



Developing an Inclusive Culture for the Disabled

True inclusive cultures embrace everyone, including the disabled. Developing an inclusive culture for the disabled begins with adopting the disability attitude.

The European Disability Forum's suggestion is simple: Adopt a "disability attitude." While few in words, it speaks volumes about creating an inclusive culture, whether social or business.

Adopting a disability attitude lays the foundation for looking at everything with understanding perspectives, whether it is the job or workplace, the recruitment policy, the diversity policy, employee diversity training, meeting policies, and so on. Diversity does not have limits, and inclusion is more than basic representation.

An inclusive culture is one founded on core values that include fair representation across workplace roles, equitable access to opportunities and resources, fair consideration of all workforce members in decision-making processes, respect for differences, and flexibility in adapting positions as needed to take advantage of employee strengths and capabilities.

Understanding Inclusiveness.

There is growing recognition that a truly inclusive culture cannot focus only on groups of people based on race, ethnicity or gender. When inclusiveness is defined narrowly, it is not really inclusive, and the effort to develop a fully productive and engaged workforce is quite likely to fall short. The organization is sending a message that some people matter more than others.

Inclusive cultures have certain elements that give all people opportunities to be fully participative. One of the misconceptions concerning inclusiveness is that it requires making everything equally accessible, usually not possible or affordable, or treating people exactly the same, which would actually ignore factors like cultural or physical differences that influence perspectives and approaches.

Recognizing that inclusiveness should include everyone, organizations came to realize that persons with disabilities also have unique perspectives and also have the right to be treated on an equal basis, even though that does not necessarily mean equal access.

What this means is that organizations should not consider a person's disability when developing Human Resources policies and procedures concerning recruiting, training and development, career planning, and other initiatives. However, there should be reasonable accommodation so that people with disabilities can choose to participate.



Getting Reasonable About Accommodation

Elements of an inclusive culture for those with a disability address the elimination of barriers to participation and promote mindful inclusion and respect. Workplace policies need to recognize and support reasonable accommodation. Reasonable accommodation includes adapting workplaces and developing resources like work materials or using adaptive technologies, but it goes deeper than that. Accommodation also includes providing employees with options like flexible work schedules, accessible hiring practices, outreach to people with disabilities during recruitment, meeting and event accessibility, and accessible training opportunities. Affinity groups for the disabled are another benchmark of an inclusive organization.

The culture of inclusiveness begins at the top. There are two aspects. First, managers should be trained to work with people with disabilities and to ensure their units are accommodating. One of the issues faced by people with disabilities is management or peer paternalistic and protective attitudes. This perpetuates the idea that people with disabilities are not as competent. A formal policy on inclusiveness may exist, but if stereotypes exist also, the implementation of the policy is going to be lacking. Commitment needs to exist at all levels of the organization. Senior leadership guides policy development and Human Resources monitors recruiting and hiring practices, but it is mid-level managers that facilitate inclusiveness because they are making the decisions concerning who gets hired, trained and promoted.

Another benchmark of an inclusive culture is a system that ensures policy statements and commitment statements are regularly communicated across the organization. The communication serves as ongoing training and demonstrates senior-level commitment. Policy statements should include the words “disability” and “people with disabilities” just as they refer to gender, ethnicity, age and race.

Employees take their cues from management. Managers who are unwilling to support requests for disability accommodations or make it such a laborious process that people are discouraged from asking, is in effect promoting a culture of exclusiveness. Managers should support diversity behaviors that show respect for all employees.

One way to bring people on board is to establish an enterprise-wide team consisting of management staff and employees with disabilities. This gives the disabled a voice and recognition at the same time.

Global Inclusiveness

Global companies have unique challenges because they operate in countries that have very different laws and cultural perceptions of what inclusiveness means.

One of the ways companies have developed a global inclusive culture is by creating global inclusion councils and regional initiatives, management and employee inclusion training, and affinity groups



with global connections. Initiatives in domestic and global companies include activities like Diversity & Inclusion Week, volunteer programs, mentoring programs and education programs.

Discrimination against people with disabilities remains high, and because of this numerous countries are developing strategies to promote inclusion.

The European Union adopted the European Disability Strategy in 2010 in response to several conditions that exist. People with disabilities are poorer than other citizens and have a higher unemployment rate. It is estimated that around 80 million disabled people in the EU face discrimination, and physical and attitudinal barriers.

According to the United States Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy, the country's third largest market population segment is the 54 million disabled. (Surprise! It is not Millennials.)

Organizations can be guided by the priority areas in the European Disability Strategy 2010-2020 as they develop inclusive organizational cultures. They are accessibility, participation, equality, employment, education and training, social protection, health, and external action or promoting the rights of people with disabilities outside the organization.

Building an inclusive culture means looking at everything from recruiting practices to workplace accommodations with perceptive eyes. It also means developing a workplace that actively promotes and practices inclusion, and people are comfortable asking for accommodations like customized employment or job restructuring, or specialized tools. A benchmark of an inclusive culture is the presence of a universal policy that provides all potential and current employees the flexibility and accommodation they need.

It should really not be a matter of who has a disability or who is of what ethnicity, race or gender. What matters is that organizations find, hire and retain the right talent. It just so happens that some of the top talent has a disability.