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Diversity and inclusion: 8 best practices for changing your culture

A strong diversity and inclusion strategy can help your organization attract top talent and drive innovative results. Here's how to launch a D&I initiative that works.

By Sharon Florentine

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Diversity and inclusion: 8 best practices for changing your culture

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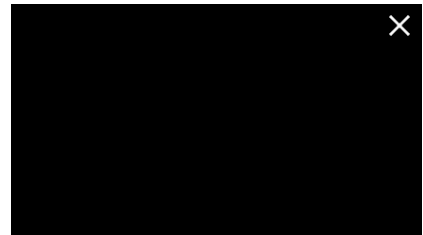
Diverse and inclusive companies drive innovative results. Yet the tech industry still struggles with diversity and inclusion, often failing to attract diverse talent due to inclusivity issues in the workplace. For organizations looking to shape up their diversity and inclusion programs and policies, the change can be challenging — and rewarding.

Most companies enact change to deliver business value, and many who launch diversity and inclusion initiatives cite research showing that companies with more diverse teams outperform those with a more homogeneous workforce, says Sabrina Clark, associate principal at SYPartners, a consultancy that specializes in organizational transformation.

"Research shows that even just the presence of physical diversity results in better performance and for companies that are data-driven, that extra performance boost can be extremely motivating," Clark says. "It's also the fact that companies that lack diversity are being called out publicly, and may even be losing business, not to mention falling behind when it comes to recruiting. Even Google is starting to show signs that their lack of diversity is affecting them."

As 2018 research from McKinsey shows, greater diversity in the workforce results in greater profitability and value creation. The same holds true at the executive level, as McKinsey found a statistically significant correlation between diverse leadership and better financial performance. Companies in

the top quartile for ethnic diversity at the executive level are 33 percent more likely to have above-average profitability than companies in the bottom quartile. When it comes to gender diversity, companies in the top quartile are 21 percent more likely to have above-average profitability than companies in the bottom quartile, according to McKinsey's research.

While financial performance is a major driver of D&I strategies, some organizations launching diversity initiatives in the face of government compliance regulations or to address shareholder pressure, Clark says. "In the UK, for instance, companies are required to publish their diversity statistics; there's also been increasing pressure from shareholders and boards," she says.

Current employees and potential hires are also raising the stakes, says Jeff Weber, senior vice president of people and places at Instructure. "More and more, when we're interviewing, candidates are asking what we're doing about diversity and inclusion. And it's not just diverse talent themselves, and it's not just millennials or Generation Z — we're hearing this from white, straight men in the Midwestern United States."

Organizations are also realizing that make diversity and inclusion a business imperative will help them avoid tarnishing their reputation, Clark says. "They're thinking ahead, which is great, about what kind of company they are, who they want to be, and what their legacy will be. It's going to continue to be important, and the voices demanding it are only going to get louder," she says.

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SY Partners has been initiating these hard conversations and investing in diversity and inclusion right alongside its clients. The following eight best practices for diversity and inclusion guide not just SY Partner's client consulting, but its own internal business strategies, Clark says.

1. Establish a sense of belonging for everyone

For each individual to bring their best self forward, a sense of belonging must first be established. Having a connection to an organization or group of people that makes you feel you can be yourself not only results in greater engagement and creativity in the workplace, it's a psychological need.

But these changes take time, and they aren't always linear, Clark says. "A client once told me that you don't just fast-forward to belonging. You have to go through the hard work of focusing on diversity and creating that inclusive culture so you can get to belonging," she says.

It's not a one-size-fits-all approach, either — that's why it's so important to share best practices and be open to trying new things. "The good thing is that as you're working on diversity, you can also work on inclusion, and vice versa. It's all interconnected," Clark says.

2. Empathetic leadership is key

Diversity and inclusion are often treated as a single initiative owned exclusively by HR. But for real change to happen, every individual leader needs to buy into the value of belonging — both intellectually and emotionally. Only when the entire C-suite steps up to own diversity and inclusion will a company's D&I practices thrive.

"You have to make sure leaders are equipped to make the story their own, feel it within themselves and be able to explain why they care; why it matters, and why it should matter to their direct reports," Clark says.

Part of this process requires tuning in to empathy; each person remembering a time when they were excluded, shamed, interrupted, and so on, so they can apply those lessons outwardly, she says. "Leaders have to feel it within themselves; then they can identify the relationship with feeling excluded or making others feel excluded. That's a critical starting point," Clark says.

3. A top-down approach isn't enough

Top-down approaches drive compliance, not commitment. From senior leaders to frontline employees, every individual must see and understand their role in company culture. This means identifying differences in employee experience and values across the organization so that change can be made relevant for each person and knowing that lasting change must activate different parts of the system — top down, bottom up, and middle out — in different ways.

4. Quotas don't automate inclusion

Hiring goals may boost diversity numbers, but this won't automatically create

an inclusive culture. Too often, leaders focus diversity and inclusion efforts disproportionately on the employee pipeline, but the employee experience continues far beyond an offer letter. To retain and nurture top talent, it's critical to take an honest look at the end-to-end employee experience, with an eye toward creating conditions that promote inclusion on a daily basis and designing ways to measure the impact.

"What you must understand is that this emphasis changes everything," Clark says. "From sourcing and recruiting to hiring, onboarding, to the daily aspects of work, team-building, culture, from successes and failures, performance reviews, succession planning, mentoring — everything."

Organizations must adapt their processes to scale diverse and inclusive behaviors. For example, in meetings: Who's invited? Who gets to speak and how often? Are you leaving out anyone whose input would be valuable?

"You have to look at everything through the lens of, 'Have I created conditions where every person can contribute in their unique, meaningful way and feel safe and secure doing that?' and if you find places where that's not the case, having the courage to admit that and work to change it," she says.

That also means understanding how your teams work best, and when tension and discord are actually beneficial. "Recognize that sometimes the easy and fast way is not necessarily the right way, and that sometimes teams function best when there is a bit of tension, disagreement, back-and-forth," she says. "Obviously, you cannot let things devolve into personal attacks, but know the difference between a healthy, stimulating exchange of every person's ideas and a situation where people are being disrespectful because of who another person is."

5. Inclusion is ongoing — not one-off training

It isn't enough to teach employees what it means to be inclusive. Like any form of behavior change, inclusion requires individuals to identify key moments in which to build new habits or "microbehaviors" (daily actions that can be practiced and measured). And when these habits are put into action in an environment that supports honest conversations and healthy tension, real change becomes possible.

"One way to do this is to identify change cohorts within the organization outside of the executive or management level," Clark says. "Then, you equip them with the skills and information to help them champion change within their departments, teams, working groups. This is much more effective than one-off training sessions which don't move the needle; you want people to incorporate these ideas and beliefs into their daily lives."

6. Maximize joy and connection, minimize fear

People are wired to react with fear and distrust when their beliefs are challenged. While fear can be a powerful motivator, it also encourages people to narrow their perspective — the opposite desired effect for creating a more

inclusive workplace. Finding ways to frame challenges through a lens of possibility — and elevating the power of shared experiences and storytelling to do so — creates greater potential for positive change.

"Then you can focus on creating moments that continue the momentum," Clark says. "You need to not only point out where there's room for improvement, but spotlight the moments of success and celebrate them. One of our clients decided to do a commitment tree; every employee wrote down their personal, individual commitment to diversity and inclusion, and they put those in a very public place so they could see signs of their progress and celebrate those."

7. Forget 'fit' and focus on helping individuals thrive

The norms, power structures, and inequities in society can easily become embedded in an organization — optimizing to hire, train, and reward people who "fit." Creating a culture where every individual can contribute their full potential requires investigating the systems and processes in your organization to uncover sore spots and blind spots, and then finding ways to reimagine them.

"'Fit' can be dangerous, because it can exclude," Clark says. "You have to first be able to identify and bring to life your organizational values, mission and purpose, and define 'fit' so that it adheres to those. You have to define it differently," she says.

8. Consider your brand

As in any transformation effort, brand and culture are intimately connected. The products and services you put into the world reflect your values — and your biases.

In the journey toward building a more inclusive organization, it's important to consider the relationship between what's happening inside and outside your company. What is your brand saying about who you are as a culture? In what ways is your employee base not congruent with your customer base? What experiences are being left out or misunderstood?

"We see the work with diversity and inclusion as a transformation that's required here," Clark says. "It's not just an initiative or a program; it requires investment from the very senior-most folks to the newest person in the door, and it requires real behavior change. It's about how the entire company operates and the individual ways of working, communicating, contributing and even just being in the world."
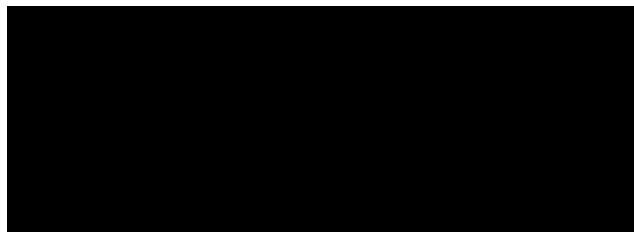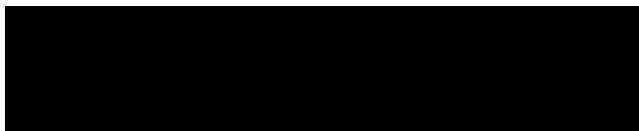
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