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Creating Inclusive Organizations: Aligning Systems with Diversity

Abstract

[Excerpt] Diversity and inclusion are often used interchangeably. However, for the purpose of this inquiry, diversity denotes the spectrum of human similarities and differences. Diversity is about people. Inclusion, on the other and, is about organization. It's about operationalizing diversity. Inclusion describes the way an organization configures opportunity, interaction, communication and decision-making to utilize the potential of its diversity.

Keywords

ILR, Cornell University, diversity, human, similarities, differences, organization, opportunity, interaction, communication

Disciplines

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Comments

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In 1998, a group of diversity practitioners and professionals from private, public and non-profit sectors came together at Cornell University to consider just this question: *What would an inclusive workplace be like?* Ideas generated from those discussions, and subsequent reviews, create an organizational framework for inclusion and extend the implications of diversity beyond personal/interpersonal relations and best practices for managing those. The inclusion framework explores the implications of diversity as systemic organizational change.

Diversity and inclusion are often used interchangeably. However, for the purpose of this inquiry, diversity denotes the *spectrum* of human similarities and differences. **Diversity is about people. Inclusion, on the other hand, is about organization.** It's about operationalizing diversity. Inclusion describes the way an organization configures opportunity, interaction, communication and decision-making to utilize the *potential* of its diversity.

Diversity implies a multiplicity of perspectives and "ways of doing things" informed by the diverse histories, cultures and experiences that people bring to the workplace. It challenges individuals to develop an expanded set of awareness, interpersonal and leadership skills, including open-mindedness, curiosity for learning about others, flexibility, dialogue rather than debate, tolerance for ambiguity, understanding, fairness and consistency without imposing sameness, to mention a few. The challenge of diversity is its complexity. On the organizational level, making diversity work and leveraging the resource it brings means developing organizational culture—loosely defined as shared understanding of "the way things are done around here"—and operating systems that function with flexibility, promote consistent standards, and guide individual actions to alignment with organizational goals.

What the inclusion framework contributes to an expanding diversity toolbox is an invitation to practitioners to assume an overall view of the organization, to ask how the policies,

"When I first read the twelve attributes of an inclusive organization, I thought they were the most comprehensive, strategic approach to getting beyond the issues of just creating a diverse workforce. They hit all the elements."

Shirley Harrison
Vice President of Corporate Diversity Management
Philip Morris family of companies

practices and procedures developed to promote diversity fit with other systems in the organization. Do operating systems convey a message and incentive that is consistent with diversity's goals? Or are they contradictory and block progress? Is the organization able to operationalize learning from its diversity and convert multiple perspectives into improved performance outcomes? Are structures, resources, and technology aligned to leverage diversity? Will employees perceive the workplace climate as inclusive and offer the advantage of their diversity when matching individual effort with organizational goals?

The inclusion framework is developed from two assumptions: 1) diversity is a valuable resource



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for organizational achievement, especially in operating environments that require cross-functional collaboration, responsiveness to change, innovation, and continuous performance improvement and 2) claiming the potential of diversity requires organizational inclusion. This discussion is most relevant for organizations that identify people as a resource. The operating premise is if people at all levels of the organization do not feel valued and respected for who they are, they will regulate their contribution of skills, knowledge and insight to satisfy more narrow, individually defined goals. For an organization to leverage the resource people bring, it must both create an inclusive environment and organize operating systems to build capability for continuous learning and to develop operating systems that are criteria guided, rather than rule bound.

"At a time when notions of workplace fairness have evolved from Title VII and Affirmative Action to valuing differences and from managing diversity to building inclusion, workplace practitioners, policy-makers and scholars are faced with a perplexing question: What would an inclusive workplace look like when one is achieved?"

Tammy Bormann
Co-Director
The Workplace Diversity Network,
The National Conference for Community
and Justice

The framework identifies twelve attributes believed to be associated with inclusive organizations and offers suggestions of best practices to support each:

- **Demonstrated Commitment to Diversity.** In an inclusive organization, visible and invisible heterogeneity is present throughout all departments and at all levels of responsibility. Human differences and similarities are welcomed, valued and utilized at all levels across all formal and informal organizational systems.
- **Holistic View of Employees.** An inclusive organization is one in which all employees are viewed and respected as whole persons with identities and family lives which extend

beyond the organization and, to the greatest extent appropriate, are free to behave truthfully in the work environment.

- **Access to Opportunity.** An inclusive organization is one that creates a professionally nurturing environment in which all employees have equitable access to opportunities for personal and professional growth.
- **Accommodation of Diverse Physical & Developmental Abilities.** An inclusive organization is one that opens opportunity to persons with diverse physical and developmental abilities by offering effective adaptations in the workplace to eliminate barriers to work performance and workplace participation.
- **360° Communication & Information Sharing.** An inclusive organization is one in which communication and information flow from all directions, in all directions and across all levels of responsibility.
- **Equitable Systems of Recognition & Reward.** An inclusive organization establishes systems to recognize, acknowledge and reward the diverse contributions and achievements of employees at all levels of responsibility.
- **Shared Accountability & Responsibility.** An inclusive organization is one in which accountability and responsibility to uphold organizational values and achieve clear organizational goals and objectives in a mutually respectful work environment are shared by employees at all levels and reflected in relations with customers and clients, vendors, suppliers, partners and subcontractors as well.
- **Demonstrated Commitment to Continuous Learning.** An inclusive organization acknowledges that every employee is a learner and teacher and creates a flexible, fluid organizational culture that prioritizes continuous, collaborative, cross-organizational learning.
- **Participatory Work Organization & Work Process.** An inclusive organization is one that recognizes the traditional and non-traditional skills, aptitudes, educational experiences, bases of knowledge, personal potential and life experiences of each employee and structures work organization and processes to utilize these diverse skills.

- **Alignment of Organizational Culture & Process.** An inclusive organization is one that acknowledges the existence of an explicit and implicit organizational "culture" and continuously seeks to align this culture to support organizational values and the synthesis of divergent perspectives.

- **Collaborative Conflict Resolution Processes.** An inclusive organization values and utilizes progressive conflict resolution procedures that empower employees at all levels, across all departments, to work collaboratively to solve problems, resolve interpersonal conflicts and achieve mutually satisfying dispute resolutions.

- **Demonstrated Commitment to Community Relationships.** An inclusive organization functions as a responsible citizen neighbor by forging constructive alliances with local government, schools and community-based organizations and professional associations to expand outreach to diverse communities, widen opportunity, enhance access or promote understanding to overcome prejudice and bias.

At this point, the inclusion framework developed through The Workplace Diversity Network is merely a conceptual construct, representing the best thinking of a group of diversity professionals. Much work remains to be done to complete the conceptual construct and validate it through research. It is not intended to be prescriptive. When taken as a flexible tool, it is interpreted in light of a particular organization's unique circumstance. The inclusion framework has been used as a resource for diversity strategy development as well as an assessment guide to evaluate a diversity initiative's fit with other operational systems and to identify internal strategic alliances for diversity's goals.

Organizations that welcome and acknowledge people's diversity, offer a workplace environment of respect and opportunity, and are able to access and leverage diverse perspectives and experiences to enhance performance will have discovered how to align operating systems with the complexity diversity brings. ■

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