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The key D&I success factor: Getting your leaders on board

by Betsy Bagley

Co-Founder & Client Success Director

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While many D&I initiatives begin at a grassroots level among employees, organisational impact is often elusive. Employee networks or resource groups can offer many benefits - from providing a safe space for being authentic, increasing engagement and retention, guiding employees to navigate the "unwritten rules" of a workplace, or shining a light on challenges employees face in the workplace. What people from underrepresented groups can't do is change the dynamics of the workplace that lead to these situations in the first place.

To change workplace norms requires intentional and coordinated effort - and it needs to be led from the top. Getting senior leadership buy-in for Diversity and Inclusion is critical, if not THE most important step, for making sustainable progress.

Executive championship is not a quick ask, however. Framing the discussion takes careful planning; it requires raising your leaders' awareness of issues that they probably have not personally encountered. We can't get on board to address a problem when we don't know it exists. While leaders support D&I as a concept (who doesn't think inclusion is a good idea?), they may not realise there is anything in their power to do differently. To get them there, you need to till the soil, so to speak. This means creating curiosity, engaging them in dialogue, and then opening their aperture to the mostly unintentional, systemic inequities that often exist in the workplace.

Go in knowing that conversations around diversity and inclusion can be uncomfortable. The best advice is to frame the conversation as an opportunity. If your leaders are willing to engage in this conversation, applaud them for their curiosity when they want to learn more about the topic, to understand what factors could be at play, and for their courage in taking an honest look at data that may reveal unpleasant truths.

There are four common elements for getting your leaders on board:

1. Establish a Common Language
2. Address Leader Uncertainty
3. Establish the Value Proposition
4. Define your Ask

1. Establish a Common Language

Challenge: If your organisation is not "fluent" in diversity and inclusion, you will need to develop a common understanding of what you want to address and why.

Many of us make assumptions about what is meant by these terms and our interpretations aren't always consistent. If we aren't talking about the same concepts in the same way, we aren't solving the same problem.

Recommendation: Clarify the meaning of common terms and how those concepts relate to leaders' business concerns.

Let's start with an analogy to illustrate some key concepts:

Diversity is being welcomed to the tennis club

Recruiting diverse talent is the very important first step. However, without attention to the experiences of employees once they join your company they may end up leaving the company for opportunities elsewhere, only for you to start the process all over again.

Inclusion is being invited for a tennis match

Inclusion is almost there. Even if talent from underrepresented groups feels valued by their team, they may never get to a position of influence and be able to contribute to important decisions and unleash their potential.

Equity is all groups fairly represented in the club management

By ensuring equitable opportunities for career progression for all employees regardless of background, free from unconscious biases (e.g. in-group bias), you create the foundation for more objective decision making, a stronger competitive edge and maximum business impact.

Let's explore these terms in more detail:

Diversity is about measuring who is in your company and where - across a range of dimensions. D&I data collection allows your employees to confidentially self-identify across many dimensions, both visible and invisible, that are important to track. A D&I strategy simply focused on hiring talent from underrepresented groups is incomplete. An analytical approach will enable you to take a look at what is happening once employees join your organisation to assess how these groups are progressing through the leadership pipeline of your organisation. This insight gives targeted focus to your strategy with the ability to monitor progress.

Inclusion takes a look at the experiences of employees in the company – this includes day-to-day interactions as well as career experiences. Inclusion ensures that employees feel valued and respected, without having to conform, which allows them to make positive contributions that lead to better results. But an inclusive workplace also ensures that policies and practices provide a level playing field where every employee has the opportunity to develop their full potential.

Equity: The goal of equity is to ensure fairness within your talent management systems and talent decisions. Despite our best intentions to be objective and fair, we are largely unable to identify unconscious bias in our individual interactions and decisions. The right data can reveal macro patterns in the workplace that are often invisible at a more granular level . It is important to layer the concept of equity across your Diversity and Inclusion metrics. Equity in representation (diversity) means analysing whether all groups are moving proportionately through the talent pipeline and indicates fairness in career outcomes. Equity in inclusion means that you try to understand any representation gaps by analysing the patterns of career experiences and opportunities. These patterns can reveal where certain groups may be advantaged or disadvantaged by structures, systems, and patterns of interacting.

Engagement: Is engagement the same thing as inclusion? Your company may conduct an engagement survey. You may even know which groups are more engaged than others. But do you know why that is and what you can do to improve?

Engagement creates the conditions in which employees offer more of their capability and potential. Inclusion is the precursor to engagement. Inclusion has been definitively linked to engagement, team performance, and innovation. Once you identify your inclusion challenges and understand how they vary for specific demographic groups and levels, you can impact your business performance. The solutions you introduce will be targeted and measurable.

2. Address Leadership Uncertainty

Challenge: If you are lucky, your leadership team understands the business relevance of diversity and inclusion. If your leaders are not there yet, you may need to do some educating about whether the topic is relevant to their work and their business goals.

As you prepare to get leaders on board, it is important to think about the topic from their perspective and come prepared to engage in challenging discussions. Many people think inclusion is simply about being "nice" and don't believe it is a topic that should be prioritised by leaders. They will need to believe in the business relevance before they are interested in considering the value of D&I analytics.

There is also the very real risk that your leaders perceive this topic as a question of their personal integrity. Before we understand how systemic inequity works, we tend to believe that the inequity means intentional discrimination. When we aren't aware of any negative intentions, it is easy to believe that there aren't any issues in our company or that there may be isolated egregious situations. If this is the case, prepare for emotional resistance. Your leaders will need to be able to talk about their frustrations and fears before they can move forward. Shutting them down will only prevent any progress you want to facilitate.

There are other more tactical uncertainties. Leaders also need to believe that there is a real opportunity to make progress. Some organisations have invested in D&I previously and have not seen measurable results. They may feel that they already have too much data and just need to get to action. Or they may fear the legal implications of collecting data that is discoverable or that is not compliant with GDPR.

Recommendation: If you prepare for resistance, you won't take it personally if it occurs.

Not many leaders have had experience dialoguing about a sensitive topic outside their areas of expertise. In these situations, people can naturally become defensive. Remember that it is less about you and more that they have deep passion for the business they lead and may feel their intentions are being questioned. Below are five key challenges our clients have experienced with getting leaders on board and approaches that have worked to facilitate productive discussions.

1. **Business Relevance:** Many conversations with leaders begin by validating D&I using research conducted by reputable business analysts. Don't go overboard on preparing a business case (we have never seen a leadership team jump on board due to this data) but do leverage some of the vast research done on this topic to get your organisation's attention:

    a. Financial performance

    b. Positive business outcomes

    c. External pressure from investment community

    d. Workforce demand for an inclusive workplace

    e. Reputation and Branding.

    The discussion of diversity and its business benefits has been on the agenda at many companies. The incentive of improved performance is accompanied by pressure to increase the representation of people from underrepresented groups at all levels of the company. This pressure comes from customers, investors, employees and an increasingly diverse talent pool. In today's business environment, the reputation of your company is

impacted by the diversity of your leadership. Find the hook that is most relevant to your business goals and performance.

2. **Blame Game:** Some leaders may think you are undertaking this assessment to "prove" something. When concepts like unconscious bias are introduced, it is not uncommon for people to interpret this as blame for problems that don't seem like their fault. For those who have experienced the workplace as fair, it is easy to believe that it is fair for everyone; it may seem like there is nothing within your control that can be done to address lower levels of diversity at the top. However, just because you haven't been intentionally exclusive doesn't mean the workplace is inclusive. We know the majority of bias in the workplace results from an unconscious preference for people similar to ourselves rather than bias against someone else. The role of data analytics is one of unbiased assessment. Data may unveil challenges that were previously not on leaders' radar; it will help to shine a light on situations where different groups may be having different experiences in the workplace that aren't related to their ability. Organisations need to examine their data through the lens of equity and inclusion to identify the patterns of workplace experiences and talent decisions; it is only in these patterns that we can identify the challenges to inclusion and make the connection between inclusion and business results. Diffuse resistance by appealing to company values and a belief in fairness. Your people data will provide an objective way to assess whether a company's intent of an equitable workplace is translating into the expected outcomes. Research shows that having a strong sense of fair play, defined as a strong commitment to the ideals of fairness, was what also best differentiated men who actively championed gender equality from those who were not similarly engaged. When you are able to collect data that can highlight where the playing field in your company may not be level, you then have the power to engage your leaders as champions for D&I. This data shifts blame away from individual leaders intentions to the unintended impact of status quo systems. At the same time, it allows you to identify specific intentional actions and metrics leaders can adopt to hold themselves accountable going forward. A focus on

intentional inclusion is very different than feeling accused of intentional exclusion.

3. **Diversity Fatigue:** Some organisations have invested in D&I previously and have not seen measurable results. They may be sceptical of further investment. In some cases, this is because the focus has been more on diversity than on inclusion. By assessing inclusion, you will be able to identify specific challenges for specific groups that result in lower representation across your pipeline to leadership. In other cases, organisations have not seen progress because there may be too many different and uncoordinated efforts. Your evidence-based approach allows you to measure inclusion more tangibly and to identify actionable insights that can be addressed with recommended practices. This shift allows an organisation to move from a list of activities that will "hopefully" make an impact to a strategy focused on addressing your greatest opportunities with targeted initiatives. This happens when you can pinpoint specific gaps in inclusion, understand the root causes of why they exist, and intervene with appropriate solutions. Additionally, you will be able to monitor metrics that ensure accountability and assess progress.

4. **Data overload:** Leaders may doubt the value of additional data. We understand this concern. More data is not necessarily better; it often gets in the way of effective action. However, we have often seen companies struggle to know what to measure or how to find the story in their data. Your engagement surveys may show that certain groups are more engaged than others. But do you know why? Your workforce representation or Gender Pay Gap data may not be showing progress but do you know where to intervene? Representation is a lagging indicator of workplace inclusion. If you can measure inclusion more directly, you will know what barriers to progress exist and where to take action. Based on our experience with global D&I diagnostics, we know that internal data matters. Leaders who are not motivated by external data have been compelled to action with internal employee data that link inclusion to performance indicators and their own business goals. You can explain the gaps in your workforce data with gaps in

inclusion. This allows you to connect where your current workplace culture, policies, and practices can evolve to create opportunities for more inclusive and equitable talent management. If internal data are able to highlight where differences in opportunity, rather than ability, are driving careers it becomes easier to engage leaders in commitment to personal and organisational change.

5. **Legal Concerns:** In today's legal climate, leaders are right to be concerned about the legal implications of collecting sensitive information. GDPR has become a top priority for us all. Ensure that your data collection and storage processes are GDPR compliant. The easiest approach is if you avoid collecting any personally identifiable information (PII) and your team sends out an anonymous survey link to your employees. The downside is that you cannot track who has responded and survey reminders will go out to all employees rather than only those who have not yet responded. Another limitation is that you cannot connect your findings to any HR employee data. If you are interested in the power that comes from integrating inclusion data with your internal HR data to analyse how inclusion impacts career development and progression, you will need to connect your internal employee data with your inclusion data. This will require rigorous protocols to maintain confidentiality and privacy that you should discuss with your legal team. Secondly, you will need a concerted effort to establish trust with your employees that this data will only be used to their benefit and will be limited to HR to measure impact and progress on individual groups. Another concern that some companies have is around collecting data that may be considered "discoverable." While we are not in the position of providing legal advice and recommend that you discuss this with your legal team, there is a legal precedent in favour of companies that are proactive in assessing equity. Just because you don't collect the data may not mean you don't have issues. Many companies (ie. CocaCola, Sodexo, Uber) began their diversity and inclusion work after large, public lawsuits. It is better to get in front of any

legal risk and address situations proactively. There are ways to contract the project to limit discoverability.

3. Establish the Value Proposition

Challenge: It is more difficult to "sell" a concept when the audience is not currently aware of the need and you may need to define the challenge before your leaders understand the value D&I analytics bring.

There is no perfect company or perfect solution when it comes to D&I. And no one ever gets across the finish line. Similar to the concept of innovation, your goal is to keep making progress. Where many companies get bogged down is in trying to find a "silver bullet" or implement too many great ideas after looking at the recommended best practices of other companies. Diluted efforts without a clear understanding of the issues at play will not translate into the progress desired.

While many companies are investing in people analytics, and may have entire teams dedicated to this function, other companies have not yet considered the benefit of D&I analytics.

Recommendation: D&I analytics enable you to build an internal business case for how D&I impacts your business and provides a targeted approach to strategy.

We recommend an iterative process that begins with identifying your company's gaps and addressing your greatest opportunities first. With each iteration you will identify actionable insights and be more inclusive than you were before, leading to greater diversity across all ranks within the company.

The key to a great strategy is having the data to understand your strengths and challenges, choosing initiatives focused on the root causes of those problem areas, and monitoring the key metrics to track your progress. Here are a few benefits that may be relevant to your leaders, depending on where your company is on its Diversity & Inclusion journey.

Questions you can answer with D&I analytics

- D&I is complicated. Where do we even begin?
- How will D&I help us address our business challenges?
- We have a focus on diverse recruitment; what else can we really impact?
- Why are some employee groups more or less engaged?
- Can we reduce our turnover of certain demographic groups by addressing inclusion?
- How can we improve team performance?
- What internal changes can we make to increase diversity in our leadership pipeline?
- There are so many different D&I practices. Where should we invest our resources?
- Which employee groups would benefit from inclusive leadership training?
- How effective is our training and leadership development? Is it increasing our ability to be more inclusive?

How your organisation benefits

Diagnose what is getting in the way of progress so your solutions are addressing the underlying issues rather than symptoms or assumptions.

- Identify and address inclusion challenges that reduce business performance
- Create data-driven action plans with metrics for success
- Concentrate resources on fewer, more focused, efficient, and cost-effective interventions
- Retain high-potential employees with targeted actions
- Increase engagement of all segments of your workforce

- Elevate your brand/reputation to attract future talent, customers, and investors
- Mitigate legal risks (adverse impact, harassment, bullying, etc)
- Set realistic and achievable D&I goals
- Identify and reward more inclusive leaders
- Track the impact of your interventions
- Hold your organisation accountable for progress

4. Define your Ask

Challenge: It is difficult for leaders to get on board if they don't understand what, specifically, you need from them.

The last step of getting leadership on board is to ask for what you need to make your project successful. The more explicit you are in your ask, the better understanding everyone will have, up front, regarding what is needed to get to impact. In lieu of that, your project becomes simply an exercise of collecting interesting information that the company is not prepared to act on. If your employees go to the trouble of responding honestly about their very real experiences and beliefs, they expect something to change as a result. If you are not prepared to respond to the results with communication and action, you run the risk of undermining your employees' trust in you.

Recommendation: The "Ask" can be framed in a "What you get" / "What we need" approach; you want to be sure that leaders see the benefits as well as what is required.

While this list may seem extensive, your leaders are not required to commit to every suggestion. What is important is that you consider the role of each item and make a conscious decision about what you can commit to and the impact of those decisions.

What Leaders can expect

Organisational Benefits

- Diagnosing inclusion challenges that reduce business performance
- Data-driven action plans with metrics for success
- Fewer but more focused, efficient, and cost-effective interventions
- Targeted actions to retain high-potential employees
- Elevated brand/reputation to attract future talent, customers, and investors
- Mitigate legal risks
- (also see Value Proposition above)

Personal Benefits

- Visibility internally and externally as a champion of inclusion
- Custom report on your Inclusion Competency Profile with support in role-modelling more inclusive leadership skills and confidence in discussing issues of inclusion with peers and employees
- The deliverables you promise and when. Examples:
- Findings report
- Facilitated Discussion to understand insights within organisational context
- Action Plan/Strategy
- The internal D&I team will build the plan with specific interventions/ /initiatives, timing, ownership, resource requests, metrics of success and seek leadership endorsement, championship, and funding prior to implementation.

What is needed FROM Leaders

1. **Championship:** The potential for your project to have impact in the company depends, to a great extent, on visible leadership commitment. This is the purpose of the "Getting Leaders on Board" discussion; while honest dialogue is critical among the leadership team, executives need to present a united front to the organisation. The means that leaders need to demonstrate their full support in their words, priorities and actions. (Example) Everyone is juggling multiple priorities and it will be evident to

employees whether leaders are prioritising an inclusive organisation and committed to the changes that entails or whether this project is mere window dressing.

2. **Project Funding:** Initially for the people resources to collect and analyse data, but also a commitment to fund the action plan that follows after the leadership goal setting and prioritisation session based on survey results.

3. **Research hypotheses:** Prior to the survey, it is helpful for leaders to share their beliefs about what is getting in the way of greater diverse representation in management ranks. With this in mind, your project team can shape the data collection and analysis to test for these hypotheses. Without this information, results might provide some insight, but may not answer the questions in your leaders' minds. Incorporating these views into your project allows you to establish an accurate problem definition, rather than one driven by assumptions.

4. **Communication:** It is essential to have a well-developed communication plan to support the change management necessary for a more inclusive culture. While your project team may manage the detailed implementation communications, your leadership team plays a key role in whether employees take the initiative seriously and prioritise the survey. This involves the following leadership communications from the CEO, business line leader, or executive champion:

    a. Email to line managers before the organisation-wide announcement to bring them on board as advocates since they will be responding to the questions your employees may have about the relevance and importance of the survey.

    b. Organisation-wide email to explain why the survey is being conducted; this develops trust in how this information will be kept confidential and used to benefit employees broadly.

    c. Highlights of results after the leadership session to review results to demonstrate transparency, accountability, and leaders' willingness to hear and learn from employee perspectives.

d. Announcement of final strategy or action plan when it is ready for implementation.

e. Lastly, all leaders may be asked to host an interactive Q&A with their teams/departments after the strategy/action plan is announced. Your staff will be eager to hear each leader's own authentic perspective. These open discussion forums will also allow you to address questions and concerns that the workforce may have about the goals and priorities you, as a team, have endorsed. You don't have to have all the answers or get everything just right in these sessions; your number one goal is to demonstrate a commitment to learning more about people's experiences in the workplace and addressing issues that get in the way of effectiveness and productivity. As a company you are on the journey together; everyone has more to learn and opportunities for growth.

5. **Resourcing:** Diversity & Inclusion often starts with an employee or employee group that "volunteers" to lead this initiative in addition to their full-time day job. While this may help D&I gain awareness with leaders and guide grassroots efforts, it rarely leads to sustainable, organisational change. There is a wide continuum of organisational structures to support D&I, from D&I councils or task forces composed of employee representatives to D&I departments staffed with full-time employees. Regardless of whether you are able to dedicate FTEs to this role, you will need to endorse a team to define the data collection needs, interpret the results within your organisational context, shape the strategy, and own the implementation, monitor key metrics, and hold the organisation accountable.

6. **Participation in key meetings:**

a. Results review to define goals and priorities: Internal project team will review key insights and discuss root causes; leaders help to define overall organisational D&I goals; leaders will prioritise actions by choosing 3-4 focus areas aligned to your goals.

    b. Approval of D&I plan/strategy: once the project team develops the plan and strategy, they will present the plan for your input and hopeful approval, involvement, and further championship

7. **Accountability:** Leaders do need to hold themselves accountable for diversity and inclusion, or any progress will be limited, as best. While your leaders do not need to establish accountability metrics until they have reviewed results and agreed on goals, it is important for them to agree that they will accept accountability for the plan. In some companies, early stage accountability is focused on process metrics more than outcome metrics. If a company establishes outcome metrics without understanding what needs to be done to create positive change, unintended consequences can result. Accountability for specific actions (while keeping an eye on any changes in outcomes) is the best way to incentivise positive workplace change at the beginning.

Conclusion

This four-step process will guide you in building a strong partnership with your leadership team. Firstly, we recommend that you take the time to establish a common language; this warms your team up and creates a safe space for discussions about difficult topics. Next, leaders will need to honestly discuss their concerns, regardless of whether your company is just getting started or has been addressing D&I for a while. These authentic conversations will help to cultivate your leaders' receptivity to the recommendations that will arise from your work. Thirdly, once leaders feel heard and you connect the value proposition of your ask to their business concerns, they are more likely to become authentic champions for D&I. And lastly, the more clarity about what you need from leaders to make this successful and what they can expect in return, the easier it is for them to say "Yes" to your request for involvement, resources, and active support.

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