

Creating and Maintaining an Inclusive Workforce

By Steve Hanamura

As we look at how business is developing in 2009, one of the social phenomena is the attention being given to “inclusion.” For some of us it is hard to understand how or why this term is just now becoming a primary focus. Inclusion has been around long before diversity became a business consideration, a global industry of its own.



Each business or sector tends to have different definitions of inclusion. They are tailor made to fit the specific organizational need in question. Here are a few examples of how some leading people in our industry are defining the term inclusion:

Judith Katz and Fred Miller, of the Kaleel Jamison group define inclusion as a sense of belonging, feeling respected, valued and seen for who they are as individuals. There is a level of supportive energy and commitment from leaders, colleagues and others so we individually and collectively can do our best work.

The Institute for Inclusion says inclusion is engaging in the uniqueness of the talents, beliefs, backgrounds, capabilities, and ways of living of individuals and groups when joined in a common endeavor. Inclusion is engaging in diversity to create a culture of belonging in which differences are valued and honored.

Dr. Roosevelt Thomas says inclusion is creating an environment that allows everyone to contribute to his or her potential. (Dr Thomas also thinks about diversity in the same way)

Dr. Bernardo Ferdman, professor at Marshall Goldsmith School of Management defines inclusion on two basic levels: individual and collective.

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Both are important for creating conditions in which everyone has the opportunity to be authentic, appreciated, to feel safe, valued, engaged and excited to be in the workplace.

Our definition of inclusion, taken from my book I Can See Clearly is to belong to, to be a part of, to not be discounted.

I find it interesting that beyond these definitions so many other people from different sectors are doing research and coming up with their own definitions of inclusion. The common theme that seems to surface from these different definitions includes things like safety, value, respect, individuals reaching their potential, etc.

In order for us to really put our arms around this topic it is necessary to acknowledge that there is a pecking order of importance that comes up based on which sector you come from.

Researchers and academicians generally are afforded more credibility than those individuals or groups who have street experience. This is due in part to expectations that are placed on individuals based on the groups they come from. As Ferdman said, it is both individual and collective.

Individually, when students are involved in choosing players to be on a team during recess, the choices are made on levels of capability. In other words decisions as to who you want to select to be on your team are based on who is the best player. As choices continue to be made, it is done in descending order, from the best to the least. The last person to be picked is usually the individual who is least capable. Those who desire to be a star player see their opportunities for recognition dwindle. They feel rejected and in some cases feel excluded for their lack of skills or ability. There is a hierarchy of inclusion to exclusion, from best to worst.

Collective exclusion or inclusion is based on prejudices or stereotypes towards an individual based on groups they come from or belong to. In diversity, I believe the people with disabilities are given last place when it comes to being considered for rights or acknowledgement at the diversity and inclusion table. They have their moments of stardom or recognition within their own group, but not in the total conversation. Not only are these attributions made by collective groups, but also economic and educational status.

Barriers to inclusion

1. Prejudice and lack of awareness of the capabilities of people who come from different groups.

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2. Fear, although it's hard to determine what the fear is really about. Maybe it's the anger from some African Americans. Or maybe fear that you will hurt the feelings of someone with a disability. Fear of the perception that women are emotional. For gays and lesbians, it could have something to do with issues of morality. For some Latinos or Asians it could be their inability to speak "proper" English. Whatever our fear, Dr Thomas emphasizes the need for us to stay focused on the requirements of the job and not the attributions we place on others.
3. Poorly equipped to work with people who are different (lack of cultural competence)
4. Resistance to change – am I being asked to change my basic belief system?

Tips for breaking through to inclusion

First, say "hello." I am baffled by all the research that is being done when some basic tenants of human interaction are ignored. While conducting an organizational audit, a colleague and I had to make a recommendation to a group of executives to "say hello to the employees in the elevator." In one of our company newsletters we introduce the five dimensions of inclusion. The first of these was to create connection. You can't even begin the inclusion process until you have connection. Sometimes this connection begins by saying "hello." People with disabilities often talk about this as a puzzling social phenomenon, but no one mentions this in research terms.

Secondly, seek knowledge. Sometimes the knowledge you need will come in the form of employees who are already in your places of work. Ask them questions that will help the educational process to become more adept at relating with people who are different. If appropriate, read books, articles, periodicals, etc. to learn about general tendencies of particular culture groups.

Third, make sure you understand that diversity and inclusion are a part of the overall business conversation. This will help you avert the concern that "we are just adding one more thing to our plate of an already busy work flow."

Fourth, examine your own prejudices and biases that may be getting in the way of your ability to connect with a certain group of people.

Fifth, examine your threshold for managing change when it comes to dealing with human behavior. Sometimes change forces us to enter territory where we don't feel confident about what needs to be done.

Remember that inclusion is not a program, but a process that requires dialog, vision and respect.

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