

Leading for diversity, inclusion, equity, and wellness in the workplace

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America's population — and therefore, our workforce — has been steadily diversifying for decades. Soon the country will not have a plurality of any particular race, and with members of Generation Z, or those born after 1997, entering the workforce, we now have four generations on our payrolls. Yet companies from a wide range of industries have struggled to increase diversity among their ranks.

Countless research has proven that programs geared toward creating a more inclusive and equitable culture leads to increased productivity, employee morale, and talent retention. Indeed, many finance companies have employees spanning the country with accordingly diverse perspectives and backgrounds. The question then becomes: As an employer, how can you go about moving the needle in this arena for your people, especially in an era of increasingly virtual and remote operations?

Every organization functions differently, so there is no one "correct answer" or silver bullet for your workplace programs. From our perspective as employment lawyers, here are some considerations employers may keep in mind when embarking on a diversity, equity, and inclusion journey, and suggestions based on our clients' success.

Leading for diversity: Representation and recruitment

Communication and transparency are key to any workplace initiative, and that's especially true for programs that revolve around culture. First and foremost, an employer must recognize differences as strengths and commit to improving diverse representation among its workforce.

The most obvious place to begin with these efforts is in employee recruitment and talent acquisition. As the old adage goes, the definition of insanity is doing the same thing but expecting different results. To recruit more diverse candidates, you have to embrace changes to your process, and it starts at the top. Ask yourself whether your organization's recruiting committee itself is diverse? If not, start there.

Employers should also revisit the criteria for selection in the recruiting and hiring process. Be specific in what your end game should look like. Where can you improve representation in your workforce?

Employers will likely need to craft a program that extends beyond the efforts historically made in order to reflect the diversity you want to achieve with your team. Some suggested methods for improvement may include:

- Recruiting based on a comprehensive set of factors rather than straightforward, binary criteria;
- Expanding job ad postings to cast a wider net;
- Maintaining sincerity in your efforts and affording equal treatment to all candidates; and
- Affording transparency and consideration for diverse voices and perspectives.

Leading for inclusion: access and involvement

Where “diversity” is the noun, “include” is the verb. You may have heard the saying that “diversity is being invited to the party and inclusion is being asked to dance.”

Establishing your company’s diversity goals goes hand-in-hand with taking meaningful action to incorporate newly recruited diverse employees into an inclusive, welcoming environment. Giving diverse employees a seat at the table and a voice in the conversation — no matter where, when, or how — will improve your overall workplace culture and productivity.

The first step is to evaluate how inclusive your organization actually is, which requires employee feedback. You should then take comments from your employees and gather members of your human resources, executive management, and legal departments to assess current activities and measure current success.

The next step is to set your particular inclusion goals and put a sustainable plan in place. How can we as an organization, branch, or department be more inviting, open, and collaborative? Look for incremental, attainable steps you can put into place to achieve your goal over time. Be sure your plan includes milestones and checks and balances to maintain momentum and ensure accountability.

You’ll also want to consider who’s delivering the messages surrounding the goals the team sets, and how you get the message out to your employees. You want a spokesperson who is genuine, well-perceived, and respected both within and outside of the organization. Choosing the best spokesperson paves the path for encouraging open, two-way communication between workers and management, which is also critical.

Leading for equity: resources and authenticity

Equity is creating a level playing field. Each employee’s background is colored by a different upbringing and experience, whether that be socioeconomic, cultural, or otherwise. In an equitable environment, each employee doesn’t receive the exact same resources; each employee receives the resources they need to be successful in their role. Some may require more support than others, which may seem unfair. This is why equity can be the hardest to achieve in a workplace: it depends on management establishing a culture of understanding so that employees receive the support they need, which is different from having an unfair advantage.

This is not a new concept in employment law. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) employs the same logic: an employee with a disability receives an accommodation in order to perform their job. Equitable distribution of resources should be considered similarly.

Here are some tactics that can support an inclusive, equitable environment:

Check unconscious biases: Everyone has unconscious biases. It's unavoidable. Once we are mindful that these exist, we can begin to identify them. It is crucial for management to set a tone that erases the stigma and shame associated with having these biases. Then, we can move forward with addressing these biases. What more information do we need? What can we do to better educate ourselves? How can we eliminate bias in our actions and words?

Unmask microaggressions: Microaggressions are casual, often offhand, verbal behavior, or environmental comments or actions, intentional or not, that represent hostile, derogatory, or negative slights or insults that target a person or group. Frequently, the offending party is unaware they have done something that might hurt or offend a colleague. For this reason, identifying microaggressions can be difficult, but doing so represents a crucial step to developing an inclusive environment where all employees feel safe and valued in order to do their best work. Leadership and HR should craft a thoughtful process for managing these conversations with sincerity, care, and discretion.

Avoid the 'diversity tax:' Once a workforce does include representation of diverse groups, a tendency may arise to look to diverse employees for input and guidance on how to handle certain issues. While those employees should certainly be invited to participate in important conversations, management should be mindful that the "burden of education" does not fall disproportionately or by default to any specific employees. Managers can and should avail themselves of ample free educational resources to build thoughtful, respectful processes and programs.

Provide a safe space for underrepresented employees: Creating a safe, positive environment where every employee feels seen, respected, and valued is the ultimate goal for an equitable workplace. When employees are able to bring their authentic selves to work, they are more productive, more fulfilled, and likely to remain in their current roles. Nurturing this environment takes time and authenticity on management's part as well, to earn the trust necessary for employees to feel respected for being who they are to "bring their A-game" every day.

Leading for wellness: employees aren't robots

The recent year has proven that employers must recognize the struggles that people are facing. More than 18 months of a pandemic and racial justice reckoning, complicated by the blurred lines inherent in working from home, have illustrated acutely that our previous trend of leaving wellness to "personal time" is not sufficient. Many finance companies have publicly invested heavily in their employees' overall health and well-being, whether that is physical, mental, emotional, or financial.

For many minority employees, this year has been both particularly difficult and instructive. Recent research has shown that many employees of color, members of the LBGTQ+ population, and others are much more comfortable working from home and are therefore reluctant to return to the workplace because at home, the need to "code-switch" is minimized. "Code-switching" refers to the pressure nontraditional or underrepresented workers feel to switch aspects of their personality on or off in order to conform to what may be more traditional office norms, leading many to feel alienated or disenfranchised.

This highlights the intersection between developing an equitable workplace environment and supporting employees' mental and emotional health. Employers who focus on their staff's well-being — whether through programs that encourage camaraderie and connection or motivate workers to be mindful of their physical health — will often find they have more cohesive, efficient teams.

Shifts in workplace culture are not accomplished easily or quickly. However, employers who are sincere about taking steps that reflect their employees' input and wishes will see success in building a 21st-century workplace.

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