Seven Steps to Create an Inclusive Workplace

A Diversity and Inclusion Series White Paper
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Most human resource professionals and top-level leaders tend to be concerned with avoiding workplace discrimination lawsuits; however, this white paper is not about avoiding lawsuits but about **creating** an inclusive environment where all workers feel valued and respected. All organizations want to attract and retain top talent, do what is right with regard to treating people in a fair manner, foster creativity and innovation among all employees, and provide excellent customer service. In essence, it's about the bottom line. The following seven steps provide a framework for achieving bottom-line results and creating an organizational climate that is free from discriminatory and exclusive practices and behaviors.

Step 1: A Little Awareness Goes a Long Way: Decreasing Harassment and Discrimination

In *A Better World: Understanding How Your Personal Operating System Affects Culture, Diversity & Engagement*, my co-authors and I discuss the importance of being self-aware to avoid discriminatory behavior. We share that "[it] is interesting to note that the more self-aware a person is the less likely he or she will move from prejudicial feelings to acts of discrimination."

So often we refer to the Golden Rule (do unto others as you would have them do unto you), when in this age of diversity and inclusion we have learned that the **Platinum Rule** is more effective within the workplace. That is, **do unto others as they would like to be treated**. This requires a measure of empathy, an important component of culture competence.

> #### *What is a Culturally Competent Leader and Why is This Characteristic Important?*
>
> At Daniel Houston & Associates, we believe a culturally competent leader is one who not only uses the Platinum Rule to understand coworkers and customers, but he or she also:
>
> - Has a high degree of self-awareness of his or her cultural background, particularly its strengths and weakness;
>
> - Has developed the skill called respectful listening, so that he or she actively seeks to understand, through listening and empathy, another's cultural perceptions of workplace issues; and
>
> - Through listening and empathy, he or she understands the need to effectively manage relationships that involve diverse individuals.
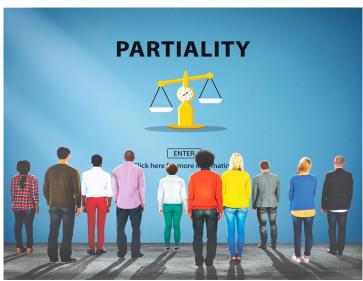
To be effective in managing diverse relationships in today's workforce, leaders must seek to celebrate commonalities, while respecting and acknowledging employee and customer differences. By refusing to acknowledge the Platinum Rule, managers, leaders and staff may attempt to treat all individuals the same. But sameness often starts in the eye of the value and norm holder. Without culture competence awareness, one is inclined to think individuals ought to act within a prescribed set of norms. Individuals deviating from these norms could be viewed as outsiders, disruptive elements, or as ill-fitted to the organization.

Contrary to what many people believe, the Golden Rule mindset creates a "blinded" sameness that can possibly leave leaders open to discrimination, harassment, and in some cases, retaliatory behavior. In addition, without a strategic plan toward diversity and inclusion, organizations may face damages of lost wages, emotional hardship, legal fees and more. Furthermore, organizations can be court-ordered to provide culture and diversity training or submit to state oversight of their policies and procedures. Ultimately, organizational leadership will realize messy litigation is preventable by changing mindsets and by increasing culture competence.

Sheldon Steinhauser states[i]:

> "Preemptive steps are worth the relatively little time and effort they require...educate yourself about employment discrimination, positioning your company to avoid lawsuits makes good business sense."

In addition to general diversity and inclusion training, organizations should introduce an awareness of workplace discrimination, addressing it before a complaint reaches a state agency that handles such cases.

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Step 2: Train Leaders on Employment Discrimination Laws

Organizations should increase awareness of employment discrimination law, regardless of employee opinions about workplace fairness. If leaders concentrate on looking after the best interest of the company, they shouldn't worry about political correctness. Views and opinions will always abound in the workplace, but organization leadership (senior management, mid management and supervisory staff) must remind its people that the law is very specific about discrimination against certain protected classes. Any awareness or cultural competence campaign must consider and follow the law. This awareness can help all employees apply a measure of fairness in every circumstance, regardless of individual perceptions, prejudices, or biases.

Employees have the legal and protected right to work in an environment free of discrimination and harassment due to age, sex, race, ability, religion and ethnicity. For example, Title VII protects:

- A pregnant woman who is passed up for a promotion due to her looming maternity leave;

- An older-generation male who is refused employment because he might cost the company too much in medical benefits; or

- A veteran who is denied employment because he might require some special accommodations.

Leaders at all levels should participate in training on company policies regarding employment discrimination laws as a start toward awareness of how one's behaviors will impact others. It's also important for leadership to know how to interpret subtle forms of discrimination so any such practices or behaviors can be stopped immediately.

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Step 3: Suggestions for Policy Manual Development

In addition to employee and management training, reviewing the organization's anti-discrimination policy is an easy and relatively inexpensive step toward an inclusive workplace, particularly if that manual has not been reviewed in the past year. An effective review should be conducted by a competent human resource professional or an attorney to ensure that employment practices are current with all federal and state laws.

In addition, attorneys suggest that the policy manual include a user-friendly anti-harassment policy and a strong statement concerning any type of retaliation by management and other employees in the event of a complaint. Additionally, consider the following:

- Although it may be expensive (but time efficient), sometimes it is worthwhile to hire an external consultant or attorney to help draft or review policies;

- Policies should be written in a manner that increases awareness of all types of employment discrimination;

- Policies should state in clear terms that any type of discrimination, retaliation, or harassment is unacceptable in the workplace;

- All policies should include a process for reporting to the organization any incidents of employment discrimination, harassment, or retaliation; and

- Leaders should consider several methods of reporting incidents in cases where supervisors are involved in the discrimination.

Furthermore, to help create a more inclusive climate, leadership should:

- Examine existing policies to determine if they communicate how complaints are handled internally, including an outline of the steps involved in filing a complaint; and

- Ensure that the policy states the type of disciplinary action to be implemented if violations occur.

To prevent retaliation against complainants, new or revised policies should define retaliation, and stress that it is also a form of discrimination. Finally, the new or revised policies should contain an appeal process for employees who are dissatisfied with the outcome of their complaint. Melanie Houston, an HR specialist for Daniel Houston & Associates, suggests, "It is helpful to have a human resources professional experienced in handling discrimination complaints review appeal processes as they require a deeper level of sensitivity that other human resource issues may not require."

Step 4: Execute a Proper Disciplinary Process

In another aspect of policy making, Houston emphasizes that poorly planned or poorly executed corrective measures or job termination are clear paths to costly discrimination suits and exclusive behaviors. She suggests that to continue to create an inclusive climate, leadership must help upper and middle management to advance a practice of carefully analyzing facts and circumstances before disciplining employees—particularly those who might be protected by the law. For example, any discipline or corrective measures should be fairly applied to all employees and align with the requirements of the position and EEO laws. According to Houston, the facts and circumstances leading to termination must be carefully documented and maintained. Further, any information placed in an employee's file should be reviewed to ensure it is properly written. "Where potential problems are certain, leadership should consult an attorney before final actions are taken," says Houston.

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Step 5: Offer Diversity and Inclusion Training and Assess Your Employees

Diversity and Inclusion Training

In *A Better World[ii]*, we specify that general awareness can be expanded by including awareness-level culture and diversity training for all employees. Special sessions for leadership and management should be included to address specific leadership issues associated with an inclusive climate and its bottom-line implications.

We further suggest that leadership not offer training in a lunch-hour format for employees or managers, or even worse, in a 45-minute overview during a staff retreat or a new-hire orientation. Instead, training should be placed within an ongoing strategic initiative, not a one-time-every-five-years event, or in an attempt to meet an HR or continuing education requirement. The following is recommended:

- Use the training as an opportunity to educate employees about the company's vision on diversity issues;

- Training goals should center not only on increasing awareness of the law but on developing a climate that supports a diverse workforce; and

- Train leaders to recognize harassment and discriminatory behavior in the workplace.

As a training strategy, management should promote the organization's vision, the law. and acceptable codes of conduct to prevent exclusive behaviors and practices. We recommend that managers model their expectations by participating in training events to ensure that non-inclusive practices are uprooted in all departments and throughout all business initiatives, such as hiring, compensation, training and promotion.

For example, in the hiring process, a manager decides to discriminate when she tosses aside male resumes and interviews only females for a copy writer position at a cosmetic company. While on the surface it may appear a woman would better know the products, candidates also need to have the necessary writing and creative skills. A biased attitude might preclude discovery of a person's talents and ability to fit the copy writer position. Another real-life example is when a hiring team tosses aside resumes because the applicants' names sound foreign or Asian, African American, or Hispanic.

The Houston & Associates team of diversity trainers not only consults on diversity recruitment and retention issues, but custom-develops culture and diversity training workshops to suit the organization's needs in basic and advanced diversity issues, intergenerational cultures, sexual harassment, and diversity-based marketing initiatives. In addition, Houston & Associates workshops, seminars and webinars include:

- Business Awareness Training
- Diversity Skill Training
- Leadership Training and Coaching
- Change Management Training: Adopting and Valuing Diversity
- Linking Rewards to Effective Diversity Management
- Building Common Ground with Difficult Coworkers and Customers

As a standard for all diversity initiatives, we suggest that EEO policies are reviewed and each employee sign a form stating that they have read and understood the organization's policies. This can be accomplished in the new-hire orientation. Additionally, the company should maintain records of all training, including training dates, signatures of the attendees, and copies of all training content. With regard to attendance, leadership should carefully discuss the pros and cons of mandating participation in seminars and awareness training workshops.

Employee Assessment

To inform training content, Melanie recommends that leadership talk to employees to obtain feedback about their experience on day-to-day workplace operations. One way to gather anonymous feedback is to conduct a workplace assessment. This assessment should uncover if gossip or concerns exist about disabilities, age biases or racial prejudices between team members, or if someone from the same or opposite sex makes others feel uncomfortable through inappropriate or unwelcomed behavior. Research suggests that employees begin to feel respected and valued when management listens to their concerns.

"Employers should use workplace culture audits and assessments, job satisfaction surveys, and other data to learn how employees feel about their treatment," says Houston. She advocates using a confidential online survey such as Survey Monkey to capture demographics and to compare diverse populations' feedback on issues of feeling valued, opportunities for growth, and issues of discrimination. Understandably, some leaders may not want this data within the public domain; methods exist to keep this information internal. If done properly, critical feedback can be used to inform training and implement positive changes. An assessment process will help retain top talent, raise productivity and morale, lower absenteeism, and ultimately, boost the bottom line.

Step 6: The Diversity Committee with Charter or Clout

To develop a firewall of protection against discrimination lawsuits, harassment, and retaliatory conduct, organizations should develop strong inclusion climates that emphasize valuing and respecting all employees. A Diversity Committee with a charter **and** the clout of the top leadership team is a large step toward creating a climate of inclusion.

In the book *Implementing Diversity,* Marilyn Loden presents an overview of the necessary steps as well as the many pitfalls of appointing a Diversity Committee to oversee the diversity and inclusion efforts of an organization.[iii] While these committees are important, according to Loden, many have fallen into the pitfall of spending a great deal of time accomplishing nothing: "They often spend anywhere from a year to three years attempting to define their role and mission. Not surprisingly, many eventually disband because of frustration and lack of clarity surrounding their charter. Others become activity-focused—planning ethnic food events, film festivals and other multicultural celebrations. In short, these activity-focused committees fail to spotlight the long-range goals and strategies of creating a diversity-friendly climate." (Loden, 1996)

What You Should Know about Effective Diversity Committees

During the course of several years, Houston & Associates' trainers and coaches have recommended Loden's model for effective Diversity Committee function and purpose. The following represents the ingredients of this model:

- Committee members must approach their work with a business mindset with clear objectives and strategies;
- Members must have the required mix of management skills and experience;
- The group must have a broad mandate endorsed by organization leadership;
- Membership must include employees with visible leadership roles;
- Membership must include employees with change management expertise;
- Membership must include employees who are personally interested in and knowledgeable about culture and diversity issues;
- Early in the group's life, a multiyear strategic plan must be developed outlining goals and roles;
- A culture audit must gather data to validate and help implement the plan; and
- An outside consultant should be retained to assist with the development of the strategic plan as well as follow-up meetings to help get the group "unstuck" if needed.

Step 7: The Importance of Employee Resource Groups

Finally, organizational leadership should take proactive steps toward enlisting Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) to become effective recruitment, inclusion, and business development tools. ERGs are comprised of African Americans, Hispanics, Asians, Native Americans, LGBTQs, as well as veterans or persons living with disabilities.

Many of these groups may begin as affinity groups or social networks, but increasing the role and responsibilities of ERGs from social networking groups to think-tank type groups will greatly and directly impact business development. Businesses and service-oriented organizations should understand that not only will bottom-line issues be affected, but inclusive workplace initiatives should increase.

According to Glenn Llopis, a contributor to *Forbes*, these inclusive practices "will allow the voices of employees to be heard, and the power of diverse thinking to influence the new ground rules that will define the workplace of the future, its workforce, clients and consumers."[iv] In addition to new inclusive practices, members of ERGs should continually focus on building the talent pipeline of diverse employees and managers. ERGs should also help increase cross-collaboration between and among other ERGs within the organization, so that collectively ERGs can advance their goals and objectives.

Llopis also suggests that organizations answer the following questions regarding the use of ERGs as platforms where talent recruitment and development and the business bottom line not only interconnect but build upon one another:

- How can your ERG better influence corporate growth and unlock opportunities for business by giving its members a voice?
- How can your ERG be more strategic about how to positively impact the recruitment, engagement, and building of a workplace culture that is most favorable to the changing face of America and that represents the fastest-growing workforce communities?

Conclusion: The Seven Steps You Should Know

To protect against painful and costly discrimination lawsuits and participate in developing an inclusive climate, organizations must be proactive in their approach to this process. First, hold leadership accountable and take time to make them aware of the signs of exclusive behaviors. Second, update or create new policies and procedures on discrimination in the workplace to create a firewall against the most common forms of discrimination. Third, it is necessary and critical to provide training to all employees, including special sessions for leaderships on how to recognize the various forms of discrimination, harassment, and retaliatory behaviors; educate management on how to implement organization policies; and implement the necessary procedures to redress behaviors that violate policies and procedures and the law.

At Daniel Houston & Associates Diversity & Inclusion Consultants, we recommend two additional steps: create a Diversity Committee charged with developing a diversity and inclusive strategic plan and charged with continually assessing employees' perception of their treatment and validation by others within the organization. Further, DHA recommends that leadership proactively increase the role and responsibilities of Employee Resource Groups toward talent recruitment, inclusive initiatives, and business development.

While the above seven steps do not guarantee an inclusive workplace where all people feel valued and respected, they provide a blueprint for conscious and proactive efforts to support inclusive climates.

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Company Bios

Daniel A. Houston is the president and founder of Daniel Houston & Associates Diversity & Inclusion Consultants, a division of The 1750 Group, Inc. He is an international trainer, certified John Maxwell leadership coach, author, speaker and organizational development consultant who specializes in improving management processes and leading companies and educational institutions in becoming high performance organizations. As a specialist in organization assessment, he has consulted with major companies in the areas of workplace and leadership style assessments.

Dan is a National Center for Diversity Trainer of Trainers and an Institute for Human Services (Columbus, OH) certified lead trainer in the areas of cultural diversity and leadership development. He has facilitated management and staff diversity training and organizational development processes across the United States, the Caribbean, Europe, Russia and Japan. To date, he has provided training and assessment services to more than 20,000 personnel across the United States and around the world. His Train the Trainer programs in culture and diversity trained more than 500 internal and external consultants and trainers nationwide.

SUNY Stony Brook awarded Dan a Bachelor of Arts degree in psychology. He earned a Master of Arts degree in counseling psychology from the State University of New York at Albany and has received doctoral-level training and a Master of Arts degree in management science, group dynamics and organization development from Northwestern University.

Dan is a member of the American Psychological Association, the National Organization Development Network, the American Society for Training and Development, the International Coach Federation and Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. He is the co-author of *A Better World: Understanding How Your Personal Operating System Affects Culture, Diversity & Engagement.*

Melanie Houston is the founder and president of Vision Resources, Inc., a management consulting firm for profit and nonprofit businesses and organizations. Vision Resources provides technical writing, editing, proposal/bid response services, and workforce development expertise. Additionally, Vision Resources assists companies in implementing policies and strategies that effectively evaluate, recruit, manage, and motivate staff. Clients include national/international community and social service organizations, and retail, utility, telecommunications, publishing, and information technology firms. She also serves as the chief operating officer for Daniel Houston & Associates, a division of The 1750 Group, Inc.

Melanie's human resource and management experience exceeds 30 years. At Bank One, Columbus (now J.P. Morgan Chase) she served in roles of increasing responsibility in recruitment and employee relations. She was tasked with providing employee relations counsel to the management staff at the Columbus affiliate, as well as affiliate human resource directors throughout the state of Ohio. From Bank One, Melanie moved to Quest International where she was employed as the Director of Human Resources and Office Systems for more than five years.

Melanie is a graduate of Capital University with a Bachelor of Arts degree in art therapy. She received a Master of Arts degree from The Ohio State University, with a major in labor and human resource management.

Endnotes

[i] http://rowdy.msudenver.edu/~steinhas/minimizing.htm, Accessed October 10, 2019

[ii] Obtain a copy of *A Better World: Understanding How Your Personal Operating System Affects Culture, Diversity & Engagement* by visiting http://www.createabw.com

[iii] Loden, Marilyn, *Implementing Diversity*. Irwin Press, 1996.

[iv] Llopis, Glenn, http://www.forbes.com/sites/glennllopis/2012/06/18/7-ways-to-enable-your-employee-resource-groups-into-a-powerful-advancement-platform/