The Basics of DEI Programming in Your Firm or Organization

From goal setting to DEI training to measurement, these 6 steps can help your organization create and maintain a successful DEI program.

1. Define strategic goals

The first step in building a DEI program is to set strategic goals that clearly identify what the organization wants to accomplish. Boil the list down to a few strategic goals that will have the greatest impact, such as:

- Increasing representation at multiple levels of the organization
- Providing training, professional development and promotion opportunities for underrepresented or marginalized groups
- Implementing equitable and inclusive workplace culture practices

2. Establish a benchmark

Everyone within an organization will be coming to the DEI conversation with a different perspective. To gain a more holistic view of how inclusive an organization is or isn't, look at the most recent employee engagement survey. This can serve as a benchmark for tracking progress.

3. Get key stakeholders onboard

Securing the commitment of senior leadership is a critical step in rolling out a DEI program. Participation increases when leaders and frontline managers can clearly explain the program's purpose and the role that every employee plays in its success. Tying the program to the organization's goals, priorities and professional development objectives helps motivate employees to join the effort.

4. Reinforce DEI values with behavior-based training

The focus on creating a more inclusive work culture requires employees to intentionally change their habits and behavior. Choosing a behavior-based training approach goes beyond simply raising awareness. It involves understanding the different types of behaviors that promote or prevent DEI, and what it means to think and act inclusively — whether interactions are in-person or online. Training should include courses on recognizing and managing unconscious bias — the subconscious stereotypes and preconceived judgments we all have about people — and preventing microaggressions, which often manifest in everyday snubs, slights and gestures.

5. Mix up teams

The understanding and learning that comes from diverse voices, experiences, beliefs and cultures spurs creativity within teams. Invite people of different genders, cultures, backgrounds, ages, abilities and other characteristics to join initiatives and projects. It will generate multiple perspectives, inspire fresh thinking and different approaches to problem-solving.

6. Measure progress

The best way to understand how employees are feeling is to ask them. Employee engagement surveys are excellent tools for measuring employee perceptions on DEI and psychological safety. By comparing survey results against benchmarks, organizations can identify inclusive teams as well as trouble spots. Focus groups, employee resource groups and ongoing conversations are additional ways to gather qualitative information about data trends and the experiences of specific groups of people.

The Effects of Mentoring

Mentorship plays an instrumental role in professional and personal development and in fostering diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) in the workplace.

The knowledge, access and feedback exchanged in a mentor-mentee relationship builds skills, empathy and support and creates opportunities for career advancement. By introducing underrepresented employees to people and groups they may not traditionally interact with, mentoring helps to combat bias and inject diverse perspectives and experiences that increase creativity, problem-solving and performance.

A study by Heidrick & Struggles, an executive search and leadership consulting firm, found that mentorship programs play a vital role in retaining diverse talent. And while there are obvious benefits for mentees, the study also revealed that minorities and women found that being mentors was an important aspect of their career growth. Furthermore, the Harvard Business Review reported that mentoring programs increased minority and female representation in management by 9-24%.

Dr. Amy Edmondson, a professor at Harvard Business School, who first identified the concept of psychological safety – a belief that one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns or mistakes – says "few interventions support DEI and the dismantling of systemic inequalities as well as mentorship." Having mentors remove workplace barriers builds the safe environment necessary for employees to feel a sense of belonging within an organization.

4 types of mentoring programs that can strengthen DEI efforts include:

1. **Career Mentoring** taps high performers to mentor junior employees in setting goals, tackling challenges and making good choices along their career journey. By identifying underrepresented employees as mentees, career mentoring can provide stretch assignments and cross-functional access and exposure to increase opportunities for promotion.

2. **The Buddy Program** pairs seasoned employees with new hires upon onboarding to help them quickly settle into their roles and become acclimated to the workplace culture. By helping new employees navigate the organization and build a network, buddy programs can increase new hire retention and productivity.

3. **Reverse Mentoring** broadens senior leaders' perspectives by pairing them with junior employees, who share knowledge about emerging trends and technologies, as well as candid input on inclusion within departments and fresh insights on employee experiences.

4. **A Mentoring Circle** brings together individuals from all levels of an organization to build rapport, understanding and empathy. Participants can share experiences on topics such as inclusivity in the workplace, ways to network across the organization, navigating work/life balance as a new parent and employee wellness tips. Employee Resource Groups are a good example of this format by providing a safe mentoring space for employees to candidly discuss the challenges they face, based on shared backgrounds, experiences, interests, etc.

The Importance of Communication Long-Term

Organizations that make DEI a priority understand that diversity training isn't a one-time event. It should be part of an ongoing program to improve DEI, aligned with the organization's priorities and values and woven into policies, practices, processes and operations.

Behavior-based diversity training goes beyond simply raising awareness. It focuses on what it means to think and act inclusively — whether individuals are interacting in-person, online or on the phone. Behavior-based training should challenge learners with realistic scenarios, videos and interactive exercises that explore assumptions and stereotypes about people and groups. Diversity and inclusion goes beyond race and gender. It encompasses abilities, age, religion, sexual orientation, ethnicity, veteran status, diversity of thought and other characteristics.

As part of a long-term approach to increasing DEI, online diversity training helps organizations foster a more welcoming, inclusive workplace by increasing employees' awareness and understanding of the issues shaping workplace culture and providing practical strategies and tactics for being more inclusive in day-to-day interactions and decisions.

A lack of regular communication is a barrier to identifying and talking about DEI-related issues that are important to employees. And while open, honest conversations about DEI can often be uncomfortable for leaders, frequent in-person and digital communication is essential for keeping employees and managers engaged and aware of the progress being made — and identifying behaviors and practices that need changing.

8 Ways To Initiate Implementation of DEI Programs

The key to success is to get started. Here are some ways to make sure your company is making a meaningful commitment to DEI:

1. **Show commitment** to DEI training throughout your organization, from executives to frontline employees. Don't put off training because of shifting priorities or short-term commercial interests; make sure DEI gets equal billing among other company goals.

2. **Focus on listening** to understand the experience, perceptions and ideas of underrepresented groups and incorporate these into program design.

3. **Embrace empathy**. Help everyone understand that we all experience the same workplace differently based on our identity.

4. **Invest in high-quality DEI training**. Poorly developed and low-quality training can have the opposite effect of what's intended, turning people off to the importance of DEI and making training an unwelcome chore.

5. **Conduct "stay" interviews to assess the risk of turnover**, understand what can be done to help people stay with the company. These types of interventions may also uncover deeper evidence of bias or inequality in the culture.

6. **Establish systems to help employees navigate their careers**, such as providing them with career mentors or setting up affinity groups that can provide mutual support.

7. **Examine current company policies** and evaluate whether they unintentionally reproduce inequalities. For example, strict rules prohibiting virtual work or flexible work schedules can be particularly punitive to employees who are caregivers, particularly women.

8. **Commit to training for managers.** Relationships with direct managers can have an outsized influence on an employee's experience of a company. If managers are insensitive or unconsciously biased toward certain employees, they can be a major risk factor for turnover. Be sure that managers are integral to promoting inclusion and equity within their teams by involving them throughout program development and checking in with them often.