

DIVERSITY PRACTICE

FIVE SECRETS TO WIN BUY-IN FOR DIVERSITY & INCLUSION INITIATIVES



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The work of diversity and inclusion (D&I) can never be a solo effort. No matter the size or focus of an organization, creating inclusive environments and remedying D&I gaps require a significant level of buy-in from several stakeholders. Because the challenges are often deep-seated and multifaceted, so too must be the solutions. In order to accomplish that goal, D&I practitioners must be prepared to meet resistance that stems from multiple realities, and to provide people with reasons to change their minds and move toward becoming active supporters.

This white paper will help readers understand the various stakeholder groups that are needed to achieve an effective level of buy-in for D&I initiatives. Stakeholders include an organization's leaders, clients or customers, managers, and internal identity groups such as minority and majority groups. This paper also explains when and why resistance occurs, presenting five key methods of winning support from a diverse group of important stakeholders.

APPLICABLE ROLES

- D&I practitioners and advocates – both individuals and groups – who are charged with leading or assisting initiatives within their organizations.
- Leaders who want to better understand the various impacts and needs associated with D&I initiatives.
- Seasoned D&I practitioners seeking information to help evaluate previous and ongoing activities, and learn practical ways to remedy challenges to buy-in.

TANGIBLE BENEFITS

Readers will come away with an improved understanding of issues that can unexpectedly thwart D&I initiatives. This white paper gives actionable steps for addressing both commonly observed and hidden obstacles to gaining support.

INTRODUCTION

While it seems as though diversity, inclusion, equity, and similar notions have permeated most of society, practitioners still face significant challenges when it comes time to get the needed people involved. It's one thing for people within an organization to tolerate D&I initiatives, but it's another when they become active supporters. Real change happens when stakeholders buy in.

Getting buy-in can be an enormous challenge for several reasons. Rapidly changing demographics in the United States and worldwide are increasingly reflected in our workplaces. Organizations are seeing more generations, ethnicities, and races working together than ever before. Additionally, multi-racial and other identity categories are being recognized, sometimes revealing even more barriers to inclusion.

As a result of this complexity, the lone wolf D&I champion is rarely, if ever, successful. However, it is the responsibility of D&I leaders to help others in their organizations understand the importance of the work, and the roles that everyone can play in moving it forward.

WHO NEEDS TO "BUY IN"?

Buy-in spans the spectrum of participation from engaged openness to advocacy. Various levels of buy-in are needed from one stakeholder group to another, and from the ground level of the organization to the top. What's more, this includes both internal and external stakeholders.

In some cases, buy-in might require you to "manage up" or guide your superiors, or learn to be strategic. While much D&I program conversation revolves around the experiences of rank-and-file employees, other groups who might require special attention and strategies include organization leaders, managers, and constituent groups.

INTRODUCTION (CONT.)

WHO NEEDS TO “BUY IN”?

LEADERSHIP – the top levels of an organization – are crucial for successful cultural shifts that address D&I problems within an organization. These include the C-suite, high-level managers, and organizational boards. Any directional change within an organization that has lasting, widespread impact comes from the top. As a D&I practitioner, these might not be the first people you engage in your work, but they are undoubtedly the most important to show that D&I are truly being embraced as a priority. As a result, leadership buy-in looks like enthusiastic official endorsement of all activities related to D&I and the designation of appropriate resources for accomplishing its stated goals.

MANAGERS are often at the front lines of D&I implementation. They are the ones who have to respond to staff who might be uncomfortable with changes, and they often are responsible for ensuring that change happens. Sometimes, it's the managers themselves who are being asked to make the most radical changes in mindset and behavior. They might be looking for validation that such demands are not personal. They also need clear justifications in order to motivate themselves and other employees to participate and, hopefully, embrace D&I initiatives.

CLIENTS AND CUSTOMERS might also be a group whose support you will need. This may include other organizations, partners, donors, or individual consumers. The societal factors that drive D&I are operating everywhere. If customers become aware of an organization's D&I by being directly informed or by indirectly noticing, they might be inclined to respond. It is the D&I practitioner's responsibility to anticipate where resistance might crop up, and head it off with appropriate information and opportunities for engagement.

INTRODUCTION (CONT.)

CHALLENGES TO BUY-IN

Unfortunately, too many bad diversity programs have helped fortify negative perceptions of work that can be difficult even under the best circumstances. A survey by Novations/J. Howard & Associates, a Boston, Mass., diversity and inclusion consulting firm, illustrates this point well.(1) Among the findings, attitudes feeding resistance to D&I initiatives included the following:

- Many employees, including women and other minority groups, think corporate diversity programs benefit only black employees.
- Of 1,134 employees surveyed, 47 percent of whites, 50 percent of Asians and Native Americans, and 53 percent of Hispanics believed “only some groups” have benefited from a focus on diversity.
- Blacks are much less likely than whites (37 percent versus 62 percent) to believe that their executive management’s goals or actions reflect a real commitment to diversity.

Lack of clarity is another major challenge to buy-in. When people cannot clearly see the benefits to themselves or their organization, or when they’re not sure exactly what is expected of them, they are reluctant to support or actively enable change. D&I leaders need to equip stakeholders to understand and communicate the drivers for D&I, within both their organization and the larger societal contexts.

The following are five secrets to countering the bad perceptions, misconceptions, and execution mistakes that keep people from getting on board with D&I initiatives.

SECRET #1 TALK BUSINESS

Whatever the “business” of your organization, a strong business case carries a lot of weight with stakeholders of all categories. It’s crucial that everyone understands how D&I can help your organization do its work better. No matter the nature of the organization, be it corporate or nonprofit, all stakeholders need to understand how diversity and inclusion will help better achieve its stated mission and goals.

Lisa Wilson, deputy director of human resources for the city of Columbus, Ohio, and past chair of the Workplace Diversity Committee for the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), put the approach succinctly for that group: “We’re now looking at a whole different picture. Diversity is no longer only a social mandate; it is also a competitive advantage.”(2)

Past Proof and Future Expectations

Thankfully, a solid body of supportive research spanning multiple years and multiple industries shows this to be the case. Everything from bottom-line growth to talent retention has been a direct result of D&I initiatives. We know this research demonstrates a correlation between workforce diversity and company profits, and that available data will be your friend in making this argument, especially to leadership.

What’s more, customers, clients, and other constituent groups expect organizations to deal equitably with diverse groups. The younger generations that are growing up and making decisions about which organizations they want to support are increasingly prioritizing diversity. Generation Z, for instance, born after 1996, is not only the most diverse age group in America, but also the most inclusive. They are less likely to label others and are more accepting of fluid identities, and they expect the same from others.

MAKE SURE EVERYONE
UNDERSTANDS HOW
D&I HELPS YOUR
ORGANIZATION DO ITS
WORK BETTER.

SECRET # 2

REDEFINE LEADERSHIP

Inclusiveness is more than a goal or an activity: in today's world, it's a leadership necessity. In fact, Deloitte, the international consulting firm known for forecasting business trends, delineates four global mega-trends – diversity of markets, customers, ideas, and talent – that are pushing organizations toward clarifying and prioritizing inclusive leadership.(3) As a D&I practitioner, you can make great strides by helping managers and C-suite leaders understand that what inclusiveness demands is actually a mindset and skill set that fosters strong, effective leadership.

Inclusive leadership skills

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| 1. <i>cultural intelligence</i> | 5. <i>commitment</i> |
| 2. <i>managing diverse teams</i> | 6. <i>courage</i> |
| 3. <i>communication</i> | 7. <i>cognizance of bias</i> |
| 4. <i>collaboration</i> | 8. <i>curiosity</i> |

Keep in mind that inclusiveness as a leadership competency is not reserved for people with titles like "diversity officer" or "inclusion manager." Framing inclusion as a leadership competency at all levels will be especially helpful in achieving buy-in from managers or career-focused individuals who might see D&I efforts as a potential distraction. On the contrary, participation in D&I initiatives opens the door to valuable new skills and upward mobility.

At the same time, those already in top leadership roles might need to be similarly educated on the value of developing inclusion-minded leadership teams. They should be encouraged to add inclusiveness to their benchmarks for well-rounded potential leaders. Some organizations, such as The Carter Group Inc. of Mobile, Ala., which provides management training and development programs, have shifted away from cross-cultural approaches to training and toward promoting soft skills that support inclusion.(4)

When companies broaden the concept and outcomes of D&I to include leadership, employees can become a constructive part of championing work that moves the whole organization forward. For current leaders who've built their careers in more homogeneous environments, an inclusive-minded approach is critical to continued success in a changing environment.(5)

SECRET #3

DON'T GET PERSONAL

The individual experiences and conceptions that people bring to diversity work are numerous and can be the source of backlash. Honest D&I work uncovers people's anxieties and advantages, and this might provoke strong emotions. Even as we work to create space for individuality and openness about the challenges faced by specific groups, it's best to avoid creating tension by getting too personal.

*Of course, people's personal lives and experiences outside of work are often entangled. The trick is to acknowledge firsthand experiences **without** focusing on them when implementing D&I initiatives.*

For example, after feedback showed that people disliked personal issues being a focus in its diversity curriculum, the University Corporation for Atmospheric Research amended its workplace diversity program to acknowledge external challenges that can impact work performance, advancement, and career choice. It avoided covering explicitly personal topics such as parenting choices. The research institution also found that people wanted to discuss inclusion at all levels, which presumably made the experience feel more organizationally focused.(6)

Reiterating the business impact is another method of helping people understand that although they might be affected by D&I initiatives, they are not targets. What's more, the focus on workplace issues, makes it easier to create and implement an action plan that people can and support and participate in.

We also need to focus on cultural competence, not political correctness. When groups have a heightened level of intelligence about other cultures, they possess the vocabulary to help them understand and even advocate for a group or an inclusion practice – without focusing on individual people's personal feelings.

SECRET #4 BE HONEST

Research has shown that D&I initiatives can make some people feel uncomfortable, even threatened.(7) One of the most important parts of achieving buy-in among various groups is acknowledging the anxiety they might feel about this work.

Majority Anxiety

White men, for example, have exhibited a physiological threat response to the mention in mock interview scenarios that a company was committed to diversity.(8) It turns out that a growing body of evidence indicates that white men – often the workplace majority – feel attacked, left out, and anxious when faced with a stated commitment to prioritizing diversity and inclusivity.

Minority Anxiety

People of color and others who are the intended beneficiaries of inclusion programs have fears of their own. A survey of 3,000 employees in 20 large U.S. organizations with stated commitments to diversity revealed that 40 percent refrained from behavior commonly associated with their own ethnic group. In addition, 29 percent changed their attire, grooming, or mannerisms to make their identity less obvious. They also limited contact with their own identity group and stayed silent when observing discriminatory treatment.(9)

People of color can feel significant anxiety when, after working to diminish their difference, a diversity initiative now puts it front and center.

All groups are less likely to resist D&I initiatives, however, when these emotions are acknowledged openly. Be honest about feelings that inclusion “takes something away from” dominant groups; admit they might indeed experience a more competitive workplace once access and opportunity are spread equitably. Similarly, recognize under represented groups' feelings of vulnerability, but be frank about the fact that D&I is not just about them – it's about a better workplace for everyone.

Help everyone realize that rather than disempowering them, diversity and cultural intelligence can empower them to improve their organization in meaningful ways.

SECRET #5 ACTIVATE (CHEER)LEADERS

One of your biggest challenges – and potential successes – will be getting the highest levels of leadership to get behind your cause. However, it is crucial that CEOs, presidents, directors, etc., are visibly and vocally supportive of diversity and inclusion initiatives.

You also need to make sure your entire leadership team physically embodies your goals. It goes without saying that this team should be as diverse and inclusive as possible. This isn't just about optics: you'll get direction from people who see every aspect of the picture, from costs to how distinct groups will be affected to considerations for implementation.

In order to get and keep the best cheerleaders on your team, be sure to do the following:

- Be clear about what you need from each person. People need to know both the importance of their role within the organization and any personal leadership traits they bring to the effort.
- Go as high up the chain as you can. Take the initiative to educate yourself about what stakeholders need to hear in order to break through resistance.
- Explain how deliverables will be defined and measured, so everybody has a clear understanding of success.
- Avoid assumptions. Don't assume that people will want to take on extra work for personal reasons, such as appearing to identify with a particular identity group. Your best champions might not be who you think.

As the saying goes, be the change you want to see. The business case for D&I trickles down to every group in the organization, including your D&I team. That means in order to ensure your own success, you'll want a team that adheres as closely as possible to the culture, standards, and practices you hope to foster.

CONCLUSION: IT STARTS WITH YOU

Getting active support from stakeholders such as majority and minority groups, organization leaders, managers, customers, and other constituents can feel like an unwieldy challenge. That is part of the unspoken work of D&I leadership. However, making use of the five secrets listed here and planning responses ahead of time can go a long way toward ensuring long-term success.

Sometimes we end up feeling alone in this work. Whether the reason is a lack of resources beyond our control, or our own failure to reach out for needed support, prioritizing buy-in can be a helpful remedy. It might be necessary to address one group or issue at a time to show that buy-in can produce tangible results and is worth the investment.

At every stage, seek out those who can help you get the right information. Reevaluate whether each task is best performed by you as a diversity leader, or whether it should be delegated to somebody else. Always consider how to bring as many people into the fold as possible.

Finally, be sure that before you approach anyone else with the arguments and attitudes outlined here, you've mastered them yourself. D&I leadership requires a high level of self-awareness and intentionality. So, make sure your own motivations are driven by the needs of the organization, that you're acting boldly and honestly, and that you yourself are a shining example of inclusive leadership. In this way, you can help bring lasting change to your organization, and immeasurable improvement to yourself.

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