Diversity and inclusion best practices for the workplace

Smart business leaders know that building an inclusive, diverse workplace can improve things such as innovation, decision-making, retention, morale, and profitability. Figuring out how to establish such an environment, though, often proves challenging. Here, we take a look at some diversity and inclusion best practices that can help interested companies boost representation and send the message that each employee plays an integral role in the organization reaching its set goals.

Watch your hiring practices

Creating a diverse workforce starts with a recruitment process that encourages top talent from a variety of backgrounds and identities to apply. This action involves two parts — making a range of potential applicants aware of job opportunities and spurring them to toss their hat in the ring.

Look in new places

To gather a more diverse talent pool, look for new outlets rather than limiting recruitment to the same places each time. Establishing connections with a historically black college, for instance, could increase your visibility to minorities. Advertising on a niche job board, such as one dedicated to employment opportunities for military spouses, could open up a labor source that often gets ignored. If your company offers remote work, promote openings to candidates across geographical regions.

Craft inclusive ads

A thoughtful job ad goes a long way toward attracting diverse talent. Pay attention to the wording of the post. Create gender neutrality by using terms such as "salesperson" rather than "salesman" or "postal carrier" over "postman." Avoid the pronouns "he" and "she." Eliminate mention of looking for someone to "fit" with company culture. Candidates may interpret the statement as an organization wanting a new hire who blends in with the majority.

Many job ads contain an EEO (Equal Employment Opportunity) statement to let candidates know that all applicants receive equal treatment. Consider going further by directly stating that your organization encourages applications from traditionally underrepresented groups such as women, minorities, and people with disabilities. If your business has adopted any special diversity initiatives or inclusion efforts, briefly describe them. Publicizing these measures not only helps attract diverse talent, it deters applicants who do not share the company's values from applying.

Keep the hiring process fair

Continue DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) efforts when interviewing. Here are a few options to consider:

- When deciding who to meet, consider hiding applicant names from resumes to lower the possibility of forming opinions based on ethnicity.

- Construct a diverse hiring panel to bring different lenses to the table and make an impression on candidates.
- Formulate a set list of questions so that each applicant gets asked the same thing.
- Consider presenting situational judgment tests as a way for candidates to display their skills on a level playing field, and evaluate each piece of writing without knowing the author.

Make your policies and attitude known

Companies that truly value an inclusive culture look for opportunities to demonstrate their commitment. Reinforcement solidifies the notion both internally and externally that inclusion practices are integral to the brand and its work environment.

Your employee handbook should clearly state your dedication to creating an inclusive workplace. Lay out the importance of creating a sense of belonging where every worker gets treated with fairness and respect. Let people know what behaviors are expected of them as members of an inclusive company and what repercussions will happen for failure to comply.

Share your mindset externally, too. The organization strengthens its reputation when customers and job candidates visiting your website and social media pages read about your D&I initiatives and see pictures of diverse teams working harmoniously.

Practice what you preach

Good luck getting employees to truly buy into your inclusion initiatives if actions do not match words. The demographics may look good on paper, but the actual employee experience on a daily basis is the heart of the matter.

A few ways to "put your money where your mouth is" include:

- Sticking to your zero-tolerance policy for people who bully others based on things such as ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, or religion.

- Creating a physical environment that considers the needs of customers and staff members of all sizes and ones with disabilities.

- Developing a human resources department that encourages people to bring discriminatory behavior to its attention and takes quick action rather than brushing off complaints or making those who talk feel like snitches.

- Expecting leadership at all levels to create a level playing field and to take into consideration the unique needs of each individual employee by making a point of regularly asking "How can I best support you?"

Provide training on unconscious bias and microaggressions

Oftentimes, subtle or "little things" make people on diverse teams feel different, excluded, or less. Combatting these negative factors requires awareness of their existence, even among the staunchest supporters of D&I initiatives.

Unconscious bias

From senior leaders downward, all in the company should examine themselves for underlying assumptions or attitudes commonly referred to as unconscious bias. Because they are triggered by the brain making quick decisions, unconscious biases "pop up" rather than arise from beliefs someone knows he or she possesses. The person displaying an unconscious bias may feel embarrassed or guilty when made aware, but reversing the tendency can prove difficult without training.

A few of the many ways unconscious bias shows up in the workplace include:

- Assuming an older employee will resist technological change or experience problems when learning something new.

- Giving a choice assignment to someone without kids because a parent wouldn't want to put in overtime.

- Presuming the youngest person in the room is not the team's leader.

- Inadvertently passing over job applicants with non-white sounding names because they do not seem like a good fit with workplace culture.

Microaggressions

Microaggressions are another contributor to negative employee experiences. In contrast to obvious improper or insulting behavior, microaggressions are digs that casually make their way into the everyday lives of people belonging to marginalized groups.

Many microaggressions occur in the choice of language people commonly use. For instance, making a statement such as "You're so OCD" to someone who triple-checks her work may imply unnecessary carefulness, but it also jabs at people who suffer from the disorder.

Other microaggressions may initially come off as compliments until thought about more carefully. Praising a woman for negotiating like a man, expressing that you barely noticed an accent when a foreign-born colleague gave a speech, or telling a wheelchair-using teammate that you don't even think of him as disabled creates a vibe that something should be said because the original expectations of their abilities were low.

While not as in-your-face as some prejudicial actions, resist the temptation to write microaggressions off as not a big deal. People facing microaggressions often experience many in a day, and these small negative interactions add up to create an overall negative employee experience.

Develop a DEI team

Everyone at your company should feel responsible for exhibiting attitudes and behavior that contribute to an inclusive environment. However, creating an entity dedicated to diversity and inclusion ensures it remains top of mind. A group that specifically focuses on the issue keeps an eye on progress. Without such ownership, each leader or department may erroneously assume somebody else in the company is taking charge. Assembling a diverse team with representation from various facets of the organization also brings more perspectives into the mix.

However, don't just stop there — make sure your DEI team is empowered to make improvements and take action. Employees will quickly see through the ruse if no tangible actions come out of DEI efforts.

Provide multiple outlets to talk and learn about DEI

A company may have diversity and inclusion training sessions that it requires new hires to attend as part of the onboarding process, and it may from time to time have other educational initiatives in which all employees take part. While mandatory sessions have their value, a range of other measures likewise should have a place in overall efforts.

Employee surveys

Surveys provide insight into employee engagement, attitudes, comfort levels, and perceptions of the effectiveness of D&I initiatives. Include space for telling about individual experiences or offering suggestions on how to improve workplace culture. Make the surveys as anonymous as possible in order to protect privacy and encourage workers to honestly and fully share their reality. Seventy-one percent of respondents in a study conducted by Glassdoor said they would be more likely to share experiences and opinions on diversity and inclusion at their company if they could do so anonymously.

Informal gatherings

Informal gatherings encourage workers to enjoy each other's company and think outside the box in the process. Consider adding holiday celebrations beyond mainstream ones. Form a lunchtime book club that reads material

from a range of authors or a movie group that covers a multitude of subjects. Volunteer as a team to host a toy drive for low-income children, work at a soup kitchen, or participate in a pride march. Mark every person's special occasions with equal vigor, whether it is birthday number 25 or 65 or whether a new baby becomes the pride and joy of a heterosexual couple or a same-sex one.

Employee resource groups

Many businesses encourage workers to form Employee Resource Groups. ERGs, as they are commonly called, are voluntary, employee-led groups whose members share a common characteristic, such as ethnicity or gender. ERGs often offer such things as support, networking opportunities, career development, and mentorship. A senior leader in the company may act as a group's sponsor or champion to help it secure financial resources and navigate executive waters. Roughly 90 percent of Fortune 500 Companies have [ERG programs](#), and they are becoming more commonplace at small and mid-sized workplaces, too.

Get buy-in from the top

This brings up something critical to all diversity and inclusion best practices — support from above. A company where leaders at all levels commit to DEI stands a greater chance for successful outcomes. Welcoming people from diverse backgrounds and ensuring everyone feels a sense of belonging permeates the organization's modus operandi. It guides decision-making and encourages everyone in the workplace to similarly commit. It'll be hard to convince employees to move the ball on DEI if leaders don't show their own commitment to the effort.

Admit what you don't know

Finally, a company should not shy away from addressing diversity and inclusion out of embarrassment or fear of failure. Wanting to become better is half the battle, so an eager and open mindset is a great starting point.

Leaders and other interested parties will find plenty of reading material on the subject. Likewise, various community, cultural, professional, industry, and identity groups are pleased to offer guidance and direction to resources. Even turning to your LinkedIn connections to ask about D&I initiatives at their place of employment can prove worthy (especially if you have worked on expanding your own network to include diverse connections).

Above all, be prepared to ask questions and really listen to the answers. Giving others the chance to express their true selves and be taken seriously is perhaps the greatest of all diversity and inclusion best practices.