



Building a Truly Inclusive Workplace with an Allyship Strategy

Business leaders have worked for years to build inclusive workplaces, but stopping at inclusion is not getting desired results. There are new elements to consider – belonging and allyship – to create a truly inclusive culture that develops a sense of belonging in diverse employees.

The ideal organization does not have an inclusive culture. It has an inclusive culture in which all employees have a sense of belonging, meaning they feel valued and appreciated. Each person has a unique story to share and a life experience that enables an employee to bring a unique perspective, ideas, and creative problem-solving. It is the lifeblood of a thriving organization. As more companies globalize and workforce demographics continue to show increasing diversity, developing a culture of belonging becomes even more challenging.

Recognizing the need to have a greater impact in diversity and inclusion (D&I), companies have been developing and deploying a global allyship strategy in which influential employees, who are not members of a diverse or underrepresented group, proactively support inclusion and build positive relationships with diverse employees that are based on trust and accountability.

Allies become the links between "business as usual" and a truly inclusive culture in which people feel safe being authentic. Success benefits the employees who develop a sense of belonging and the company that unlocks the innovation and creativity in its workforce and strengthens employee engagement.

Where are the Resources for Change?

The principle of D&I has been around a long time now, but like most business principles, it must adapt. In the U.S., it emerged as a strategy of adaptation to changing workforce demographics in the country. Today, many companies also have global operations employing people or are actively recruiting and hiring diverse people. Including diverse people in human resources processes is an important step in developing a workplace aligned with the customer base, but the effort should not stop there.

The challenges that D&I practitioners face are many. They include ensuring diverse people are given equal opportunities to reach their potential once employed and to express their unique selves.

A major challenge of D&I practitioners over the next year is getting access to adequate staff and resources, and the authority to enact the kind of change and create the type of culture desired. In many organizations, practitioners work alone or have a team of one or two people yet are asked to initiate and sustain substantial change through collaboration with the staff in human resources and



by convincing leaders to join the effort. It is remarkable they have been so successful while working with so few resources.

Using Privilege and Power to Drive Inclusion and Belonging

Given this scenario, allyship takes on critical importance in developing a culture of inclusion and belonging. There are companies taking a leadership role in this area, like Expedia Group.

Expedia Group defines an ally as "An individual who enjoys some privilege and is using that awareness to end oppression, create inclusion, and understand their own privilege." Allies are expected to take action, demonstrate inclusive behaviors and drive change. Expedia has invested significant resources in an allyship strategy that actively promotes inclusion and belonging on a global basis. There are many components of the effort to make sure it is effective and productive. They include employing allyship trainers to develop leadership role models and productive allies, training courses, summits and roundtables, and community outreach efforts.

Allyship requires a different mindset and can be the breakthrough effort to creating a true culture of belonging. The basic tenet is that each person is on a journey, and it is important to understand that people across cultures and identities want to learn and grow and bring their best self to the workplace. They have stories to tell and non-diverse people need to listen.

The strongest barrier to creating a sense of inclusion and belonging is in people's minds. For example, judging an entire religion, culture, or race based on one person's behaviors or perspective is unfair and often done unconsciously. People who belong to a privileged group need to question their own experiences and biases to understand how they have influenced their thinking about people.

Leaders as Intentional Allies

Anyone who is not a member of a marginalized group can be an ally. However, it is incumbent on all leaders to be allies because they are in positions of power and to reinforce others who serve as allies.

Leading by example is crucial, and there are many opportunities. A manager can directly address negative or inappropriate behaviors, promote diverse people who are not in the room, challenge bias.

One of the important qualities of allyship is that it is not a self-identified relationship building effort. The allyship position is recognized as intentional by those with whom the ally works and as a conscious effort to build trust and accountability.

Allies are advocates, knowledge sharers, learners and change agents. They believe diverse people when they describe their experiences or tell their stories. They embrace D&I, use inclusive language, hold dedicated conversations and share ideas in meetings.



Accountability is also an element of an allyship program and is measured in various ways. Analytics can demonstrate the allyship effort is linked to business priorities, increases employment engagement, and improves retention and internal movement of diverse employees.

After the program is initiated, business performance metrics can measure the impact of allies' efforts. Predictive metrics can point to future trends and guide the organization in identifying where interventions are needed.

Allyship is an Ongoing Conversation

Expedia's allyship program is not just another initiative with a beginning and end. A crucial aspect of a successful allyship effort is that it is a core ongoing strategy for delivering meaningful change. Despite the millions of dollars invested in D&I programs, diverse people often remain isolated and unable to be their authentic selves.

The missing piece of the puzzle is belonging and creating a sense of belonging requires an investment in resources. Too often, businesses create a D&I leadership position, directing the person to improve the culture, but fail to give the person the resources needed.

Allyship is a strategy for giving non-diverse people of privilege or in positions of power an opportunity to make a powerful impact on the organization's culture, and it does not require hiring more people except for perhaps one or more ally trainers. A successful allyship strategy turns leaders and others into D&I team members who understand that inclusion and belonging is an ongoing conversation.