

10 Ways to Operationalize Your Diversity Process

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There remains little debate as to the business case for diversity. Operating domestically and/or globally, all organizations are facing changes which require innovation to maximize the opportunities created by the changes, while transforming the challenges into strengths that will lead to a competitive advantage. The diversity process is one strategy or lever for winning in the workplace and the marketplace.

Although the intensity of the debate is less, documenting the business case is helpful. However, rather than document and communicate a generic business case for diversity, clearer insight can be gained through answering the more important and sometimes unanswered questions of “In what ways and to what extent is diversity impacting our business?” and, “How can diversity and inclusion assist in meeting our specific corporate and business unit objectives?”

Diversity Officers can answer these questions in two ways; first, by pointing to five specific trends that are impacting businesses; and then by taking each corporate objective and asking....“how can leveraging diversity in our company help us achieve this goal?”

The examination and application of the *Five Converging Trends* moves us out of business as usual and into either a proactive or reactionary stance. From our perspective, the trends consist of:

1. Demographics have and are continuing to shift. This entails changes in the workplace and marketplace including age, languages, religions, race and ethnicity, sexual

orientation, various abilities and disabilities, various levels of education, skills and experiences....and others.

2. Customer and Employee expectations have and continue to shift. Based on the demographic changes, expectations of how we work, where we work, what we do, who we do it with and for continue to shift...along with who provides the service, what service is provided, how it is provided...etc,.
3. Technology is changing how and where we work and how customers access us.
4. Increasing and changing competition from traditional companies in the space and from those adding on to their product and service portfolio.
5. Therefore, organizations are changing to keep pace with the trends. They are rightsizing, downsizing, merging, centralizing, decentralizing, and consolidating and sometimes capsizing!

Remember... these trends are not happening in a vacuum. They are converging and vying for valuable resources, time and attention.

Asking, answering and communicating the impact of the converging trends and explaining how a comprehensive, business relevant diversity process can help: stabilize the workforce; create a workplace where innovation, quality, customer service, safety thrives; attract and retain needed talent; enter emerging markets, etc....is foundational to creating and implementing a sustainable diversity process.

As with any other major organizational change process, even though the case is convincing, there remains a need to gain critical organizational support and sign off before moving forward. This step is important to insure alignment of the diversity process to the business and to communicate the roles and responsibility to the leadership group for the change effort.

Often the vision and overall mission statements are written or approved by the leadership team and communicated by the President or Chairman. At this point, expectations begin to rise from employees—some who have waited to see and hear the direction and level of commitment.

It's now time to deliver strategies that form the framework of the overall process and tactics that

make your diversity strategies come alive with real impact.

Here are 10 ways that can assist in operationalizing your diversity process to establish a robust, successful and sustainable effort:

1. *Create the overall strategy to form the framework of your process.* Avoid piecemeal activities that are not tied to business strategy. Insure that your strategy includes the three pillars of workforce, workplace and marketplace. You may prioritize these three focus areas, but they are inexorably linked. The workforce consists of those folks who provide the organization's core products and services to the marketplace. The workplace consists of the culture, policies, procedures and practices that can have a positive or negative impact on the workforce's ability to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse marketplace. In addition, think about the four components of a comprehensive diversity process that includes: increasing representation, understanding diversity, managing diversity and leveraging diversity. Due to identified gaps, most organizations spend a large portion of their resources on increasing representation at specific levels and job categories. Unless adequate time and resources are devoted to the remaining components, the organization and the workforce will be caught in the spin cycle. Here's the impact of the spin cycle. Without learning to understand how to work together, new recruits and existing employees will be less than productive. Without managing diversity, which is looking at the organization's culture and systems, the barriers that are preventing success or the systems which help to attract and retain the workforce will not be identified, changed or reinforced. Consider systems changes related to recruiting, retention, development, performance management, mentoring, work/life balance, pay equity, etc. These barriers can be identified through assessments, focus groups, exit interviews and talking and listening to Affinity Group members. Also consider the overall culture of the organization – in which ways does the “way we do things around here” create inclusion or exclusion? Leveraging diversity occurs when the workforce can fully contribute their talents, thoughts, skills and abilities to meet the goals and mission of the organization. Unless and until the previous components are addressed, the organization will not benefit from the diverse perspectives, backgrounds and experiences that created your business case.
2. *Link and align your strategies and tactics with the other functional areas and specific initiatives.* The diversity process should be seen as any other business strategy. Like marketing, education, community involvement, R&D, accounting, Foundation activities....diversity is a vehicle for accomplishing business goals. If diversity is seen as “something else to do”, most folks will never get to it and you will be dealing with the resistance brought on by the vast amount of work already required. Also tie diversity strategies and tactics to quality, safety, customer satisfaction, productivity goals and employee satisfaction.
3. *Create impactful short term and long term tactics, conduct a gap analysis by comparing the organization's current situation to its vision for the workforce, workplace and position in the marketplace.* The gaps that appear should drive tactics. This analysis does not need to take months. It can include a stop/start/continue discussion so that you can explore the effectiveness of current programs and continue to use them or replace them.

4. *Measure and track the progress you are making in closing the gaps.* Report out on the effectiveness of the tactics every six months.
5. *Include a comprehensive communication plan in your overall strategy.* Often diversity is the best-kept secret. Many organizations create a diversity newsletter while others include diversity related articles in the existing communication pieces. However, the communication plan should consist of more than well-placed articles in the newsletter. The diversity focus should be part of the annual report; Board of Director's meeting, included in "town hall" meetings and in marketing and advertising campaigns. Communication should focus on more than "food days" and should describe ways that the diversity process is helping to realize organizational goals.
6. *Insure that you have a structure in place to support and implement your tactics.* Depending on the footprint and complexity of your organization, consider a Diversity Manager or Chief Diversity Officer (CDO), an Executive Steering Committee and Diversity Councils with project Action Teams. This structure insures there are enough resources to accomplish the tasks, it keeps people at all levels involved and engaged in the process and insures that all activities are linked and aligned with the strategic framework. There are many ways to create the structure that will fit best for your industry, corporate culture and overall process. Clearly, a well focused and managed Diversity Council will better insure that the process is sustained and crosses the enterprise.
7. *Create a comprehensive learning strategy for employees at all levels that are job specific.* While many organizations provide sensitivity or awareness seminars, employees at all levels need new skills and tools for working productively and respectfully in an increasingly complex and diverse workplace. Executives need to know how to support and advocate for building a workforce and workplace that meets their vision. In my experience Executives must gain confidence and competence to talk about diversity publicly and with various employee groups. They need to know how to articulate the business case and they need to understand their specific roles and responsibilities in supporting the process. Managers must learn to lead diverse teams. They need to gain tools for interviewing, motivating, coaching, mentoring, delegating and communicating across all dimensions of diversity to meet their performance objectives. Employees must learn to work together productively and respectfully and to contribute to an inclusive workplace.
8. *Assigning accountability and responsibility for meeting the vision and for specific tactics insures success.* Without this tactic, the Diversity Manager will be seen as the sole person responsible for leading the effort and will be depended upon for the overall success of the initiative. Each person within the organization should have ownership and clearly defined role in meeting the vision.
9. *Insure a broad definition of diversity and an inclusive tactical focus.* All dimensions of diversity should be acknowledged and engaged.
10. *Insure that each strategy and tactic includes the WIIFM – the what's in it for me? factor.* Often the business case is made at the corporate level, but fails to filter down to the departmental and team level. Employees need to know how diversity and inclusion will make their jobs more fun, less stressful, and that they will learn new ideas and skills.

Managers must see the connection between the diversity process and tactics and meeting job performance goals. Executives must know how the diversity process will assist in meeting overall business objectives.

By developing specific, measurable tactics tied to a comprehensive strategy, you will be able to operationalize the diversity process, meet the expectations of your various constituencies and position diversity as an important business strategy.

Linda H. Stokes is the Founder, President and CEO of PRISM International, Inc., a WBENC-certified, full-service provider of innovative and proven consulting services, training programs and products for leveraging diversity & inclusion, increasing cross cultural effectiveness and preventing harassing & discriminatory behaviors.

Prior to organizing PRISM, Linda's professional experience included ten years in healthcare management, eight years banking executive experience and three years in international customer service consulting and training. Leading PRISM over the past 14 years, she has built an organization that serves over 1 million employees in over 160 organizations in fourteen countries on six continents with services and programs offered in a variety of languages and dialects for organizations such as Verizon, MasterCard, Alaska Airlines, IBM, Siemens, We Energies, John Deere, Unilever Best Foods, General Dynamics Land Systems, Medtronic and Michelin North America to name a few.

As a writer, Linda co-authored the groundbreaking Times-Mirror's book - *Multicultural Customer Service: Providing Outstanding Service Across Cultures*. She continues to write and contribute articles to numerous journals (Forbes, Profiles in Diversity Journal, DiversityInc) on topics about providing service across cultures and languages and strategic and tactical diversity and inclusion.

As a speaker, she has addressed audiences at international, national, and regional SHRM, ASTD, IQPC, Linkage, National Urban League and Conference Board events. As a diversity practitioner and leader in the diversity field, Linda has addressed and coached CEOs, Presidents, Senior Executives, Boards, Diversity Directors and Diversity Councils at many of America's top corporations.

Involved in her Central Florida community, Linda is a volunteer in the Green Circle program and provides diversity awareness training to second and third grade children at several area elementary schools. She served on the board of the Healthy Community Initiative of Greater Orlando. In 2005, she was recognized by the Orlando Women's Executive Council and received their 2005 Women's Achievement Award for Business.

Linda received her *Master of Arts in Educational Leadership* from Stetson University and her *Bachelor of Arts in Psychology* from Rollins College.

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