

DIVERSITY LEADERSHIP

HOW TO ENERGIZE DIVERSITY & INCLUSION WORK WITH MINDFULNESS



NIKA WHITE CONSULTING



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In industries across the country, some diversity and inclusion (D&I) efforts are missing their mark. One of the key challenges goes much deeper than the programs, resources, or structures that diversity and inclusion practitioners face. The truth is that even those most dedicated to D&I can be hampered by habitual ways of thinking that limit the maximum effectiveness of their D&I efforts. So, the problem with your D&I efforts might be you.

But, there's a powerful tool available to address this problem: mindfulness.

Being inclusion-minded is a leadership function. It can directly impact our attitudes, leadership approach, and the way we interact with others. While an inclusive mindset is a key leadership competency in today's marketplace, there are multiple roles within organizations where people are tasked with leading diversity and inclusion efforts or have taken on the responsibility themselves.

APPLICABLE ROLES

- Chief executive officers and chief operating officers
- Diversity program directors
- Human resources directors/staff
- Individual or group diversity and inclusion advocates
- D&I working group or council members

TANGIBLE BENEFITS

- Better awareness of potential conflicts and hidden impacts
- Improved ability to manage (up or down) to gain needed support
- Improved ability to unpack D&I myths and evaluate new information
- Reduced urge to "fix it and move on" from complex challenges
- Better management of expectations

Assuming a true leadership role in D&I requires going beyond the basics to become an Intentional Inclusionist™, beginning with a mindful approach. If you don't intentionally include, you will unintentionally exclude.

This white paper includes an evaluation of current challenges to D&I and practical information on how mindfulness helps to overcome them. More importantly, this tool offers you the chance to develop new ways to think about the work of inclusion to energize your process and maximize your results.

THE STATE OF DIVERSITY & INCLUSION

Habitual ways of thinking can limit the maximum effectiveness of D&I work. Practitioners of D&I at all levels often ask themselves, *Why won't people engage? Why don't our programs work? Why isn't this work more effective?*

Across sectors, many swept up by the rising current of interest in having some level of D&I activity within organizations find themselves wrestling with these questions. Social and political issues are causing leaders to step up by either introducing or improving D&I initiatives. Even so, research and anecdotal evidence reveal a number of challenges to diversity and inclusion work today that an intentional, and therefore mindful, approach can help address.

The *Harvard Business Review* reported that while "U.S. companies spend millions annually on diversity programs and policies . . . [from] ensuring equal employment opportunity compliance, to instituting cultural sensitivity training programs, to focusing on the recruitment and retention of minorities and women . . . they are not increasing demographic diversity, and may even be decreasing it." (1)

CAUSES OF FAILURE

Fix-It-and-Move-On Mentality

D&I practitioners and the people they answer to often want a checklist of problems and solutions. Yet, this work often requires pervasive changes and long-term work, making it hard to maintain the enthusiasm and momentum needed to achieve successive goals. As a result, initiatives can miss the mark or remain permanently stalled by the desire for a one-size-fits-all solution.

Masking Problems

One study found that while diversity initiatives aim to improve outcomes for low-status groups in organizations, they might actually make it harder to detect discrimination. (2) Essentially, people tend to believe that once an organization introduces diversity initiatives, the problems disappear. Also, people become less vigilant and less likely to detect discrimination.

THE STATE OF DIVERSITY & INCLUSION

CAUSES OF FAILURE (CONT.)

Failing to Consider All Groups

D&I practitioners can be blind to the impacts that activities and messaging have on all groups – both advantaged and disadvantaged. For example, pro-diversity messages have been found to signal to white men that they might be undervalued and discriminated against. The men showed physical stress symptoms and worsened performance on job interviews irrespective of their beliefs about politics, fairness, or even stated support for diversity. (3)

Outdated Practices

Authors Frank Dobbin and Alexandra Kalev noted in 2017 that many diversity programs are failing to adapt to the changing social and professional landscape. They wrote, “Despite a few new bells and whistles, courtesy of big data, companies are basically doubling down on the same approaches they’ve used since the 1960s – which often make things worse, not better.” (4)

YOU NEED TO
DEVELOP THE RIGHT
MINDSET FOR
INCLUSION AND
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BECAUSE IF YOU
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INTENTIONALITY THROUGH MINDFULNESS

An intentional approach, beginning with mindfulness, can help diversity and inclusion practitioners avoid the kinds of costly pitfalls described in the previous section.

But, what is mindfulness? The most widely used definition is “intentional, non-judgmental awareness of moment-to-moment experience.” (5) In recent decades, mindfulness practices, which have been based in stress reduction and improving well-being, have penetrated the business world for tackling a number of issues.

Managing yourself means being mindful and self-aware. These are the attributes of leaders who have the propensity to practice intentional inclusion consistently. When we are not mindful, we compromise our ability to be intentional. It’s easy to approach a situation with an unconscious bias when we are simply unaware. Lack of awareness creates blind spots that can lead to exclusion.

BENEFITS OF MINDFULNESS

Overcoming those blind spots and energizing D&I work, beginning with mindfulness, enables practitioners to:

- approach D&I work with new perspectives,
- do the personal work needed to strengthen diversity practices,
- better understand diversity challenges on multiple levels,
- engage in respectful questioning and explore human difference,
- proactively create space for all to contribute and feel valued,
- become comfortable respectfully challenging existing practices,
- recognize the need to minimize both people bias and process bias,
- understand the difference between activity versus impact,
- unpack myths about D&I, and
- better evaluate information as it comes rather than accepting or rejecting it wholesale.

HOW MINDFULNESS WORKS FOR DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

Mindfulness helps directly address unconscious bias, the automatic or “knee-jerk” reactions we have without thinking, which impacts our work.

Exclusion results from acting on misinformation about an individual or a particular group to limit their opportunities. Even as truths are revealed, earlier misinformation continues to exert a powerful, often unrecognized influence on our thoughts and actions. Our brains unconsciously make decisions based on what feels safe, likeable, valuable, and competent.

Thankfully, there are several ways mindfulness helps counteract these innate tendencies and behaviors:

- Research has shown that mindfulness reduces implicit age and race bias. This worked even when people were taught mindfulness techniques just a few minutes before being assessed. (6)
- Not only can people reduce their implicit bias, but they can even become more aware when they’ve already made the mistake. (7)
- Meditation, one of many mindfulness practices, can increase compassionate responses to others’ suffering (8) and decrease implicit bias against stigmatized groups. (9) (This helps D&I practitioners as workplaces change and new categories of low-status groups emerge.)
- One study suggests that “even a brief mindfulness-related instruction can implicitly reduce the propensity to perpetuate stereotypical thinking through language”. (10)

WHEN YOU ARE
MINDFUL, YOU ARE
MORE SELF-AWARE OF
YOUR ACTIONS, YOUR
THOUGHTS, AND HOW
YOU MAY BE
PRESENTING
YOURSELF TO OTHERS.

MINDFULNESS EXERCISES

Mindfulness takes practice, just as diversity and inclusion work does. Below are four activities for getting started. (11)

BECOMING AWARE (5-10 minutes each)

Pay attention.

The next time you encounter someone new or familiar, listen closely to his or her words. Think about their meaning and uniqueness. Aim to understanding others, delaying your judgments and criticisms.

Make the familiar new again.

Find a few small, familiar objects – such as a toothbrush, apple, or cellphone. Look at the objects with fresh eyes. Identify one new detail about each object that you didn't see before.

Focus on your breathing.

Sit in a quiet place with your back straight but relaxed. Feel each breath move in and out of your entire body. Gently redirect your wandering attention back to breathing. Simply become aware of what's happening around you.

TAMING THE CRITIC (30 minutes)

- See if you can remember a strong judgment you've had about yourself or someone else in the last few days.
- Spend a few minutes investigating the way your body feels as you reflect on this judgment.
- Was the judgment a reaction to something or someone? Spend at least five minutes investigating the thoughts (e.g. opinions or "facts") that arise in relation to this judgment.
- Investigate the emotions (e.g. fear or pride) that come with this judgment.
- Does this judgement appear often? If so, do you have any sense of why you have this strong, automatic reaction? Does it make you feel more isolated or connected to others? Can you sense where it comes from?
- Write about some of the ideas that surfaced.

MOVING FORWARD MINDFULLY

Although habitual thinking can get in the way of maximum effectiveness for our D&I work, a mindful approach can break through those habits. By training the mind with simple mindfulness practices, you are able to sharpen your awareness and work with intentionality.

A mindful approach adds a great deal of value to people working as allies and advocates for D&I. It improves your ability to manage yourself and short-circuit automatic reactions that might be impacting the way you work. What's more, it increases your receptivity and understanding of others and recognition of what is happening in the moment.

Mindfulness also causes us to take inventory of the actions, behaviors, and attitudes of those around us, which leads to an opportunity to influence those behaviors in such a way that inclusion can be fostered. When D&I work becomes more impactful, it becomes more enjoyable.

To move further on the path toward becoming an Intentional Inclusionist™, share this resource with your colleagues, and visit Nika White Consulting at www.nikawhite.com to find more ideas, resources, and services.

WHEN YOU GAIN
TRACTION, IT MAKES
THE JOURNEY SO MUCH
MORE EXCITING
AND FULFILLING.
POSITION YOURSELF TO
BE IMPACTFUL SO YOU
CAN CELEBRATE THOSE
MILESTONES TO KEEP
YOU GOING AND
ENERGIZE YOUR WORK.

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