

## Ten Reasons Why Diversity Initiatives Fail

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Diversity as an organizational directive has taken on a life of its own. Many companies have crafted broad business cases, established diversity leadership teams and launched diversity initiatives, all with varying degrees of success. Diversity as a profession and a culture-change tool is relatively young. We are in a steep learning curve and like other long-term approaches to change, there are significant challenges, problems and pitfalls. Highlighted in this article are ten reasons why diversity initiatives fail and some recommendations about how to avoid the pitfalls.

### **1: Failure to address the deeper issues of discrimination and marginalization**

Effective diversity initiatives uncover and address the reasons why individuals and groups are systematically marginalized in organizations. Discriminatory behavior that oppresses individuals translates into oppressive practices within the organization. A successful diversity initiative exposes these practices and requires the organization to change its behavior and culture.

In order to remedy the problem, many organizations undertake diversity audits or scans that alert them to real and perceived issues of discrimination and bias. While this approach has some merit, it is often ineffective because many audits ask questions that ignore the deeper issues of bias and exclusion. Diversity initiatives that do not address discriminatory behaviors are by their very nature superficial. If an organization desires success, then it must address discrimination at the individual, interpersonal, group and organizational levels.

### **2: Failure to view diversity as organizational change**

An effective diversity initiative will change an organization at its core. This means changes in the power dynamics and organizational structure; the way decisions are made; and the way the organization conducts business, recruits, values, rewards and promotes people. In my experience, few organizations realize this when they begin the work of diversity. They often think in terms of small changes but cannot imagine changes in the power structure, for example. Rarely do they expect a full-scale revolution in organizational thinking and norms driven by a commitment to diversity.

Some diversity initiatives generate only cosmetic change; that is, the organization becomes more diverse visibly. However, behind the scenes little change in discriminatory practices has actually taken place. Some organizational cultures are so imbedded that people of color and other groups will continue to be marginalized; only people who look like the majority will be given opportunities.

Often, organizations champion diversity but make it clear that certain things will not or cannot change because of tradition or some other reason. If this is an organization's perspective, any initiative it launches will be compromised from the start.

### **3: Failure to examine how much change an organization can accommodate and in what increments**

Organizations often start diversity initiatives because they recognize that something has to change. For example, an organization may realize that it cannot retain women and/or people of color. Once a leadership team decides the organization has to change, it must also acknowledge that diversity issues did not occur overnight and therefore will not change overnight. Too often, organizational diversity efforts are set up to fail because the leaders have unrealistic expectations. The result is usually backlash from excluded groups who expect things to change instantly and backlash from majority groups decrying too much change too soon.

Change must be orchestrated strategically. Start by knowing your organization, which may mean planning for a period of time to meet with key players and answer critical questions. Second, decide which allies must be cultivated and cultivate them. Organizations in their current iteration require that we form alliances with people currently in power to get things done. One way to do this is to set up interventions and processes that will help you win their support for diversity. No one person or group of persons can affect the kind of full-scale organizational transformation needed to make diversity work. It is therefore necessary that blacks form alliances with whites on diversity, that gays form alliances with straights and that unions form alliances with management, for example.

Fourth, consider which diversity objectives will require a longer time to meet and have a strategy to address those challenges. Finally, monitor and measure change so you can identify progress and areas that can be accelerated. If you fail to anticipate the amount of change your organization can accommodate, then reevaluate your schedule and make adjustments.

#### ***4: Failure to address systemic issues***

All too often, diversity initiatives are designed only to address issues relative to the individual level. That is, how and why individuals are affected by diversity issues and the associated ramifications. They do not, however, address the systemic issues — an organization's practices, policies and procedures — and how they operate to exclude subordinated groups. Additionally, they do not address the unwritten, informal rules of how people are promoted and why: the informal systems of power, control and mobility inside an organization.

Often an organization appears diverse visually, yet it is not operationally diverse. It may have more women, people of color and persons with disabilities, for example, yet these people remain at the lower echelons of the organization. I once worked with an organization that had a policy of only promoting from within for the highly-compensated positions. The organization argued that such a policy was fair since it rewarded its loyal employees. Since the organization started hiring people of color only five years earlier, the opportunity for this group to advance was limited. In addition, the environment was so racially charged that people of color only stayed an average of three years.

By addressing the formal and informal oppressive policies, practices and procedures, the possibility of generating a more equitable environment exists.

#### ***5: Failure to clearly and comprehensively articulate why an organization is devoting time, effort and resources to a diversity initiative***

Whenever an organization rolls out a new initiative, it must build "buy in" and clearly explain to key audiences why now and what is in it for them, as well as the business. This is especially important with diversity initiatives because they come with emotional and political baggage that other initiatives do not.

A cohesive strategy should address in plain language the importance of diversity to the organization, not the world at large. This means that the senior leadership team should have had frank, open conversations about why diversity in their organization and why now. Failure to fully educate and train senior leadership, who will ultimately be responsible for championing organization-wide diversity, will result in the initiative's marginalization from its inception and will almost certainly lead to defeat. If senior leadership is not clear about the benefits of diversity, then the organization should not move forward with an initiative. Instead, it should focus on having the team deal with its own issues around diversity, as well as examine the organizational issues.

Many organizations skip this step. The result is often an intellectual rationale for diversity, which generates intellectual stimulation but lacks sufficient foundational fortitude to survive attacks from various organizational stakeholders.

#### ***6: Failure to engage white men***

Underrepresented groups do not have the power and influence to effect change, therefore they must recognize the critical role that straight, white men play in organizational change. Any diversity team that does not create opportunities for this group to learn what's in it for them and why is doomed to fail. If white men are not present at the table they will likely see diversity as a chore, an obligation, a directive or a political ploy. We cannot expect their commitment until they are genuinely engaged.

Given the changing demographics of the world, white men have something to gain from the relationship as well. They stand to gain a deeper understanding of diversity and its relationship to the world of business and to develop competence in this area, which is essential in these times. By supporting this group we help them to make better decisions and become stronger leaders of an increasingly diverse workforce.

#### ***7: Poor diversity training and education***

Organizations managing successful diversity initiatives conduct diversity training. On one end of the spectrum, diversity training has become a bastion of political correctness and a feel-good activity. At the other end it is criticized as too confrontational and overly oppressive. Diversity training programs must be conducted respectfully and not be used as a subterfuge for personal or political agendas.

Effective diversity training should confront the problems, not the people, by exposing behaviors and issues related to oppression and discrimination at the individual, interpersonal, group and organizational levels. It should help participants to understand themselves and others, and to build skills to address these sometimes uncomfortable issues. The training should not humiliate or shame people into acting. Rather, through a well-designed methodology, it should allow them to understand the fundamental flaws of oppressive behavior for themselves and those who are oppressed.

When planning to train groups, first decide on the objective, what success will look like and how it will be measured. Poor training can cause more damage than no training at all.

#### ***8: Lack of authentic diversity leadership***

Many organizational leaders can speak articulately about diversity, but lack the knowledge, tenacity and courage to effect the large-scale organizational intervention needed to make diversity an organizational reality. This requires a willingness to assess the degree of risk a leader is willing to take and the ramifications of these risks.

Given the nature of diversity initiatives one cannot lead on this issue without significant risk. Authentic diversity leadership requires leading by example and making decisions reflective of that leadership. The authentic diversity leader not only articulates why diversity is vital to organizational life, but also he or she believes it and acts on it without hesitation.

**9: *Selecting incompetent consultants***

Just about every credible profession has published standards and credentialing. The rationale is that standards and credentialing lead to consistency and credibility in the practice of that profession. In the field of diversity there is no recognized certification for consultants, therefore organizations need to develop their own criteria.

I once worked with an organization lead by two white men who retained two white women as diversity consultants. I believe they were retained because these men were more comfortable with two women who would never challenge them. The result was a disastrous initiative, which was rejected by the organization and resulted in litigation. The organization was then forced to hire another consultant at triple the cost.

Organizations committed to diversity as organizational change have an obligation to select a consultant with a stellar reputation, proven track record and appropriate credentials. (For more information about consultant competencies, please refer to the article on this topic in this issue of *The Diversity Factor*.)

**10: *Lack of accountability***

Organizational leaders have yet to devise a credible way of holding people accountable for diversity success. This accountability applies to everyone — from the board of directors to the CEO, to managers, employees, leaders and diversity professionals. Accountability requires that we say what we will do, do it as promised, do it competently and be called to task if we do not.

One approach includes holding people accountable by tying diversity performance to bonuses and compensation. While I applaud these efforts, I see many of them as creating quota systems. That is, many of these links to compensation are based on the number of women and or racial minorities who are recruited into organizations. Compensating people strictly for numerical achievements is not only fraught with legal risks, it also encourages the kind of resentment that has caused Affirmative Action to be so viciously and effectively attacked.

Instead, people in organizations should be evaluated on how well they contribute to a diverse working environment that provides equal access for everyone; how effectively they seek out and cultivate diversity in organizational life; how effectively they utilize procurement dollars with women and minority-owned businesses; how creatively and effectively they promote diverse products and services; and how effectively they create and maintain a working environment where diversity is not only valued, but also expected.

In some organizations lack of accountability has lead diversity to the same second-class status that has been assigned to EEO and Affirmative Action. Some people see these management tools as entitlements, not as value-added programs. By establishing accountability we can prevent the pitfall of having diversity initiatives become mostly ignored and largely irrelevant.