Opinion: Diversity in the workplace isn't enough. Businesses need to work toward inclusion

November 28 2022, by Steven Smith, Katelynn Carter-Rogers and Vurain Tabvuma

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Diversity is now widely [believed to be good for business](#). In the corporate world, it's often referred to as Equity, Diversity, Inclusion and Accessibility (EDIA) or Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) training

or awareness.

Not surprisingly, there is now a desire across all sectors to understand how organizations can harness [diversity](link) and inclusion to increase employee performance and well-being. Yet [workplace](link) [diversity programs can often be ineffective, or even backfire](link). And when they do work, [some programs can be unsustainable](link).

Why does this happen? One reason is that, despite best intentions and companies wanting to hire diverse employees, [organizations are often not equipped or ready to adapt their work environment to sustain diversity](link).

This can lead to conflict within organizations, as well as a lack of belonging and acceptance by the new employees hired. In other words, the employees may be diverse, but they do not feel included. Employees [who do not feel included are less likely to stay](link).

Inclusion goes beyond diversity

Perhaps it is not a surprise, then, that scholars have called for a shift in emphasis [from studying *diversity* in the workplace to studying *inclusion* in the workplace](link), arguing that although diversity and inclusion are interrelated concepts, they are distinct.

How is inclusion different from diversity? Defining features of inclusive climates are reflected in policies, procedures and actions at all levels of an organization. Inclusive organizations are consistent with fair treatment of everyone, with a deliberate focus on [groups that historically have fewer opportunities and who are still stigmatized](link) within our society.

Importantly, inclusion goes beyond diversity. Differences among individuals are not just identified, but are celebrated and integrated into

daily work life. These differences are also woven into the organization's culture through policies, climate, leadership and practices.

Fundamentally, an inclusive climate is a diverse environment within an organization that values the contribution of all employees. It is a workplace climate where people with different beliefs, perceptions and observable characteristics are able to work effectively with others, feel valued, and have strong feelings of belonging within that organizational context.

This begs the question: How does an organization create an inclusive workplace?

All voices must be heard

Members of the majority may feel targeted by EDIA programs and can have [concerns about "reverse discrimination](,)" leading to conflict within the group. If majority group members end up feeling "passed over," they could become resentful and create an unwelcoming, negative [work environment](https://) for new hires who may be perceived as under-qualified.

To combat this, organizations need to understand both the experiences of the minority and majority within an organization. Organizations must ensure that barriers and concerns are understood, and proactive steps towards inclusion are taken. Employers need to understand their current workplace climate and learn what practices need to be addressed and implemented into their organization's culture.

1. Harness the power of inclusive leaders

Managers are [responsible for creating inclusion in the workplace](). They must: show that they are comfortable with diversity; alter the rules of

acceptable behavior to adapt to the new culture; create opportunities for dialogue about and across differences; demonstrate an interest in authentic (and in some cases learning *to be* authentic) diversity; and encourage authenticity in others.

Recent research shows that a leader's pro-diversity beliefs, humility and cognitive complexity increase the likelihood of inclusive behaviors, which in turn, has positive behavioral outcomes related to job performance, creativity and reduced turnover rates.

2. Intentional and involved decision-making

Inclusive practices within an organization include ensuring there is participation in decision-making, proper communication and facilitation, conflict resolution procedures, and a safe work environment. Without participation in decision-making, it is unlikely that people will feel valued and develop strong feelings of belonging in an organization.

3. An open and welcoming start

It is important to start with the end in mind. Inclusive practices should begin at the very moment newcomers to an organization begin their tenure. There is a positive relationship between employee workplace onboarding and organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and job performance. Employee onboarding also reduces quitting intentions.

New employee onboarding should not only focus on orientating newcomers to the organization, but is also a chance to familiarize newcomers with its inclusive practices and communicate that their unique beliefs, perceptions and characteristics are welcome and valued.

In situations where new hires may be the only person coming from a

specific group of people, navigating the workplace becomes difficult and can feel exclusionary. Having access to mentors and colleagues with similar lived experience is [beneficial for transition and overall retention](#).

Shared responsibility

It's important to understand that, although these workplace attitudes and behaviors can shed light on how new employees relate to their workplaces, they don't tell us how much new employees feel they can participate in decision-making, or how welcoming, healthy, and safe their work environment is. There is always work to be done to improve workplace culture.

Inclusion is everyone's responsibility and doesn't end after the hiring stage. If organizations truly want to retain diverse employees and have them be successful, they need to make consistent and sustained efforts to support the integration of these employees in the workplace.

The goal of EDIA programs is to help organizations develop an inclusive organizational climate and design [employee](#) onboarding training that focuses on the employees' sense of belonging and well-being. A truly inclusive approach needs to create an inclusive climate, have inclusive leaders and implement inclusive practices.

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