The Inclusive Dance: Ways To Leverage A Diverse Culture

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Diversity and Inclusion – Not One in the Same

> *Diversity is being invited to the party. Inclusion is being asked to dance – Verna Myers.*

Diversity and *inclusion* are commonly used interchangeably and despite recent efforts to differentiate between the two concepts (see diversity doesn't stick without inclusion, three requirements of a diverse and inclusive culture and why they matter and diversity branding), more attention is required to help us understand why *diversity* doesn't automatically equate to *inclusion*. We know that organisations gain the benefits of a diverse workforce *only* when inclusive cultures exist.

However, research shows that multinational organisations that strive for global inclusion often fail to pay careful attention to whether employees from diverse backgrounds feel included at work and mostly struggle with determining *how* to implement inclusive strategies. In this article, we differentiate the difference between *diversity* and *inclusion*, why this matters, and share three strategies as to how the Australian Institute of Business (AIB) builds an inclusive culture.

What Is Diversity?

The concept of diversity is all about the full spectrum of differences. According to seminal work, Prasad and Pringle (2006), diversity has two dimensions. The *primary* dimension refers to the typically visible differences such as gender, age, and disability. The *secondary* dimension indicates the differences, which are not typically visible, such as beliefs, values, and personal preferences. Taken together, all such

differences fit under the umbrella of diversity.

Diversity is often used as a competitive advantage to attract diverse and talented employees. It is also considered as an opportunity for organisations to brand themselves as an employer of choice and as a strategy to differentiate from competitors. However, to be successful in a competitive business environment, organisations need to go beyond diversity and focus on how to create a culture that embraces inclusion, whereby employees feel valued and included so that it's i*ngrained* in the culture.

What Is Inclusion?

Distinctly different, inclusion is "the behaviours that welcome and embrace diversity". It is "the degree to which an employee perceives that s/he is an esteemed member of the workgroup through experiencing treatment that satisfies his/her needs for belongingness and uniqueness". Simply put, it's recognising and building upon the unique strengths of others so people can bring their wholesome and best self to work. Shore et al. (2011) indicate that *uniqueness* and *belongingness* are at the centre of inclusion. Employees feel *unique* when they are recognised for their distinct talent and skills they bring to the team and they feel *belongingness* when they share important commonalities with co-workers.

Why Does Inclusion Matter?

Thriving organisations, such as Deloitte and Qantas (see this list for more examples), are increasingly recognising the value of diverse and inclusive workforces that combine the collective capabilities of people, irrespective of their diverse (e.g., gender, generation, or cultural) background. By fostering an inclusive strategy, inclusive workplaces are able to create an environment where employees feel valued and well treated.

To complement progress in this space, research also shows that uniqueness improves the group performance when individuals are not only accepted but their "uniqueness" is valued (Shore et al., 2011). For example, minorities (who are indeed, unique), reported a higher level of career optimism when they developed networks (thus, contributing to a sense of inclusion). Research has also shown that inclusion can be a solution to discriminatory practices, which contributes to employee well-being and a catalyst for greater innovation, which, overall, contributes to greater financial performance.

So How Do Organisations Embrace An Inclusive Culture?

According to the Diversity Council of Australia (DCA), inclusion is achieved when a diverse group of employees feel that they are respected for who they are, connected to their colleagues, and are encouraged to contribute their ideas. So how does an organisation achieve this?

Respected for Who They Are

It should come as no surprise that the way in which employees feel valued and respected is a tone set from the top. As leadership cascades through an organisation, the importance of inclusion needs to be engrained into the culture through both structural (e.g., organisational values, alignment to Strategic Plan, and talent management) and cultural considerations (e.g., attitudes, language and sub-cultures). AIB's articulated core values include being human, being respectful of diverse views, challenging convention, and intolerance of bullying and bigotry.

More particularly, AIB's Inclusive Language guidelines explicitly detail appropriate behaviours and language associated with age, disability, race, gender, ethnicity, culture and sexuality. DCA's #WordsAtWork campaign shows how language is a powerful tool for building inclusion at work and has developed a series of easy-to-digest educational resources for workplaces to show how inclusive language can lead to greater productivity. A challenge for leaders is balancing a celebration of difference, with a culture of inclusion. So, for example, AIB's senior leaders explicitly acknowledge the month of Ramadan. Given the normalisation of the Christian calendar (e.g., Easter and Christmas), we believe that such recognition widens organisational understanding that 'normal' is a subjective word loaded with cultural learnings.

Integrate Ways for Colleagues to Connect

Aligned with the talent management approach, a visibly diverse culture will create a culture where employees feel connected to each other and therefore, more comfortable to contribute and collaborate effectively. Office design plays a critical role in nurturing an inclusive culture through physical considerations (e.g., space between workstations, access to natural light, and different textures integrated into wall design) and different ways of working (e.g., access to quiet rooms and standing stations). Beyond office design and irrespective of face-to-face or remote working arrangements, having communication tools in place – such as Slack, Teams, Zoom, Google Meet – will allow for greater communication, collaboration and management.

Research also shows that diverse teams facilitate that sense of belongingness and signify the value of uniqueness. In fact, a study analysing approximately 600 business decisions made by 200 different business teams, over a two-year period, showed that diverse teams made better decisions up to 87% of the time. In designing suitable new premises for AIB as recently as several months ago, critical considerations included the need for natural light, open-plan layout that prioritises interaction over insularity, smaller rooms for team-based projects, as well as quiet spaces. A further feature of our office design is that each meeting room is named after a local Australian (Julia Gillard, Don Dunstan, Maggie Beer, and Gavin Wanganeen, as well as our founding family). Each namesake represents our values e.g., courage, innovation, tolerance and pushing normalised boundaries.

Encourage Innovation From all Levels.

Tapping into the talents, insights and experiences of employees across functions and levels can nurture a culture of continuous innovation. While having systems in place – such as an ideas board – can help generate new ideas, develop concepts and obtain iterative feedback, the sense of inclusion comes from employees feeling safe to have a voice. A recent whole-organisation Pitch Competition at AIB is an effective way to illustrate this point. This approach invited *all* employees to pitch their innovative business ideas to the senior management team in a 'speed dating' scenario. The activity recognised and valued the deep and rich talent and insights that our employees have, and provided an inviting and safe mechanism for them to contribute. The positive response was overwhelming. The approach actively demonstrates the desire of the leadership team to unlock innovation across the board and to tap into collective capabilities.

Our Take-Away

Put simply, *diversity* is about whom you hire. *Inclusion* refers to the extent to which diverse employees feel valued, respected, accepted and encouraged to fully participate in the organisation. If diversity is approached in a way that is embedded in a broader culture that maximizes inclusion, then it brings opportunities for organisations to nourish the potential of their diverse employees, which can drive productivity and financial performance, and improve competitive advantage… so don't forget to ask them to dance.

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