Achieving Cultural Change

We have reviewed planning and implementing a Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) program, and how a cultural change should be planned, so we now will look at the hard part – achieving our goal and establishing the culture for the long term.

Implement the change

People generally don't like change unless they are the ones making the change, so there will always be resistance. Cultural change is not just about practical "to-do" items, but has to address considerable psychological factors – it is about BOTH the rational AND the emotional. After all, you are trying to change the thought process of individuals who have generally held their beliefs since long before they became an employee. Much is fear of the unknown and of the risks they may be taking on. Leaving aside the few who are so set in their thinking that they will never see the point of this change, most people who don't feel comfortable around the D&I topic are open to discussion about it. Highly technical people, in particular, are sometimes simply uncomfortable with 'soft skill', or to their view 'touchy-feely' programs, but are not actively opposed to the ideas.

Interestingly enough, a top-down directive approach, other than through vision, strategy and creating the climate for change, is not usually as effective as encouraging innovative solutions at the smaller work unit and 'grass roots' level.

Providing as much two-way communication as possible will help employees and managers get answers to questions, express their frustrations, and also acknowledge what is working well. These doubts and concerns are real and need to be understood, so it is important to be open to hearing them and showing that they can be addressed.

Show exactly how the changes will affect each person and make sure that each understands what is coming. Constantly reinforce the vey real benefits to the company and to their workplace. Provide plenty of opportunity for employees to get involved and to do their part to move the plan along, and try to get action occurring right across the organization. As short-term targets are met, or specific achievements occur, celebrate them as milestones and evidence of success. People need to feel that they are having achievements, even in the short term, especially on what they know will be a long road to a changed culture.

Ensure the change becomes the new culture

To make sure that a long-term change process does not stagnate and that achievements really do become the "new norm", try to identify what supports the change on a long-term basis and also what may get in the way. Reinforce what the overall company culture is all about and how it now reflects the changes. For example, have people been told something like "If you notice someone being left out or unfairly treated, say something. You're just as much at fault if you stand by and watch."? Are there FAQs or "do's and don'ts" that are widely distributed?

Feedback systems can be very useful in identifying ongoing barriers or unintended consequences. There will always be successes to celebrate but, though tempting, try not to proclaim victory early, since there will always be aspects of the plan which need improving and adjusting. Strategies which worked a year or two ago may not be working well now, so continuous learning is essential. It is better to perform well a few smaller ideas than to over-reach on lofty goals which have to be dropped part-way through. Surveys and focus groups over the lifespan of the project can reveal areas for more work. Again, this is a multi-year project!

Support and training, along with reward systems are of value for long-term effectiveness, as is sincere and ongoing leadership support. One-off training is not enough because cultural change is not a sudden conversion. For example, are individual initiatives that further the change process both assessed and rewarded for annual appraisals and promotions? Have you identified champions outside of management and equipped them with the skills and knowledge to support change within their own work unit? Have you incorporated D&I commitments into the corporate employee handbook or values and ethics guide?

Communications of a variety of different types over the long term continue to be key parts of maintaining the momentum, and they need to occur not only at the start, but throughout the change process.

There will be setbacks because humans are complex, but don't let these discourage you. These are opportunities for learning. Equally, when things go well, celebrate that success! ■