From the Field: Practical Applications of Research

Striving for an Inclusive Workplace

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Abstract

This article aims to provide school leaders with preliminary information and initial insight into the challenges they face when they seek to hire, retain, and sustain a diverse workforce. This article brings together some essential facts about the lack of diversity in the school district workforce in New York and outlines an array of steps school leaders can take to sustain a more diverse workforce that better reflects the diversity within society and in their schools.

Introduction

My work in school districts and other social agencies has enabled me to serve as a consultant to many leaders who struggle to create an inclusive culture for their staff and students. Daniel Goleman, psychologist and author of a best-selling book on Emotional Intelligence, as well as countless articles on the subject, said: "the rules of work are changing, and we are being judged by a new yardstick-not just how smart we are and what technical skills we have, which employers see as givens, but increasingly by how well we handle ourselves and one another" (Goleman, 2007). With great interest, I have witnessed leaders from an array of employment sectors respond in various ways to the social and political protests that have engulfed our country since 2019. As a consultant to school districts, municipalities, and small businesses, I've had many opportunities to participate in leader-level conversations centered on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in general, and more specifically, the impact these conversations can have on the recruitment, selection, and staffing processes. While some organizations have achieved various levels of success on their Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion journeys, others have struggled, and in some instances, their leaders have become frustrated after encountering barriers to an inclusive workforce. This is particularly true for school leaders on Long Island, many of whom, in addition to facing rapid shifts in racial demographics among the student populations they serve, have struggled at times to recruit and retain educators with diverse backgrounds, particularly where the intersectionality of race and ethnicity occurs.

Demographic trends indicate that the United States is becoming more racially and ethnically diverse, yet staffing levels of diverse educators have remained stagnant, at least statistically, for decades. For example, according to the US Census Bureau, in 2014, there were more than 20 million children under the age of 5, and 50.2 percent of them were minorities, making up a majority-minority.

In 2017, Education Trust New York reported that "there is not a single Latino or Black teacher in one-third of all New York Schools, and nearly 200,000 Latino and Black students attend schools with no or just one same race or same ethnicity teacher" (P.12). Similarly, as reported in Newsday (2019) a Hofstra University report indicated that "nonwhite students accounted for nearly 45 percent of the region's public-school enrollment in 2017, with particular growth among Asians and Latinos. Even so, nonwhite teachers made up only 8 percent of the region's classroom workforce" (Hildebrand, 2019).

According to the New York State Education Department, in the 2020-21 school year, Hispanic students accounted for nearly one-third of Long Island's student body, Asians were nearly ten percent, and African Americans accounted for about nine percent of 421,254 students. According to a March 2022 article in Newsday, Long Island has 36,000 public school teachers who instruct 418,257 students. Ninety-two percent of Long Island teachers are white, while approximately 9.5 percent or slightly under 3,600 full-time teachers are minorities, and the minority student population is 52.8 percent (Polsky, 2022).

Current data indicate that in a vast majority of Long Island schools, minority students never encounter a minority faculty member during their K-12 journey. In contrast, the vast majority of white students only see teachers who look like them during their K-12 journey. As a Human Resources consultant immersed in nearly all aspects of workplace issues, I often wonder, based on their lack of exposure to critical elements of diversity in their schools, how prepared some of our graduates are for the increasingly diverse world they will encounter after high school.

As the son of two fiercely proud African American educators who in 1960 came to Long Island from vastly different socio-demographic environments to live and work, I am struck by the fact that today's school leaders have, in addition to so many other things, been tasked with addressing the

long-anchored practices that created exclusive or "in group" hiring patterns and preferences that continue to delimit the inclusion of nonwhite educators. On the other hand, as my parents often said when helping me prepare to face a significant challenge, "someone has to do it; why not you?" My purpose here is to share with educators the insights and understandings I have gained working with school leaders and help today's leaders sustain a diverse workforce in their schools.

To improve organizational culture, as a means of achieving more equitable, diverse, and inclusive workplaces, many school leaders and professional development programs include the topic of workplace inclusivity at the forefront of leadership development programs. Two questions are central to this emergent and possibly transformational leadership conversation, and I believe they are fundamental to any school organization's strategic plans. The first question is, how do we engage leaders to embrace the need for change, enhance collective social and emotional intelligence, and focus on creating environments that reflect a core value of inclusion? The second question is, striving for diversity, equity, and inclusion, how do we determine future human capital needs, recruit qualified candidates, select the best candidates as new employees, retain them, and help prepare them for sustainable success?

As a Human Resources consultant, whenever I am asked to assist clients with Diversity, Equity, and Inclusivity (DEI) initiatives, I am often reminded of the phrase "employers cannot fix what they do not understand." Regardless of where they might be on their DEI journey, I implore them to spend some time reflecting, without attribution, on how "we" got here, and I explicitly say "we," because, as Stephen Covey once said, "we see the world, not as it is, but how we are conditioned to see it" (2004, P. 28). While this may be an uncomfortable truth for many leaders, any organization's successful DEI journey must begin with individual and organizational reflection, or what I call an Inclusion audit.

It is helpful to look at any DEI effort systemically to understand better the substantial degree of connectedness among its core elements of recruitment, selection, inclusion, and retention. Setting up a systematic data review of the historical and current outcomes by schools and departments for the inclusive hiring system will reveal strengths and weaknesses within the process.

As more employers have discovered, employees across multiple demographics are demanding change on issues pertaining to DEI and achieving more inclusive workplaces. In February of this year, the Gallup Organization reported that 42 percent of 13,085 employees surveyed indicated that having an "organization that is diverse and inclusive of all types of people," ranked among the top six things they wanted in their next job. (Wigert, 2022) Research conducted by the American Psychological Association suggests "there is a relationship between equity, diversity, inclusion (EDI), and organizational health. Fostering a welcoming and inclusive workplace helps employees feel a sense of belonging and contributes to a healthy work culture, and taking a multifaceted approach that engages employees throughout the organization reaffirms your organization's commitment to EDI while supporting employee well-being." (American Psychological Association, 2022).

In what might be considered indicative of the extent to which the workplace has become a microcosm of society, some organizations have become more assertive in responding to emerging employee expectations. For example, Deloitte, one of the top accounting firms in the world, recently shared the following message with both prospective and current employees:

"For those of you considering joining our Deloitte team now or in the future, we welcome your exploration of our culture and our commitment to DEI. Ask yourself-and us-if Deloitte is a place where you can connect, belong, and grow. And for our people, we urge you to hold us to increased transparency and meaningful change. Know that these goals are not exhaustive of the work ahead. Continue to engage and challenge us on how we lead this movement and deliver on the talent experience you deserve. Most importantly, continue to bring your full and authentic selves to work-and encourage your colleagues to do the same" (www.deloitte.com, June 22, 2022).

In posting statements such as these, Deloitte is sending two powerful messages. The first message tells prospective employees that this is a progressive workplace that not only welcomes employees of all backgrounds, it is also a place that values inclusion. The second message is more directed toward current employees and serves as an important reminder that DEI is infused throughout the organization, and while subtle, this message serves as a reminder to current employees to avoid conduct that conflicts with the organization's stated values.

One aspect of inclusion that many leaders struggle with is not understanding what an inclusive work environment looks like. Admittedly, this question is not easy to answer without some depth of analysis. However, it bears noting that inclusive work environments are continually self-reflective, have ongoing movement, and embrace change. Another key determinant is the extent to which the organization is willing to assess the impact of organizational and individual practices, including how effectively the leaders communicate across real or imagined barriers.

I often share a story with my clients about a time when I was asked to teach a cohort of Korean leaders pursuing their Master's degrees through Stony Brook University's College of Business, which had a campus in Korea. In my case, the students came to the United States to study during an intensified four-week semester. They spoke little to almost no English, and because I did not know even one word of Korean, I initially rejected this prestigious teaching assignment because I was concerned about the significant language barrier. However, a few days later, I decided to take the assignment, and it turned out to be a magnificent personal

and professional experience, partly because of the effort it took to mitigate the discomfort I initially felt. As a result of the experience, I now frequently ask leaders I am working with to assess their comfort level when communicating across diverse cultures and groups. This type of self-awareness is critical because hiring decisions and in-group out-group associations, can be impacted by barriers, whether real or imagined, due to language, gender, age, race, or any constitutional protections, and those barriers act as unconscious "gatekeepers" that can negatively influence employee-related decision making.

I have listed below some of the practices that inclusive organizations with whom I work employ to sustain their diverse workforce:

- Conduct recruitment outreach, or participate in regional efforts to expand the recruitment net in order to achieve a more diverse pool of applicants. Monitor the interview process and candidate experience to ensure it aligns with your DEI commitment. Inclusive organizations also monitor new employee onboarding practices. Data confirms that this positively affects employee retention rates and engagement levels for employees in general, particularly for diverse employees.

- Maintain a visible commitment to prioritizing inclusion at the highest leadership level and ensure this commitment cascades throughout the organization. Have a strong desire to improve, do not fear or avoid the hard truths and challenging discussions, and have equitable employment practices that are rooted in trust.

- Pay close attention to demographic changes in the general population and the workforce.

- Are adept at dealing with conflict, particularly conflict that can stem from social and organizational change.

- Know that unconscious bias (biases we do not realize we have) can be just as impactful and dangerous as racism because even the hidden or unknown biases of good people who lead organizations can influence recruitment, interviewing, candidate selection, performance evaluation, career development/promotions, in-group versus out-group relationships, employee sense of belonging and engagement, organizational climate, and are often manifested in bigotry, intolerance and unfairness because they cloud internal decisions, influence human interactions, shade perceptions of others, and are far more difficult to pinpoint.

Conclusion

I recommend to leaders that they conduct an inclusion review of their organization. While it may sound cumbersome, it does not need to be. An inclusion review can range from a leadership discussion focused on whether there is a disconnect or a gap between what we say we do and believe and how people experience inclusion in the workplace. A review of staff demographics (age, gender, race, ethnicity, and disability) can authentically determine who is underrepresented. A review that involves tracking the racial and gender breakdown on teams, promotion rates, who is assigned key projects, and reviewing employee retention rates can help identify any biases the organization may have. In addition, consider the following three questions as part of the audit:

- Do you know how employees from different demographic groups feel about your organization?

- Do your employees feel they can be their authentic selves at work?

- Do your employees feel like they belong as full members of your organization?

It is important to remember that in order to have a more inclusive workplace, leaders must focus on instilling a sense of belonging for employees of all backgrounds and remain fully cognizant of the fact that newly appointed employees from diverse backgrounds might not assimilate as seamlessly as others into the workplace unless employers provide a continuous onboarding process that focuses on building trust, and strives to achieve both a common mission and positive workplace culture. Finally, as organizations mature in their inclusivity processes, here are some additional suggestions for questions that can be part of any organization's inclusion review:

- Is the organization genuinely welcoming to people of all backgrounds? What systemic inequalities may exist? How does the organization come across to prospective job applicants? Are we processing this assessment through our prisms or theirs? What, if any, gaps exist?

- How easily does our organization accept and welcome diverse employees? To what extent do we meaningfully interact with them?

- What are the gender and racial/ethnicity breakdowns in our overall workforce? This assessment should then be applied to representation in overall management, senior management, and among new hires. Similarly, a review can be done of all promoted employees and the 10% highest paid populations.

- What information might be available in a review of retention data focused on the reasons for the departure of former employees?

- What information might be available from meeting with select groups of current employees to identify is-

sues/concerns specific to the work environment and get their thoughts on the organization's culture?

- What image does your website and digital/social media presence present to prospective employees?

- Do your job descriptions and advertisements include gender-sensitive words and nurturing and supportive language?

- Have your employees experienced any patterns of discrimination, bullying, or harassment?

- What about supplier diversity? How much money do we spend with companies owned by people from underrepresented groups?

A Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion journey is a powerful impetus to enhance employee engagement, wellness, and productivity. Leaders and Boards of Trustees must not only hold themselves accountable they also have to recognize that building an inclusive organization is a non-linear journey that requires continuous commitment, but is arguably one of the most crucial steps a progressive leader can take to help build a workplace that aligns with the future, while simultaneously helping to better prepare students to sustain it.

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