

Then and Now: The Evolution to Inclusion

There has been an evolution taking place in America over the past several years. Like any evolution it was fueled, initially, by a few passionate voices – ours included. It has occurred in fits and starts and has sometimes lain dormant for a time as other priorities emerged and distracted organizations from a focus that might have yielded significant positive business results.

This evolution has been the one from a focus on diversity to a focus on inclusion, a cause we have been championing for more than 20 years now as a business imperative—the key to positive business growth. And, although, we have made some progress, we still have a long way to go. Most recently, the economic climate in the United States caused many organizations to move into survival mode, shifting their attention away from initiatives designed to embrace inclusion in a misguided effort to cut costs by focusing staff attention on more visible efforts to positively impact the bottom line. As we see some slight signs of economic improvement, and as we continue to stress that inclusion is a business imperative, we are seeing some organizations come back around to the realization that without engaged employees whose efforts can yield engaged customers, bottom lines won't budge.

Part of the problem with the adoption of what we believe to be critical business practices is that diversity efforts have not worked. Yes, we've said it: diversity efforts have not worked. Why? Because almost without exception those efforts have focused on the wrong numbers – not bottom line numbers, but numbers of people of various types: numbers of women, numbers of people of color, numbers of members of every variety of protected classification under Title VII.

We're here to tell you it's not about those kinds of numbers. It's not about counting people. We view that focus as "then." This is now. For businesses to succeed today in a competitive, global economy, they must be firmly focused on now – on the business initiatives designed around inclusion that can result in more engaged, loyal employees and, in turn, more engaged loyal customers.

Here are the shifts we've seen.

Then: It Was About Counting People

Over the last half century, we have seen increasing gains in workplace diversity starting with President Kennedy's signing of Executive Order 10925 in 1961, when we first saw the term "affirmative action." That was more than 50 years ago, and it led to the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964.

Meanwhile, organizations that embraced “diversity work” seemed to focus on hiring women and people of color or focused on event-based training initiatives, what we call a “dip and done” approach. Over time, these good intentions to create a more ethnically and racially diverse workforce began to focus on “getting representation” and educating people about differences. This has been a numbers game that, in many cases, lacked a clear business linkage. Corporate America has been spinning its wheels for decades, attempting to influence change by focusing on the numbers and it hasn't worked.

Now: It's About Including People

While, over the past 50 years, many of us have learned that counting people doesn't work—we've also learned that including people does. It doesn't matter how many pink, purple or green people you have on staff if you're not capturing the insights, input and innovations of those people. Inclusion is the new business imperative. Inclusion is what will lead to real business growth on a global scale.

Then: It Was About Command and Control

In the old business model leaders told people what to do. They set the rules and they held people accountable to those rules. They had all of the answers—or so they thought. Their staff was considered little more than workhorses, there to do the bidding of those above them in the corporate hierarchy. It was a top-down world where everybody knew their place and few dared to challenge that oppressive status quo. But that was then.

Now: It's About Engagement

Today's leaders—the good ones—recognize that their employees represent valuable capital, not because of their “horsepower,” but because of their “brain power.” Today's good leaders know that their organizations can benefit by capturing the hearts and minds of their employees, seeking their input, listening to them and recognizing that it's not just the people at the top who have all of the good ideas. Good ideas come from everywhere! Those good ideas drive bottom-line results.

Then: Seniority Ruled

The world of command and control was generally inhabited by the senior executives: leaders who had earned their stripes through years of work and had reached an age of seniority and presumed wisdom. They held positions of authority and were revered (generally) by newcomers to their organizations—the young, inexperienced ranks whose youth put them at a decided disadvantage in terms of the perceived value of their intellectual contributions. But that was then.

Now: GenY Presents Significant Opportunity

In the 21st century everyone is a knowledge worker—especially GenY. Employees aren't valued as much for their physical prowess today as they are for their brain power. And, in a competitive global economy we need to capitalize on that brain power!

Unfortunately, just as the demand for intellectual capital is exploding, employers are faced with an imminent exodus of knowledge workers. As Baby Boomers begin to leave the workforce in droves – and, yes, they eventually will – who will be poised to take their place? GenY. GenY – the cohort born from the early 1980s to the early 2000s—represent the vast bulk of highly relevant and employable available “talent.” Ignore them at your peril. GenY comprises more than 27 percent of the American population and nearly 25 percent of the American workforce today. These individuals now aged eleven to thirty, will comprise over 50 percent of the workforce by 2020. Importantly, GenY is different. They:

- Are more comfortable with technology
- Have never seen loyalty to a corporate culture pay off for their parents
- Tend to have greater comfort and familiarity with different ethnic groups
- Have limited patience with the status quo, much like Boomers who wanted to change the world
- Represent significant opportunity for your organization!

Then: Business Was Local

In days gone by, people did business locally. They shopped at the corner store. They frequented the “mom and pop” restaurants. In the 1960s, if you asked 100 people from around the world where cars were made, they'd likely say “the United States.” We were a U.S.-centric economy.

But, as transportation and technology connected the world and made it, in many respects “smaller,” companies began to sell their goods and services to broader markets—even global markets. But back then, what they sold globally looked very much like what they sold locally and that didn't work so well. Years ago, American companies like McDonald's created products catered to American appetites and the rest of the world literally ate them up. That was then.

Now: Business is Global

Today, while there is certainly still a demand for American culture and American products, developing countries also want to consume goods and services that reflect

their own local tastes. The increased ability of domestic companies to give them just that means American's monopoly on consumers is a thing of the past.

The globalization of the auto market is just one example of the ability of foreign companies to rise up and change the game. Technology, of course, has fueled the global economy. It is no longer necessary for organizations to be physical, bricks and mortar entities or to exist within clearly defined geographic boundaries. Organizations can be virtual; they can be everywhere—and so can their customers. Successful organizations in the global economy are those that best understand these customers, in all of their rich diversity.

Then: Your Employees and Your Customers Looked Like You

Take a look at company photos from days gone by and you're likely to be struck by the sameness of the individuals in these photos. In most cases, the white male majority dominated. This was, of course, the impetus for an eventual focus on the need for diversity—the recognition that organizations were hampered by their sameness, by the lack of females and people of color. That led to the numbers game that we called “diversity initiatives”—the focus on attracting more women and people of color. It wasn't a bad approach, it just didn't go far enough or focus on what mattered most—inclusion as a driver for business. But, that was then.

Now: They Don't Look Like You Anymore!

Today, the best companies are comprised of a wide range of people inside (employees) and outside (customers). America's traditional “majority” is becoming the “minority.” The most recent Census Bureau data indicates that, for the first time, the majority of Americans under the age of one are minorities. Today, 35 of the top 50 metros in the U.S. are majority minorities for kids five and under. In eight of these metros, it's greater than 75 percent. They don't look like you anymore, because there is no you. Instead, there is a rapidly growing amalgam of we—a society populated by diverse individuals based on a wide range of characteristics including sex, age, race, religion, sexual preference, etc., etc., etc. How to get our arms around these changing demographics?

Inclusion!

About InclusionINC - Founded in 2001, InclusionINC is a leading global consulting and learning organization specializing in inclusion & diversity solutions tied directly to our client's business objectives promoting employee engagement, productivity, innovation, and retention and reaching growth markets.

InclusionINC provides a broad array of client companies with the tools and tactics to increase workplace inclusion and improve internal and external business performance