



Leveraging ERG Allies to Build a Positive Organizational Culture

Bridging differences in a diverse workforce is an important strategy for creating and maintaining a positive productive culture. Employee resource groups are prime sources of allies who can build alliances across diversity in every category.

Diversity in the workplace continues to grow with companies embracing people of different generations, faiths, disabilities and personal identities. Bridging these differences to develop a cohesive workplace, while enabling authenticity, is challenging but necessary to reinforcing a positive organizational culture.

It is not a goal that can be pursued by one manager or one Human Resources department. It takes allies who serve as proactive and deliberate champions, creating an environment in which people respect differences. Just as importantly, allies help an organization leverage differences because they help people feel psychologically safe in expressing their unique perspectives, experiences, and ideas. It is an engine for a positive culture and innovation.

Employee resource groups (ERGs) are an excellent source of allies – people who can create connections across the organization and outside their own group.

Allies are Proactive

What is an ally in the diversity context? It is not someone who is a mere representative of a particular group of people, like women or African-Americans or people with disabilities. An ally does much more than represent. The person is an active promoter of a culture of inclusion, working to advance the culture through intentional and thoughtful efforts.

This is not a new concept, but it has taken on new meaning in a globalized business marketplace and an increasingly diverse workforce, requiring a need for greater recognition of differences and psychologically safe workplaces.

It was not that long ago that LGBTQ community members hid their sexual identity out of fear. Fear has no place in an inclusive culture. It stymies the sharing of ideas seen out of the mainstream. It stops people from being authentic and bringing their whole selves to work. It stifles conversations about diversity, and it stifles innovation. When people fear being their authentic selves, the organization does not have an inclusive ecosystem.

Establishing diversity and inclusion (D&I) policies and procedures only sets the stage for change, but it takes people reaching out to people, making connections and creating bridges that cross identities.

Find Allies Close to Home



Allies are the people who proactively make the connections, and behave in a manner that is compatible with D&I as core values. They are the first line advocates who play a role in correcting bias, sexism, racism and the many forms of discrimination that are often subtle.

Where are these allies found? The most logical place is ERGs. Members of these groups have already proven they are willing to take the extra steps to address issues around diversity and inclusion. They are proactive, willing to work for change, and open to learning about themselves and others.

Developing allies means helping people understand how to take their positive qualities and apply them in a proactive broader manner in the workplace. They learn how to actively promote and advance a culture of inclusion through intentional and conscious efforts.

Allyship is a process of building relationships based on trust and conscious behaviors. Belonging to an ERG is not a requirement, but the ERG is a natural place for finding allies.

Growing Positive Connections

Becoming an ally is a learning process. An ally must be acutely aware of their own biases so they are not projected in the responses to others. The organization can provide training and resources to people most likely to become proactive allies.

The diversity champions building bridges must also always exemplify inclusive behavior, making them change agents striving for a culture that does not exclude anyone. This requires an internal analysis of current thoughts and behaviors. For example, an ally in a meeting notices there is only one African-American attending and she seldom speaks up. The ally works to change that situation, helping the woman feel empowered.

Allies also know how to appropriately respond to venting by other employees and can recognize system inequalities.

Developing an inclusive culture requires action. Many of the ways allies promote an inclusive culture focus on helping marginalized employees fully participate in the organization. For example, the ally shares growth opportunities and encourages people to join in company events where they can interact with a variety of employees.

Allies advocate for education programs, awareness building events, and strategic decision-making that makes D&I a core value. Managers who become true allies ensure their decision-making process for hiring is equitable – job descriptions are not biased, diverse candidates are included, and the personal perspective is open to considering people who have different characteristics and life experiences from the hiring manager. ERGs often develop partnerships with advocacy organizations, and allies can leverage those connections to improve inclusion of diverse people in the recruitment and hiring process, and the supply chain.

Reaching Across Boundaries



Recruiting allies from ERGs also enables building a network of diversity champions who can share across boundaries. For example, an ally from a faith ERG can promote organizational learning opportunities on religious inclusion that all employees can access. An ally who belongs to a mental health or disability ERG can help drive initiatives with meaning for the workplace.

Organizations are discovering they need people who are willing to just listen and allow others to share their unique experiences and perspectives, and to give honest feedback on their experiences in the workplace.

An important characteristic of an ally is that the person is often outside a particular group but is willing to publicly declare support and advocate on behalf of an underrepresented or marginalized group. For example, a heterosexual advocates for LGBTQ rights or an African-American advocates for Latino rights.

Originally, an ally was defined as a member of a majority group who advocates for a minority group, but workforce diversity has changed that idea. Now people develop networks across all perceived boundaries, so an ally can be a member of a majority or minority group.

The key element is that an ally will "go public" with support. This behavior strengthens the inclusive workplace culture and enables people to bring their whole selves to work. The support also strengthens the organization's brand as an employer of choice.