



# Sustaining Inclusion



by Mary-Frances Winters

**R**APIDLY CHANGING demographics, shifts in attitudes, lawsuits from groups that charge discrimination and exclusion, and the realization that diverse points of view lead to better business decisions have made diversity a key business issue.

Why is it so difficult to create high-performing, inclusive environments that allow all employees to thrive regardless of their race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, or other differences that can create barriers and exclusion? Three key elements are often missing:

**1. Implementation of a robust bottom-up strategy with strong leadership commitment.** Diversity mandates usually emanate

from the CEO. A direction is set, goals are articulated, oversight is housed with the “Chief of Diversity” and the journey begins. Many plans call for training, recruitment, promotion strategies to increase the ranks of underutilized groups, and leadership development to help managers understand how to lead diverse employees effectively. Such efforts are necessary but insufficient. The top-down approach often leads to resistance. Line managers often can’t see how to implement global strategies. Employees return to their work teams from awareness training unsure of what to do differently. Soon it is business as usual.

The work team provides the best environment to apply the concepts and generate real learning. Communities of commitment and practice are powerful venues to put theory in action. Work teams might meet weekly to explore topics that relate to diversity and personal development within the team. Learners discuss the issues from the perspective of their own work team. The learnings are practiced and reinforced within the team. New norms may

emerge, for example, on how we want to treat each other as a team or what *respect* really means for this team. The bottoms-up model leverages flexibility in approach. The ability to “customize” enhances the chances of achieving goals.

**2. Linking diversity and inclusive initiatives to business strategies.** While traditional reasons for seeing inclusion as a key business strategy are important, closer connections can be made, which resonate more readily with employees.

Link all marketing and improvement initiatives to diversity and inclusion.

Also, the connection between diversity and other personal development education is often overlooked in curriculum design. Conflict resolution, communication skills, and team building are areas that overlap with core diversity tenets. Leaders must show the connection between every core business process and strategy, with the company’s diversity effort.

**3. Willingness to encourage the heart.** Diversity is often seen as a series of strategies and tactics, such as increasing representation of underrepresented groups, training of employees, and the creation of diversity councils and employee affinity groups or networks. While these initiatives are useful, they won’t be sustained without a shift in attitudes.

No matter how much we try to “manage by fact” and keep emotions out of business, emotion goes into every decision. Diversity is no exception. The topic of diversity challenges values, assumptions, morals, and character.

The only way to sustain a culture of inclusion is to dig deep within the roots and abandon old traditions, assumptions, and values. It is hard work, but the payoff is huge—a committed, highly engaged, high-performing workforce. **EE**

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**ACTION:** Create a culture of inclusion.

**RESOURCES:** See Stephen Center’s Diversity Initiative. There are 35 articles on this topic.

