Best Practices

A Diversity Strategy that Garners Results

By Brian Williams-Norgaard

Diversity and inclusion strategies can readily produce dynamic results, yet they are often rendered ineffective for two key reasons: they rank low among organizational priorities and they fail to align with the organization's operations. It's critical to build upon each of these determinants for success when designing a diversity and inclusion strategy.

Internalizing the Case

Turn your diversity strategy into a high priority by helping the organization to internalize the case for diversity. Making the case for diversity is one thing; internalizing that case is an entirely different paradigm.

Making the case is a milestone that amounts to getting buy-in from key decision makers; internalizing the case is a process that leads to widespread adoption of a belief in the value of diversity and inclusion.

Making the case prompts executives to initiate and maintain diversity programming; internalizing the case stimulates broad-based support for diversity to be factored into every dimension of an organization's policies, practices, and behavioral standards.

Change Agents

This internalizing process begins with a firm commitment by change agents who are responsible for the development and implementation of diversity strategies. Heads of diversity, executive champions of diversity, diversity-conscious board members, members of diversity councils or advisory groups, and diversity advocates are the primary change agents. These individuals must be able to consistently demonstrate their wholehearted belief in and commitment to living and working by the virtues of diversity practices and principles.

Holding steadfastly onto this belief isn't easy. There is a long history of mainstream resistance to embracing multiculturalism in the workplace, so people have become accustomed to sidestepping the issue. All too often, we see prominent change agents waver in their commitment to diversity if politically expedient or when faced with competing priorities that strain financial and human resources. This reinforces the image of diversity as a peripheral function rather than a core activity, and opens the door for further resistance. Even carefully crafted diversity strategies fail to gain traction under these circumstances.

Keep in mind that the vast majority of diversity change agents are not diversity specialists. They are for the most part well-meaning staff, managers, and executives that were either assigned to or volunteered for this distinctive role in additional to their regular jobs. With few resources and training, they are charged with the unlikely task of setting groundbreaking cultural competency standards for the rest of the organization to follow. Their best hope for accomplishing this goal is to internalize the case for diversity.

Commitment

Serving as a diversity change agent implies a commitment to enter into a process that fosters a steadfast belief in the value of diversity and inclusion. Intercultural training, facilitated introspection, and candid dialogue on dicey issues such as race, religion, and social inequality are de facto elements of this process. If every change agent diligently takes to this task, it is merely a matter of time before a critical mass of stakeholders internalizes the case for diversity.

Diversity Structure

Demonstrate your diversity strategy's operational relevance by institutionalizing a diversity structure. An organizational structure is a means to organize work and execute goals. It's a vehicle for getting work done.

An effective way to get the work of diversity done is to design diversity strategies around a well-defined structure. A diversity structure creates a framework for understanding where and how diversity and inclusion practices impact the organization and its operations. It maps the flow of communication, identifies change agents and decision-making processes, defines departmental relationships, and demonstrates how diversity is aligned with the organization's operations and strategic plan. With a solid diversity structure and cadre of fully committed change agents, your strategy is sure to garner positive results.

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Six Diversity Strategy Basics

1 ESTABLISH GUIDING DIVERSITY PRINCIPLES. Develop principles that will guide your diversity strategy. Try forming an exploratory committee that includes members of your executive team to examine or re-examine how your organization approaches diversity.

2 DEFINE DIVERSITY CONCEPTS. Articulate the basic meaning of diversity concepts so that you can create a common language for diversity throughout the organization. Add relevance to your concepts by tying them to the organization's mission, vision, or values.

3 ASSESS NEEDS. Assessments are necessary to figure out the state of diversity in your organization and to determine top priorities. Use an outside vendor to enhance confidentiality; design your tools in house to cut costs.

4 INSTITUTE A PLANNING PROCESS. Engage in strategic diversity planning to define goals, identify process owners, and establish timelines. Project costs one year ahead and always tie the plan to the budgeting cycle.

5 COMMUNICATE. Be sophisticated about communicating your diversity efforts. Partner with communications and public relations departments. Push relentlessly to keep diversity on the organization's radar screen.

6 ESTABLISH METRICS. Process indicators measure your effort in delivering diversity programming. Outcome indicators measure the impact of your efforts. Select indicators that best match your goals.