

Diversity: Closing the Gap

By Franky Johnson and Adele B. Lynn

Most leaders will tell you that they value a diverse workforce. We happen to believe them. We don't believe that most leaders are inherently prejudice or exclusionary in their intentions. Yet, in practice, examples of exclusion in the workplace can be found everyday. In fact, a recent comprehensive study by the National Urban League reported that fewer than half (45 percent) of employees believe that diversity is part of the corporate culture of their respective employers, and only 32 percent believe their company has an effective diversity initiative. Moreover, executives' perceptions about diversity are 28 percent more favorable than those of the overall workforce.

How do we explain the gap in executives' perception about diversity and employee perception? More importantly, what can be done about this gap? We believe that the gap exists because as mere humans, we often find it challenging to live our intentions. This difference in intentions and practice are at the root of our most challenging problems, including diversity. Everyone has experienced this gap where intentions and practice divide. Just think about your last New Year's resolution if you're looking for an example.

So, is there an answer? Recruiting diverse talent, inclusive values, diversity awareness education and training, career development and advancement, supplier and customer diversity are all important pieces of the puzzle. Yet, many companies have these kinds of strategies in place. Here again, it's not intentions that we're short on... it's practice.

We offer a fresh look at closing the gap between strategy or intentions and practice. We suggest organizations serious about inclusion consider the following:

1) Measurement – Every gap between intention and practice represents an opportunity for improvement, but if we can't identify the gaps, we don't know where the opportunities are. Finding out specifically where the gap begins is important information that assessment can bring. It's reported that the breakdown often occurs at the level where employees interact directly with management at the supervisor and middle manager level. However, a baseline measurement is the only way to determine specifically where an organization's stated intentions differ from its practice. Therefore, knowledge about how your diversity initiative currently stacks up is the starting point for improvement. You can measure stated values, goals, performance and behaviors that support or deny your diversity efforts. Then, your organization is in a position to set or evaluate its strategic direction. Repeated measures will help organizations focus their efforts so that true change occurs.

2) Improve leaders self-awareness and self- management – Self-truth is the first step to improvement. Each person on the management team has to have a clear understanding of his or her actions and behaviors to close the gap between his or her intentions and

practice. This honest assessment is the beginning of change. Organizational efforts are great to outline the strategy, but inclusion happens in our one to one relationships and interactions with various individuals that we encounter each day in the workplace. The leader is the example and the driving force for such interaction and if the leader isn't aware, then the gap will remain.

But awareness alone is not enough. Each person on the management team from front line supervisor to senior executive must understand how his or her interactions can be improved. The most important step managers can take is to show genuine interest in the people who work for them. When management takes the time to demonstrate this level of caring and understanding, employees feel valued and honored. If the manager's true intention is to understand how others see themselves, that alone will begin to close the gap. This emotional intelligence link to diversity provides managers with self-knowledge about their personal gaps in living their intentions versus what they practice. It goes beyond providing managers with organizational knowledge about diversity. It makes it personal. Both perspectives are critical.

Many techniques for improving this gap exist. One that has proven successful is the practice of reverse mentoring. Mentoring isn't a new concept, but pairing managers with persons at lower ranks in the organization creates a whole new awareness for the leader. This reverse mentoring process gives management a completely different level of inclusion from the point of view of the employee.

One such company that installed a reverse mentoring program found that they needed to revise some of their diversity efforts. What they found was that their current diversity awareness training efforts were dividing people instead of uniting them. Another company found their company values statements were completely inadequate because they didn't link the values to behaviors. What management discovered through reverse mentoring was that the phrase "a respectful workplace" was well intended, but held such different meaning for people that little was accomplished with the statement. More surprisingly, managers in reverse mentoring found that personal behaviors that they considered to be respectful had an opposite effect in practice. Suddenly, the gap between intention and practice became crystal clear.

Inclusion isn't just about the right thing to do. It's about maximizing talent and creativity from all people in the company. Human capital is one of the most important investments a company can make to obtain a competitive advantage. But, you already know that. As the workforce expands to global inclusion, the gap between intention and practice is likely to get worse. It's hard enough when we work in the same office everyday. When our workforce is halfway around the globe, even greater challenges exist, as do greater opportunities to capitalize on talent.

Closing the gap takes time, but frankly, it can take eternity if we don't realize the differences between what we intend and what we practice. Some people are tired of waiting and won't be there when your organization finally figures it out. Can you afford to lose this essential talent?

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