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Diversity Is Dead ★ member / subscriber content

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The conversation about diversity as we have known it is over.

Much like equal employment opportunity and affirmative action, the term "diversity" has come to represent something smaller, and with a more limited focus, than was originally intended. Diversity has become about representation of people of color and white women, and in many instances, the term diversity is specifically used as code for African Americans.

Originally, diversity referred to the multitude and full range of human differences. We each bring our diversity, our different perspectives, experiences, and identity, to all we do in life. As we tap into those differences, particularly in organizations, we bring innovation, new perspectives, fresh viewpoints to bear on the bottom line, creating competitive advantage that only a wide range of talents and ideas can offer.

Affirmative action, diversity

Even in the early days of using the word diversity in organizations, many organizational leaders and members of dominant groups would not embrace the concept that differences added value, that differences are good for organizations. Instead, diversity became a more politically correct term for affirmative action or referred only to representation. Consequently, the language changed but the way of thinking about differences, as being primarily about race and gender, did not.

In many places the Affirmative Action office simply changed its name to the Diversity office. Yet the responsibilities of this function remain constant: assisting in the recruiting and promotion of white women and people of color and completing affirmative action reports (often more an exercise than part of a strategic initiative with organizational backing and accountability). This office has also become a convenient place to hire or promote a man of color, a woman of color, or a white woman to a leadership role.

Looking closer, it also becomes clear that in most organizations, the people in senior leadership roles in this office have little or no influence in the organization. They may soon find themselves labeled as the "diversity police," stuck with no career path beyond this office or role. So while the organization may look good from the outside for having this role filled by a diverse candidate, the person in this role often becomes stuck, unable to move up in the organization.

Diversity efforts gone wrong

Organizations often sabotage their diversity effort by seeing it as a program in a limited sphere and as pertaining to only a few people or part of a public relations strategy. Restricting diversity efforts to one or two identity groups keeps diversity in a box. By taking diversity out of the box a whole realm of possibilities emerge. When leveraged effectively, differences can provide a competitive advantage in all areas of the organization including customer service, marketing, and product development.

Senior leaders also often sabotage their organizations' diversity efforts by failing to be closely linked to, aware of, and supportive of it. This distance sends a message to the organization, and the world, about a lack of commitment to, and acceptance of, diversity as important to the

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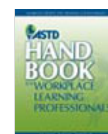
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organization's business strategy. For diversity to be seen as an important initiative, the important people in an organization must be seen and heard demonstrating the imperative for investing in diversity efforts.

In many cases where the diversity function reports directly to the CEO or president, diversity is seen as the pet project of the CEO/president and not as a core business strategy. All too often the person leading the diversity function is the lowest paid of the CEO's direct reports and gets the least amount of coaching and attention.

An example of how diversity efforts are marginalized is evidenced in the recent experience of a woman who had been reporting to the president of a large utility company for three years under the title of chief diversity officer. The president to whom she was reporting had just moved the diversity function to HR because, he said, "we are nearly finished with diversity anyway." He wanted fewer direct reports, and the diversity function was seen as the least critical to the business and therefore the first to go. The company was completing a first round of two-hour diversity awareness sessions for everyone, causing the president to feel that the diversity box had been checked.

Another way to doom diversity efforts is to bring together or hire a more diverse group of people without also adjusting the culture to be more accommodating, supportive, and inclusive of differences. Making environmental or cultural changes is critical to ensure the survival of those who do not easily fit in the existing culture. Adapting the culture to enable and support all people to use their full capabilities and do their best work, differences included, takes a significant commitment of time, effort and strategy.

Before making a purposeful effort to bring more diversity into its workforce, an organization must establish some level of cultural readiness by examining its policies, practices, and procedures for any barriers, overt or subtle, that might limit a new person's ability to contribute. One way to begin this process is to see what barriers exist for people already in the organization. For example, what expectations are spoken or unspoken about single people and their willingness to work long hours or their ability to travel? Is there an assumption that offering domestic partner benefits sufficiently addresses the needs of people in the organization who are lesbian, bisexual, or gay, or are *all* policies examined and changed to be inclusive?

Although 80 percent of Fortune 500 organizations are doing "something" around diversity, the overwhelming majority are doing something programmatic, awareness or social etiquette workshops of some kind. These efforts may leave a temporary feel-good impression, but do little or nothing to change the way business operates, how people are treated, or the culture in which people are trying to do their best work.

Scores of organizations have checked the Diversity Box yet are wondering, or soon will be wondering:

"Why haven't we achieved the results we were hoping to achieve?"

"When will the organization see the return on investment, and how will we know it when we see it?"

"Why are people still feeling poorly treated?"

"Why don't the people we desire and need (e.g., young people, experienced hires) want to come work here, and if they do come, why do they leave so quickly?"

"Why are there still allegations of discrimination?"

Where do we go from here?

If people think diversity is "done," then let's lay it to rest. If it is treated simply as an expendable add-on program or function it is doomed, because expendable programs are cut at the next downturn of the business cycle. If it is limited to race and gender differences and headcount, diversity is dead.

If the original spirit and aims of diversity are to survive, the next phase must be directly

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connected to the overall organizational strategy and results. We must change the conversation from diversity as a representation or recruitment effort, to inclusion as a key lever for increasing operational performance.

A few organizations have washed their hands of the term "diversity" altogether. Many others have added the word "inclusion" to their change effort. It is not that these organizations have given up on diversity, only that the term "diversity" no longer speaks fully to the goal of their change effort.

Some organizations are beginning to understand that focusing on representation alone or just awareness training will not substantially change or improve business results. These organizations have realized that what they are really seeking is a diversity of ideas, approaches, and knowledge, the potential for which already exists in any organization. Acquiring this diversity, then, is not the goal; rather, the goal is enabling people to contribute fully so that their differences are adding value. The basic premise of diversity adding value is the belief that talent comes in all sizes, colors and forms, and that organizations need a broader range of talent than in the past to succeed.

Most organizational leaders have heard that diversity adds value, increases innovation and creativity, and leads to smarter decisions. Some leaders believe this to be true; many even understand how diversity connects to various pieces, if not all, of the business. The key to making diversity efforts yield beneficial results is found in actually including the diversity of the organization. Having diversity is not enough. The inclusion of all people's different talents, ideas, and perspectives is what really enables the benefits of a diverse workforce to be reaped.

Perhaps the term "inclusion" speaks more to the focus of an effective change effort than does "diversity." There are a number of organizations adopting this term and refocusing their efforts in such a way that their work is focused on changing the culture of their workplace to create a more inclusive environment. An inclusive culture invites and encourages all people to contribute their own unique ideas and perspectives to create 360-degree vision in order to accomplish the mission and key strategies of the organization. An inclusive organization can tap into a broader range of information and thus can make wiser decisions and choices about products, services, and resources. Diversity may be dead, but the inclusion of people in meaningful ways is just beginning.

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