

THE LAYERS OF DIVERSITY & INCLUSION

By Stella Nolan

How are diversity and inclusion perceived in the South African business landscape? Well, some believe it is a liberal ideology that will have no bearing on their overall business objectives. Yet others embrace the basic concept and consider linking it to their favourable Status Level to portray their corporate culture as being diverse and inclusive. However, in reality, both miss the point, which is that diversity and inclusion is a long-term, sustainable and cohesive means to enhance any business's performance, especially in terms of innovation.

How is 'Diversity' defined?

It is the traits and characteristics that make people unique while embracing their differences.

How is Diversity conceptualised?

Diversity is a dimension that differentiates groups of people by encouraging respect for and appreciation of their differences irrespective of age, gender, ethnicity, religion, disability status, sexual orientation, education or national origin.

The concept goes beyond simple tolerance of one another through exploring the human differences in a safe and nurturing environment. The desired result is that a workforce can embrace, celebrate and leverage off one another to the greater benefit of all.

How is 'Inclusion' defined?

It relates to the behaviours and social norms that make people feel welcome in a particular environment.

How is Inclusion conceptualised?

Inclusion is acceptance irrespective of a person's national origin, age, race and ethnicity, religious beliefs, gender, marital or socio-economic status or personality traits.

Key to driving inclusion is a shift in an organisation's culture from a 'them' and 'us' scenario to one of engagement and transparency.

The concept relies on basic human nature, which is that when people feel valued, they function at full capacity and feel part of a culture.

Making the concept of diversity complex is that its interpretation differs from person to person, based on their age, gender, ethnicity, religion, disability status, sexual orientation, education and national origin.

Core to the successful implementation of a Diversity and Inclusion Strategy is that it has the balance right. Ironically, exclusion more often than not forms the base of developing such a policy.

Scenario :

An organisation based in Kwa Zulu Natal identifies that it has a shortage of 'Black' Women in their workforce demographic. They mandate that only 'Black' Women will be employed until they reach their desired quota.

The Human Resource Manager herself is a Zulu speaking 'Black' Woman. Her interpretation was that she had to employ 'Black' Women. Over a period of six months, she meets her desired quota by appointing 12 Zulu speaking 'Black' Women, mainly because she was comfortable with their culture and had language commonality.

However, recruiting in such a manner removes diversity from the workforce. It may meet the Management Control targets, but falls short on variety linked to ethnicity. Fundamentally, her recruitment model was flawed, as it was one of exclusion. Her interpretation of the brief to employ 'Black' Women meant that she not only excluded 'Black' Women who do not speak Zulu, but Indian and Coloured Women too who qualify as 'Black' in terms of legislation. Primarily, employing 12 people with no differences does not support diversity.

The example here highlights the complexity of diversity and inclusion, where exclusion can easily become the basis for the strategy. The lesson here is to leverage from diversity and inclusion; it must be defined and filtered through all occupational levels with checks and balances in place. Bear in mind that to maintain diversity, an organisation must continuously monitor the levels of inclusion. Such inclusivity should go further than simple transactional inclusion.

Diversity and inclusion must be a monitored, well-managed process. Without consistent evaluation or management, it may well hinder an organisation's ability to succeed. Incorporating diversity within an organisation is more than merely 'ticking-the-box'; it is embracing different attitudes and behaviours. It is paramount that any issues arising from a diversity and inclusion roll-out plan are addressed sooner rather than later. Unfortunately, what is apparent from the scenario mentioned is that poor implementation of diversity and inclusion may well have the opposite effect to its intent. Therefore, an organisation's mission, vision and values must be adequately pre-determined to promote diversity. The leadership in an organisation must lead the transformation journey by example from the front.

A vital aspect of managing diversity is the ability to identify inclusion versus exclusion by steering clear from a 'them versus us' scenario. Such a shift can happen through advanced Human Resources practices, with particular reference to recruitment practices which take team dynamics into account. Concurrently, elements to take into account to adequately manage diversity are attitudes, stereotypes, assumptions, preconceived expectations, as well as treating people differently. Each of these elements, more often than not, stem from cultural, inter-generational and lifestyle differences.

Gardenswartz & Rowe, global diversity specialists, described diversity as an onion possessing layers which, once peeled away, reveal the core. Four categories separate the layers of diversity, namely personality, internal, external and organisational dimensions.



- > **Personality** refers to a person's unique style and characteristics. It addresses whether a person is an introvert or extrovert, reflective or expressive, quick-paced or methodical, a thinker or a doer. This area analyses how a person would interact with and react to other people, as well as how others will interact with and react to them.
- > **Internal Dimensions** incorporate six characteristics of a person's makeup, namely gender, age, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity and physical ability. For the most, these characteristics are not life choices, yet they ultimately reflect the treatment of people in an organisation, as well as perceptions outside the work environment.
- > **External Dimensions** are the direct result of life experiences and choices. Considering aspects such as a person's religious background, level of education, marital status, work experience, disability status, and recreational habits are vital. These characteristics are how people either connect or disconnect and from where value or disrespect stems. Such perceptions arise from the External Dimension of the person, making an opinion.
- > **Organisational Dimensions** bring together all the elements, constructively evaluating both the similarities and differences of a workforce. It allows assessment of what the outcome would be of a particular person holding a position of leadership versus forming part of a team; how that person would function in a creative environment versus an analytical one. It would highlight the contrast of a particular person functioning in a client-facing role in comparison to an office-bound one. It investigates the effective treatment of both colleagues and the overall productivity of an organisation. In essence, it represents areas of similarity; however, it takes on board the benefits of differences.

In short, a well-managed diversity strategy would highlight distinct similarities and embrace the differences, hence have the potential to uncover hidden potential through a different perspective.

However, mismanagement of this process may sow seeds of conflict, bringing about confusion and hindering teamwork, resulting in a decrease in productivity and harmony. Decisive management is essential to an organisation optimising such complex differences through incorporating a practical framework and strategy.

Developing a Diversity and Inclusion Strategy and creating a diverse and inclusive culture are two completely different things. The following is a non-exhaustive list of areas to consider when developing a Diversity and Inclusion Strategy:

Embrace individuality

Core to an integrated Diversity and Inclusion Strategy is ensuring that an employee does not have to mask who they are at work. For example, a Muslim employee who feels insecure about maintaining their prayer routine, forcing an employee with a tattoo to cover their marking, or a breastfeeding mother returning to work with no area to pump her breast milk. When employees feel they have to hide or mask core parts of themselves at work because they feel unsure, unsafe or invisible, it can take a toll on motivation and engagement, thus ultimately affect employee retention and turnover rates.

Organisations must consider aspects of inclusivity as part of their efforts to create a workforce that reflects a variety of backgrounds and experiences.

From the shop floor to the boardroom

The makeup of an executive team hugely signifies an organisation's commitment to diversity and inclusion, as it inherently drives the culture. A survey conducted by Boston Consulting Group found that among organisations representing Fortune 500, only 24 CEOs were women, representing 5% of the total number of CEOs. The same report pointed out that, among the 500 CEOs, only three were 'Black' People, another three were openly gay, and one identified as a lesbian.

Probably the most challenging aspect of addressing a diversity and inclusion strategy is that those driving it most likely do not have a say over the executive team.

Acknowledge and honour religious and cultural practices

Religion and culture are core to who most people are; however, these issues, more often than not, are put on the back burner. A policy honouring religion and culture could incorporate prayer areas, a kosher kitchen and floating holidays to accommodate the religious preferences of all employees.

Create a safe communication platform

Part and parcel of creating a diverse and inclusive culture is a safe platform whereby employees can address their differences safely and respectfully. Such a platform would allow employees to remain authentic to themselves and be proud of the unique qualities they bring to the workforce. Freedom of expression, enabling an employee to share their unique perceptions on issues or lifestyle, will connect a workforce. For example, an employee from the LGBT community is allowed to articulate how they would like to be addressed by fellow employees and why.

Intergenerational harmony

Remember that people from different backgrounds and generations often have vastly different perspectives on all sorts of issues. The differences range over many areas, such as what they choose to wear to work, how they compose an email, the kind of feedback given on employee reviews or the types of ideas they pitch in meetings. A communication platform enables a workforce to understand the thinking patterns of their fellow workers. For example, the work culture of a person from Generation X may be to work from dawn to dusk with no work/life balance. Yet Millennials may prefer a policy of working smart but not as hard, as to them having boundaries between work and life may be more essential.

Today millennials – those aged between 22 and 38 - make up the vast majority of the workforce. Having a workforce that recognises and accommodates multiple generations is essential in building a diverse and inclusive workforce. While millennials are generally known for being tech-savvy, the older millennials might not have the same proficiency with tech tools as their younger counterparts.

At this moment, the national workforce incorporates the Baby Boomers, who are currently retiring from the workforce, Generation X and the Millennials. Each generation brings its innovations to the table, and each can learn lessons from the other. As the customer base of most organisations spans across generations, the input of all is essential for an organisation's product to have a broader reach.

Focus groups are an excellent way to collect qualitative data and gain deeper insights into employees. By using an outside facilitator, employees may be more comfortable speaking freely, and the external company will maintain a neutral position.



Universal Infrastructure

Critical to inclusion is ensuring that there are no infrastructural barriers. For example, can a wheelchair user access all areas of the workplace? When scheduling a meeting to a boardroom on the 3rd floor, will everyone have access to attend? In booking events and planning activities, are the cultures, any limitations or belief systems of all participants taken into account, so that everyone feels welcome and included? Very important, too, is who is invited and not invited to attend such events.

A large body of research shows that the hiring process is unfair and full of bias. Much of it is unconscious sexism, racism, or ageism. If left unchecked, this could harm an organisation's culture.

Embracing diversity is not necessarily part of the human make up. Therefore, when an organisation hires, promotes and evaluates job performance, the person performing that role needs to know how to de-bias their practices and procedures.

Three areas to consider in addressing the complexity of diversity and inclusion:

Individual attitudes & behaviours

The overall attitudes and behaviours of individuals within an organisation's workforce are paramount to successfully expanding diversity, thus creating a heterogeneous workforce.

These specific attitudes and behaviours are based on an individual's internal dimensions that will ultimately affect an organisation's culture due to:

- > Multiple languages in the workplace;
- > The chosen lifestyle of co-workers;
- > Co-workers wearing religious symbols or attire;
- > Conflicting positions between employees and management on internal policies;
- > Generational differences;
- > Acknowledgement and acceptance of cultural differences;
- > Specific views on disability; and
- > Outlook on gender equality.

Levels of intolerance, ingrained prejudice and stereotyping will ultimately have a negative impact on an organisation's core service offering.

Collectively, both the similarities and differences of a workforce will make an impact on an organisation's cultural DNA, its ability to evolve and holistically embrace diversity as the norm.

Managerial skills and practices

An organisation's managerial skills and practices should recognise that one style of management will not necessarily apply to all. Managerial practices should be tailor-made to support the wide range of a workforce.

When embracing diversity in the workplace, diverse management practices should be firmly in place. Management must be aware of the vast differences within their workforce, recognise and embrace each person, then provide the opportunity for organic growth.

Recognising the inherent differences within a particular workforce and using these as a positive will filter through to conflict resolution, accountability, team cohesion, commitment and ultimately work performance.

Organisational values and policies

The final focus area for leveraging diversity relies on changes to organisational values and policies. Doing this is possibly the most critical focus area, as it addresses how an organisation welcomes diversity.

- > How is a workforce recruited to create a broader talent pool to ensure a more diverse and equitable workforce?
- > Are those who recruit, themselves diverse? Are their internal dimensions adequate to be open and objective to differences?
- > Are decision-makers open to diversity? Bear in mind that it is human nature to surround oneself with those who replicate one's values and belief system.
- > What succession plans are in place?

What sensitisation programmes are in place to successfully integrate differences within an organisation's culture?

Source of Reference:

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