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The Value in Participation

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The Value in Participation

Abstract

[Excerpt] Much has been written about the critical role of top organizational leadership in diversity change. Leadership must understand the nature of the change initiative, articulate its strategic significance, authorize resources, compel accountability, and model consistency. We like to recall a simple encounter at a company dinner dance. The company had just extended language in the non-discrimination policy to include sexual orientation and instituted domestic partner benefits. When the dancing began, one gay couple approached the dance floor. No other couples joined them until the company president led his wife onto the floor and began to dance as well. That's leadership.

Keywords

: ILR, Cornell University, leadership, diversity, critical role, resources, accountability, consistency, company, non-discrimination, policy, sexual orientation

Disciplines

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Comments

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Much has been written about the critical role of top organizational leadership in diversity change. Leadership must understand the nature of the change initiative, articulate its strategic significance, authorize resources, compel accountability, and model consistency. We like to recall a simple encounter at a company dinner dance. The company had just extended language in the non-discrimination policy to include sexual orientation and instituted domestic partner benefits. When the dancing began, one gay couple approached the dance floor. No other couples joined them until the company president led his wife onto the floor and began to dance as well. That's leadership.

With diversity, however, responsibility extends beyond leadership. For any organization that reflects the norms of our current society, successful diversity change implies a significant culture change, one that infuses the expectation to learn from difference. It transforms the stories people tell one another about how the organization operates and what—and who—is “really” valued. If an organization's goal is to create an inclusive community where diversity is recognized and valued, where daily interactions are guided by mutual respect and where differences of perspective are utilized to improve performance, a top-down or consultant-delivered solution has limitations. While this approach may compel compliance, its substance often fails to become part of the living fabric of the organization. It may, in fact, be met with increased cynicism and undermined by mixed messages. *How might an inclusive process of collaborative change offer advantage?*

Can we expect a workforce to take diversity change seriously if the methods used to create change are not inclusive? Can diversity change be genuinely diffused without participation?

*Jane Maestro-Scherer, President, Fathom, Inc.
Co-facilitator, City of Ithaca Project*

City of Ithaca Work Environment Project

This was exactly the question considered by the City of Ithaca, New York when it initiated the Work Environment Task Force. Ithaca is a small city of just over 29,000 people. The latest Census Data reports a population that identifies as roughly 15 percent Asian, 8 percent African-American, 5 percent Latino and 76 percent White. It is home to Cornell University and Ithaca College. The university environment attracts people from around the world, creating a cultural atmosphere in city life that reflects the diversity and ethnic traditions of its residents. The City employs 420 permanent employees, in 12 separate departments, represented by six different unions, including police and fire.

In response to several allegations of bias and discrimination in the workplace, the City decided to take a highly participative approach. The City's Common Council formed a Work Environment Task Force, a diverse cross-section of management, union representatives, and the rest of the workforce in a collaborative process of research, data analysis and policy recommendations. Special emphasis was directed to perceived issues of oppression and intimidation. City leadership supported the process by offering time off and overtime to participants.

The process unfolded in several distinct stages. First a Survey Design Team was established, composed of a cross-section of the workforce, invited to participate in the questionnaire development phase of data collection. Working with expert facilitators, the Team developed a

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comprehensive work environment survey, then served as survey administrators, setting up times for employees to complete the survey, explaining the background of the project and answering questions about confidentiality and intended uses of survey data. The effort built confidence, communicated the intent of the change process and resulted in a 68 percent voluntary response rate.

Once the data was compiled, information analysis sessions were convened. Employees were able to view the data, ask questions and manipulate the data to look for relationships they thought were relevant to the issues under investigation. For example, they could request to see the relationship between gender (or tenure, employment status, etc.) and reported experiences of intimidation. They could then refine their understanding by looking at the sources of these negative experiences. As city employees gained more familiarity with the statistical tools used in these sessions, their information requests became more sophisticated. In each session, a series of findings that the group could agree on was documented.

Since the range of issues that surfaced was broad, the Task Force decided to choose three to begin working on immediately—supervision/discipline, oppression/intimidation and health and safety. Employee groups, called Issue Action Teams, were pulled together again to review what had been found, ask additional questions of the data, and develop recommendations for action. These Issue Action Team sessions involved over 50 employees, from senior management to rank and file, and generated 67 specific recommendations for change, all of which were adopted by the Common Council and budgeted for staged implementation. Recommendations included training on sexual harassment and diversity, the development of uniform standards which all managers understand and enforce, a mentoring-coaching program, and research study of bullying.

Building the Case for Inclusive, Participatory Diversity Change

Are the methods used in a diversity change process as important as the message? To be effective, a diversity change should include everyone in an organization, top to bottom. The late William Foote Whyte, founder of Cornell's Program for Employment and Workplace Systems, once wrote: "Those who know the most about the work are those who do the

"As a result of utilizing the participative process, the City of Ithaca obtained a significant amount of **ownership** for the project. Additionally, the involvement of front-line employees in the survey design phase resulted in a 68 percent response rate. The tool itself turned out to be very comprehensive and I believe if the employees had not designed it themselves we would have received great resistance."

Schelley Michell-Nun
Director of Human Resources, Ithaca, NY



work." Perhaps the same can be said for diversity culture change.

The City of Ithaca experience demonstrates that an inclusive change process offers several advantages, both procedural and substantive.

Credibility. Confidence in a change process is strengthened when employees at all levels perceive that their particular perspective and circumstance was expressed authentically and taken into consideration in decision-making. In the City of Ithaca project, initial substantial skepticism dissipated as the authenticity of participation was realized.

Acceptance. Diversity and inclusion reach deeply into personal territory, challenging employees to examine their own values, belief systems, norms and social interaction patterns. In this context, resistance to change is natural. The City project affirms our thinking that a combination of strong sponsorship from the top with an involvement process that creates opportunity for employee groups throughout the organization to do their own learning reduces change resistance.

Ownership and Accountability. Successful change implementation requires commitment from the workforce. Especially in the context of diversity and inclusion, workers who are engaged early and authentically take ownership for the change process.

Decision-making Validity. We found in the Ithaca project that front-line workers were often best equipped to interpret survey data because of their intimate knowledge of the context from which it was generated. **No outside consultants or upper-level management group could have provided the richness and depth that was possible through this inherent knowledge.** The utilization of this internal knowledge resource not only improved the "product" of the effort but also contributed significantly to its

legitimacy with the remainder of the workforce, who regarded it as "informed" decision-making.

Diffusion. Communicating is one of the biggest challenges. Involving significant numbers of employees from various organizational roles and levels promotes an "organic" diffusion effect. In the City project, over a third of the workforce was involved in survey development, data analysis or action planning. This active participation increased awareness and readiness in a way that vision statements, newsletters, memos, training or directives alone could not have achieved.

Competency. Engaging a broad representation of employees in an inclusive change process enhances group process, builds analysis and problem-solving skills, and develops a more sophisticated awareness of organizational systems and complexity.

Success using a participative approach to culture change is not automatic. Expectations generated by this process may not be appropriate for organizations whose main focus is legal compliance and litigation prevention. It is, however, consistent with organizations where there is already a culture of autonomy and self-direction. It is well suited for organizations that have adopted employee involvement, utilize teams, or function with a joint labor-management process.

Participation requires the understanding, support, involvement, commitment and emotional intelligence of top leadership. And while the upfront time required to organize and engage involvement is greater, the time usually required to build awareness and understanding, overcome resistance, and implement change is greatly reduced. When well designed and facilitated, the upfront time of a participatory approach to change is an investment in increased probability of success. **PDJ**