



Planning Cultural Change

We have reviewed what the words Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) mean. We looked at one of the obstacles to making change, namely unconscious bias, as well as how to plan and implement a D&I program. At this point we need to take stock of the importance and complexity of the change we are trying to accomplish. We will now look at what cultural change entails and how to plan the initiative, whether it is D&I or any other change that impacts on people's attitudes and behaviours.

We are looking for an organizational environment which allows people with all backgrounds, differences and ways of thinking, to work smoothly together with each performing to their maximum potential, safe from any fear that part of who they are is not accepted or respected. Everyone is encouraged to make a meaningful and unique contribution.

This is not a technical change, such as changing the company's computers or aircraft types, but a change in how everyone thinks, which challenges their assumptions and beliefs assembled over a lifetime, long before they started to work for the company. This is a cultural change, which is a change in how the organization's people together understand how processes work. We need to know how we can, not only manage, but in fact lead people through that transformation. If we do not, then the series of activities we engage in will not easily change mindsets. There is evidence that people's behavior is strongly influenced by the organizational roles they play, so changing the organizational context of relationships and responsibilities will cause the change in individual attitudes, not the other way around.

Diversity, especially of ideas and thought, is a key part of innovation, and since inclusion is what makes diversity work, innovation and learning can be measured by the level of inclusion in the organization. This can be most easily seen by the barriers to inclusion, such as policies, practices or procedures which give some people unequal access or exclude them altogether. Who is invited to the meeting? Who is listened to? Who gets interrupted? Whose ideas are adopted?

There have been numerous books written on change management, and much discussion about the differences in terminology between things like models, processes and plans. We are going to look beyond the theoretical and academic analyses and focus instead on the very practical "how to" of changing culture.

Gain support for change

To build change in thought processes into company culture, there first needs to be a clear reason why change is needed, a good sense of the complexity of the change, and a picture of what the new reality will look like. It must be clear to everyone how vitally important D&I is and why this is an essential move to keep the company ahead in its field. Key leaders in the organization must feel strongly enough that this must happen that they are willing to champion and lead the change process, agreeing on the case for change and how best to implement it. D&I is not a program that is owned and managed by HR !

It is important to understand exactly where the organization is positioned currently. What is the current culture in the area of D&I? How would you describe it? Does everyone have a sense of belonging and does each feel that they can put their best self forward? Can you think of a time when you yourself felt excluded, interrupted or disrespected – remembering that may help understand what this change is all about. Tap into strengths in the existing culture and the way people think and believe currently and use these to help drive the change.

Identify those individuals across the organization who have strengths which can facilitate the changes. This includes not only the formal leaders at each level, but also informal respected employees to whom others look up.

A vision and strategy will result which will be keys to success and which need to be explained thoroughly to everyone, often many times.

Develop a plan to detail what must change, how it will change, and whom it will affect. This should show what resources are needed, how extensive the changes will be, and what stages need to be built into the process. Doing a multi-step plan with successive targets is generally better than a sudden total change. Make sure that it is not a top-down plan but gets input from all levels of the organization – this helps with engagement. Patience is essential since most cultural changes take years, not weeks or months. ■