The 7 Actions for Leading or Creating an Inclusive Organization

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In response to intensifying global competition, more and more organizations are striving to create inclusive work environments that can offer dramatic improvements in productivity, quality, creativity, customer service, job satisfaction and talent retention. Those experiencing the greatest success tend to be those that make creating and sustaining an organizational culture of inclusion a leadership priority, and establish tangible ways of holding leaders throughout the organization accountable for making quantifiable progress.

Changing an organization's culture requires a carefully planned, sustainable effort that must be led by the organization's senior executives and supported by leadership at all levels of the organization. It must start with an understanding of people's current behaviors and experiences that are preventing the organization from achieving its goals, and a vision of the new organizational reality that will be needed to create the greater sense of belonging, increased commitment, and unleashed synergies of an inclusive work environment.

Any change effort that is not supported and modeled by the organization's senior executives will quickly be recognized as nothing more than a "flavor of the month" by the people of the organization. But the effort must also be supported by mid-level managers, work-group leaders and front-line supervisors throughout the organization or it will evolve into an "us against them" scenario in which people are not held accountable for failing to buy into the senior leaders' direction for the organization.

Senior Executives Must Lead by Word and Deed

Not only must the organization's senior executives communicate a compelling business need for creating a culture of inclusion throughout the organization, they must also be visibly and genuinely committed to the change effort. Since the senior executives are the ultimate role models in the organization, they must become models of the kinds of inclusive behaviors they want to become the norm throughout the organization.

For leaders who rose to their positions in an autocratic organizational hierarchy, learning to embrace and model behaviors like collaboration, partnership and consensus-building may seem awkward at first. Fortunately, in an inclusive work culture, leadership infallibility is not required; leadership integrity is. Our experience shows that integrity and honesty in an organization's leadership is a critical factor in fostering people's commitment, morale and investment in the success of the organization. For senior leaders, acknowledging the difficulty of change and demonstrating a commitment to being on a learning curve is a highly effective way of building credibility and acceptance for the change effort throughout the organization.

Communicating the Organizational Imperative for Inclusion:
Modeling an Inclusive Approach to Communication

In a large, many-layered organization, most people will not have a direct-report relationship or significant direct contact with the senior leaders. If the senior leaders want to make a strong impression throughout the organization about the need for change and their own personal commitment to change, they must step outside the normal means of organizational communication and create new points of contact. They must send multiple messages about the culture work, how the leaders are being held accountable, and what people can expect to see and experience differently.

In some organizations, leaders have used series of "town meeting" forums to meet with large groups in a setting that fosters personal contact and the modeling of an inclusive leadership style. Others have used video messages, telephone messages, letters, and e-mails. A key is to model an inclusive approach in the communication process:

♦ Being genuine and honest in speaking about personal commitment

♦ Acknowledging that others may have legitimate questions, misgivings, fears, doubts or other perspectives

♦ Inviting questions, reactions, and other feedback

♦ Listening carefully while accepting the validity and value of others' perspectives

♦ Responding to feedback in ways that show people's concerns have been heard and taken seriously

Establishing a Strong *Business* Case for Inclusion

To many people, creating a culture of inclusion may sound like an effort with a social agenda rather than a business agenda. This is understandable, since there have been many such efforts to promote fairness and equal opportunity that have not been connected to business outcomes in organizations. Unfortunately, without direct and visible ties to the business and to each person's work in the organization, such efforts tend to lose priority to more traditionally defined business agendas. If an organization begins an effort to become more inclusive in its practices solely because of an assumed moral obligation, the effort is likely to be perceived as a charitable pursuit. Charity, of course, is the first activity that gets put "on hold" when the organization encounters a crisis-and nothing is more commonplace in today's business world than crisis.

There is also another, less obvious danger when the effort is perceived as a moral obligation instead of a business need. People will assume inclusion is simply a "soft" personnel issue; they will assume management processes, leadership styles and business practices can remain unchanged.

Inclusion does have a significant social component. Social justice issues must be acknowledged and resolved if a truly inclusive environment is to be established. For people from diverse backgrounds to feel included and be included in the vital work of the organization, and for people to work together effectively using their differences as assets, new skills must be learned and new practices must become the norm. Because these new skills and practices involve interpersonal behaviors, they may be seen as secondary to technical skills and practices.

If they hope to engage the people of the organization in the change effort, leaders must make a clear connection between these new ways of doing business and improved business outcomes. People must understand these news ways of relating to people in the workplace are real business behaviors, norms and expectations that are part of their employment "contract."

Some businesses have used their commitment to moral obligations - such as strong stands on social and/or environmental issues - as a selling feature: customers can feel better about themselves and promote their favorite causes by buying those businesses' products and services. While adopting socially responsible practices can enable an organization to market itself along these lines, leaders must be careful to stress this factor only as a bonus, not as a primary reason for the inclusion change effort.

Key Points for Communication: What People Need to Hear

Exclusive practices can no longer produce the kinds of results today's organizations need. Autocratic hierarchies with top-down-only communication, need-to-know information sharing and replaceable-cog workforces are relics of the mass-production industrial revolution era. Leaders need to state and restate and reinforce the benefits of adopting inclusive practices:

♦ A broader pool of skills, talents and perspectives to draw from for problem-solving and organizational success

♦ Greater commitment of discretionary energies from all members of the organization, not just some individuals who look and act like the leaders

♦ Better partnerships, cooperation, coordination and business results from diverse teams

♦ Greater engagement of a full range of differences in producing the synergies that leads to breakthroughs in productivity and innovation

Education, Engagement and Accountability: Leadership Must Be On-Board at All Levels

Senior executives must hold their direct-reports accountable for learning, modeling and communicating the need for an inclusive workplace and inclusive business practices. They must also insist that their direct-reports hold their direct-reports accountable at all levels of the organization.

A majority of people in organizations report that the most influential figures in their work experience are their immediate supervisors. In most cases, middle managers and line supervisors are the conduits for information and expectations up and down an organization's hierarchies; this relationship is also the biggest factor in making or breaking each person's connection to the organization and its mission, goals and practices. If a change effort is to be successful, leaders at all levels must be engaged in an education process that enables them to understand the organizational imperative for inclusive practices and gives them the opportunity to learn to use inclusive skills and behaviors in a safe, supportive, learning environment.

7 Actions for Leading or Creating an Inclusive Organization

1. **Be a learner.** Be willing to challenge yourself and grow.

2. **Be inquisitive.** Seek a range of perspectives.

3. **Set the vision.** Explain the reasons why inclusion is important.

4. **Model inclusive behaviors.** Demonstrate that "none of us is as smart as all of us."

5. **Champion the change effort.** Be an active advocate for change.

6. **Speak out when necessary.** Hold the organization accountable; it is also on a learning curve, and it needs constructive feedback.

7. **Hold each other accountable for all of the above.** Hold your direct-reports accountable. Be a learning-partner for them as well as all leaders.

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