

Diversity, Equity & Inclusion



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Diversity: Concrete Actions Employers Can Consider to Help Drive Inclusion

Taking action to create diversity, equity, and inclusion within our organizations is both a timely and important consideration for employers of all sizes.

In working with clients and within my law firm to implement intentional and transformative actions, there are four steps that rise to the top as recommendations for organizations or businesses to consider when creating a solid base for promoting inclusivity:

- 1. Be Courageous**
- 2. Make Room for Everyone at the Table**
- 3. Meet People Where They Are**
- 4. Share Our Stories**

BE COURAGEOUS

What does that mean; what does it entail?

Acting with courage is not acting without fear. In fact, being courageous means acting even when we may be fearful. We have triumphed over fear many times in our lives.

Think back to your Bar or Bat Mitzvah and reciting the Torah portion in front of the entire synagogue, or your first solo at church, or even that time when your softball team was depending on you to make the winning play... What about the moment you realized you were going to be a parent by surrogacy, birth, or adoption, or that you were getting married and “til death do we part” was a real thing? All these life experiences – and so many more - may have included just a bit of fear of the unknown. We mustered the courage to move into and through those moments.

Similarly, organizational leaders must have courage to be able to embrace diversity. This means confronting stereotypes and prejudices and challenging what is currently in place if it’s not an environment where everyone can succeed on merit. It’s about working to create an environment that values diversity.

To be courageous, we must have difficult conversations with people and make tough decisions based on integrity. To be courageous, we must acknowledge mistakes and take concrete steps to do better going forward. Creating an inclusive workplace culture does not occur overnight; it requires constant reflection, action, and dedication from all.

How do organizations demonstrate courage? Generally, it boils down to setting clear goals for diversity and inclusion with measurable results and then making sure that teams are held accountable. It means being open to sharing the details of both challenges and achievements along the journey.

Let’s unpack those.

When working to create an inclusive workplace, it is important to set specific and measurable goals. These should address all aspects of inclusion and diversity, such as recruitment, promotion, retention, and company culture.

In one setting, a company might seek to increase the representation of underrepresented persons in management positions by a specific percentage over a specified time. The progress made towards achieving this goal is then monitored using employee demographics in leadership positions.

The Diversity Lab organization’s Mansfield Rule Certification program was started for law firms and is now available to in-house legal departments. And of course, corporations can model internal strategies on its core elements.

The goal of the Mansfield Rule is to boost and sustain diversity in leadership through three main pillars:

1. Shifting cultures and mindsets through data tracking and a process that requires 30-50% of those considered for lateral hiring and key leadership opportunities come from underrepresented groups;
2. Sharing best practices; and
3. Increasing the visibility of underrepresented talent by featuring them in client forums and a Diverse Partners Directory.

The Mansfield Rule’s methods are grounded in behavioral science. One example: Research shows that the 30-50% consideration requirement achieves the critical mass in leadership necessary to drive change. And to ensure the program’s long-term results, there is an increasingly challenging “Certification Plus” category. This program evaluates whether firms and legal departments have achieved diversity in leadership, not just considered it.

To be clear, this effort is **NOT** about unlawful quotas. It is not about telling anyone who to hire or about hiring based on gender, race, or other immutable characteristics. It is about ensuring that our candidate pools are more robust so that all who qualify for a role based on objective criteria are given a fair opportunity to compete.

No matter what method one uses to achieve meaningful change in an organization, accountability is essential. This means managers and other team members are key partners in creating pathways for the success of the overall effort, including the implementation of progress reviews and evaluations.

Through working collaboratively, including highlighting any challenges or achievements, we create transparency. Transparency plays a key role in building trust among colleagues and other stakeholders.

MAKE ROOM FOR EVERYONE AT THE TABLE

Along with being courageous, inclusion requires that there is enough space for everyone at the table. This means not only Black and Brown people, or women, or persons with disabilities or all the “other” categories we may immediately think about. It also means straight White men, veterans, those of different faiths, and so much more.

Inclusion means much more than just hiring people with different perspectives; it means everyone has the same opportunity to express their unique abilities and viewpoints. To achieve this goal, we need to actively create room for everyone by providing equal opportunities, support, and resources. A workplace where all employees feel valued and respected for their perspectives, no matter their background, is the goal.

Creating inclusion requires intentional strategies and actions such as:

- **Creating talent pipelines** that actively recruit and seek out the best talent, including diverse candidates.
- Developing **mentorship programs and sponsorship programs** to support colleagues, including those who are underrepresented in the workplace.
- Encouraging colleagues to feel comfortable **expressing themselves and respecting the opinions of others**.

Let’s examine this a little more:

Talent pipelines are a great way to find and hire diverse candidates.

- We can partner with professional associations, educational institutions, and community groups to engage and identify candidates from a variety of backgrounds, including those who are underrepresented in the workforce.

- We should use unbiased hiring practices, such as structured interviews and blind resume reviews, to objectively evaluate candidates' skills as they relate to the key criteria for the open role.
- We can implement programs such as internships, work study options, and apprenticeships that provide everyone with opportunities to gain valuable skills, including those from underrepresented groups.

Mentorship and sponsorship are key to every colleague's success, no matter their background. To drive success across our enterprises, we can:

- Create formal mentoring programs that connect underrepresented team members with professionals who have the experience to offer advice, mentorship, and opportunities for networking;
- Encourage our senior leaders to be sponsors of high-potential professionals from different backgrounds and advocate for their advancement and career development within the organization; and
- Provide training and resources to help mentors and sponsors equip mentees with the necessary knowledge and skills to support their success.

Why create an atmosphere where all **employees are free to respectfully express their opinions?**

Diversity of thought, experiences, background, and more can help drive innovation and creative problem solving. We can't reach moments of breakthrough success unless we secure the active participation of all stakeholders. That means everyone's ideas must not only be invited, but duly considered.

Is it feasible? Yes. In fact, it is often a critical element in the long-term success of organizations. A 2019 study by Great Place to Work looked at hundreds of publicly traded companies before, during, and after the 2008 Great Recession. The study found that while the S&P 500 saw a 35.5% decline in stock performance among the companies studied between 2007 and 2009, those that remained highly diverse and inclusive saw a gain of 14.4%. [Source: Forbes, 06/24/2020]

- To help achieve this, consider giving all colleagues the opportunity to participate in discussions and meetings where they are encouraged to share their ideas.
- Offer programming to help colleagues recognize the importance and value of different perspectives, as well as to help develop communication and collaboration skills.
- Celebrate diversity through initiatives and programs that allow colleagues to recognize and appreciate the backgrounds and experiences of others, regardless of race, culture, or ethnicity.

By actively seeking out diverse applicants, creating mentoring and sponsorship programs, and cultivating a culture that recognizes varied points of views, organizations can improve inclusion. These efforts can lead not only to more equal work environments, but also improved productivity and organizational success.

MEET PEOPLE WHERE THEY ARE

How do we then meet people where they are?

To truly embrace inclusivity, we can acknowledge individuals and their respective needs and experiences, taking care to support them along the way. Understanding the needs of each colleague and helping them succeed is key.

Some intentional and potentially transformative strategies include:

Offering flexible work schedules and accommodations for employees with different needs.

- Accommodation for colleagues with disabilities, such as assistive technologies, modified workstations, or extra support services, will enable them to perform their jobs successfully, in turn helping to create an inclusive environment.
- Where it might make business sense, colleagues can work remotely, allowing for greater flexibility in work/life flow.

This can be particularly important for those colleagues who are on the Neurodivergent spectrum. People often only consider diversity and inclusion in terms of ethnicity, race, or gender. **What exactly is Neurodiversity?** Many of us heard this term for the first time just a few years ago, and some people are hearing it now for the first time. **Neurodiversity refers to the range of differences in individual brain function and behavioral traits, regarded as part of normal variation in the human population.**

According to the Neurodiversity Career Connector, at least one in 15 people are Neurodivergent with **1 in 44** on the Autism Spectrum; **1 in 10** having **Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder**; **1 in 10** having Dyslexia; and **1 in 162** have Tourette Syndrome. The organization offers a wide range of resources on its website at <https://ndcc.simplifyhire.com>. The Neurodiversity Network has additional information and highlights corporations with targeted programs at <https://www.neurodiversitynetwork.net>.

Keep in mind that diversity is a very broad concept, and organizations have to work to stay ahead of the changing workforce characteristics. Diversity and inclusion programs can be tailored to the specific needs of the many “types” of diversity represented by the professionals in your workforce, the communities you serve, and your clients.

Meeting people where they are may also mean creating and embracing affinity or employee resource groups. These employee-led groups are open to everyone and offer networking, community involvement, and professional development opportunities. Recognition and engagement are important in acknowledging and celebrating the contributions of these groups and their individual members across the enterprise. This can be done by highlighting them in corporate communications, celebrating them at diversity and inclusion activities, incorporating their feedback into organizational policies, and ensuring they have meeting rooms, funding, and senior leadership access, to help them achieve their goals.

SHARE OUR STORIES

Each and every person reading this has a story.

Storytelling is a great way to build community and promote inclusion. By sharing our own experiences, we create a space where others can do the same, thus fostering an environment of empathy, mutual respect, and understanding.

Whatever their story, leaders should share experiences, including the challenges faced, the strategies used to overcome them, and lessons learned. By sharing experiences, leaders can be authentic and vulnerable in the discussion. It’s also important to share insight gained from cross-cultural interactions which have enhanced our personal and professional lives.

We can encourage our colleagues to tell their stories and to give their perspectives on diversity and inclusion. This is done by creating an open environment that allows employees to freely and respectfully express themselves through workshops, town halls, or other team-building activities. By listening to the stories of team members, we can gain insight into their unique experiences and challenges. We also strengthen bonds between teams by fostering trust through honest exchange.

At our law firm, we launched a “Courageous Conversations” series that features a variety of presenters from across industries sharing their personal and professional journeys. The conversations have been a powerful connector for our colleagues, clients, and communities.

It is our duty as leaders to celebrate and recognize our colleagues' diverse backgrounds and experiences. This demonstrates the value of diversity and inclusion and can inspire others to embrace more of their unique characteristics. These transformative actions can be simple. For example, colleagues may be featured in the company's newsletters, or celebrated at appreciation events.

Additionally, to foster an inclusive work environment, it is essential to provide our teams with learning and resource opportunities on diversity and inclusion. Offering workshops, online courses, or seminars on topics like cultural competency or allyship can help all of us become more knowledgeable and have better conversations within our organizations.

Further, as leaders, it is our responsibility to ensure that our policies and practices support diversity and inclusiveness. This includes reviewing our processes regularly to update our policies as needed; ensuring equal pay for colleagues of all backgrounds; and creating safe working environments in which everyone feels valued.

Inclusion and diversity are not just buzzwords, nor do they have to be weaponized. They are vital components to successful, innovative organizations. We can create workplaces that not only represent human diversity but take advantage of it to its fullest potential.

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