

Going Global – Taking your domestic diversity program and processes beyond the USA

By Laraine Kaminsky



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In the beginning as many stories start, a company had a head office in a city in the US , travel and communication were complex and complicated so it took a great deal of time and trouble to get input from “the region.”

Today that is no longer the case – with a click of a mouse you can include your colleagues from across the globe.

The evolution of corporations from regional to national to international to multinational to global has been both interesting and exciting for those who have studied and been engaged in the journeys.

The business drivers have been both internal and external. Mergers and acquisitions have changed the internal culture of many companies. “Foreign” takeovers, “hostile “ takeovers and then the business case for many joint ventures and international acquisitions have changed the culture of companies that now operate on all five continents.

The national values of the country, of the head office and the location of the executive team impact on how the policies and procedures are implemented globally.

With this as a foundation, we then start looking at Diversity and Inclusion from a Global perspective and there are numerous factors to consider if you are head office in the US and are considering the implications of taking your programme and processes beyond borders.

To view Diversity and Inclusion globally, a framework is useful – the framework I prefer to use is to start with the historical factors of exclusion in the specific geography.

Understanding the history of the country specifically and then the region in general and how women are /were accepted and are treated in society is a good starting point.

Going from there to class , caste , religion and other dimensions of inclusion and exclusion in the area will serve to be great informative platforms.

Learning from the local organisation – going in to listen, learn and collaborate will be the best way to start.

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Having a strong idea of historical conflicts and hot buttons will serve to educate and inform the global diversity committee and minimize faux pas.

Sometimes it is the nuances of the REGIONAL differences that are extremely important to take into account. For many US headquartered corporations it seems simplest to look to Canada and Mexico for the first foray into implementing a global diversity programme.

This is done by either taking a training programme which has been designed for the US and piloting it in Canada and Mexico or including women on a “Global women’s council.”

Re-training and regional differences – the historic, political and linguistic composition of Canada is so completely different that Canadians take huge exception to the material and switch off instead of engaging, and one has to then deal with the backlash and comments like – ‘we do not have any diversity and inclusion issues here – this is strictly a US programme and problem’ – definitely NOT the intention – but the impact is very negative.

This is only one example of intent and impact with rolling out the programme – another is fully understanding the legal structure of employee benefits and the legal system in terms of rights and obligations for women in the work place from a global perspective.

When working with Global Women in Leadership or Women ERG’s networks etc., it is critical to research the maternity, paternal and parental leave structures in the country and even in the region when there are provincial and state differences.

The notion of on and off ramping for women globally take on completely different meanings in the different regions.

Another regional aspect to consider from a D and I perspective is the “poles” that work for sales and marketing – for example many large corporations have an area called EMEA – the acronym for Europe, The Middle East and Africa – if you start analyzing these regions through a cultural lens we are discussing huge differences.

Europe as a continent is changing so significantly because of many factors, but for this article, I would like you to think of 2 areas: Demographics and the impact of the changing nature of the populations of the urban areas in many of the

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European cities and how that impacts on the workforces.

The other consideration is of changes in religion in many areas and the intersection of religion and attitudes to sexual orientation.

The intersection and inclusion of the GLBT ERG's in different geographies takes courage on the part of the organisation to invest resources for training, information sessions and building a strong foundation where the community can feel safe in coming out and supporting themselves and each other in an otherwise potentially hostile environment.

There are many, many positive business outcomes for building the organisation's true values as being inclusive in all geographies and linking them to the corporate values.

In my experience the communication strategy and business strategy have to be clearly linked and strategically linked to the timing and the nuances of every region and pole with true champions and well –informed, committed and truly interested business partners from every area with which you are linking.

My advice is to move slowly, cautiously with internal and external knowledge and true sensitivity. Asking for guidance and accepting advice from people who are in the region paves the way for continued success. If we are looking at Inclusion it needs to be a mutual, respectful learning and teaching process for continued success.

The active collaboration can be a model for the virtual teams in the business so that the road ahead is full of documented examples of how this leads to more people in the organisation becoming increasingly comfortable and successful working and living outside of their personal comfort zone.