



Belonging: A New Era in Diversity Management Strategy

Kimberly Underwood, Ph.D.

Introduction

According to the Society of Human Resources Management (SHRM), companies spend billions of dollars annually to support diversity and inclusion initiatives (Agovino, 2020). Yet, there is an ever-present gap in both academic literature and practitioner knowledge within the understanding of how many of these initiatives truly impact employees and, ultimately, lead to a sense of true belonging for many employees. Demographic diversification in the workplace has prompted the continued need for organizations to infuse diversity management into both human resources practices and organizational strategies.

As societal demographics shift, there is the imperative need for organizations to consider this shift, especially in areas of leadership, human resources, and management. A recent United States (U.S.) Census Bureau report provided an in-depth analysis of the population across age, race, gender, Hispanic origin, and nativity. According to the report, *Projections of the Size and Composition of the U.S. Population: 2014 to 2060*, the U.S. population is projected to become more diverse by 2044 (Colby & Ortman, 2016), which will likely lead to an even greater diversified workforce in the future.

Human capital is considered one of the most valuable resources found in modern organizations. Within this collection, a wealth of knowledge, experiences, and backgrounds contribute to the overall success of organizations in today's economy. Fisk, Silvera, and Haun (2019) note that, when considering a comprehensive definition of diversity, there is a need to include a recognition of both the numerous similarities and differences within demographic representations and affiliations within cultures. Through the diversity found within collections of personnel, companies benefit in various ways from the many contributions that diversity brings to organizational cultures. Hill, Tedards, Swan, and Balsamini (2021) stress the importance of recognizing and utilizing the diversity found within organizations to reduce turnover and attract the best personnel, increase creativity and problem solving, improve organizational marketing and visibility, attract more diverse customers, and remain competitive in their respective fields. Additionally, several studies support the positive aspects of diverse group formation in the workplace, such as findings that suggest groups with multi-demographical

groups are more creative in decision-making tasks (McLeod, Lobel, & Cox, 1996) and have more constructive types of conflicts that produce new ideas beneficial to organizations (Lovelace, Shipira, & Weingart, 2001).

Antiquated organizational practices reference the presence of diversity through the numeration of categorical representations of race and gender within its structures. However, contemporary organizations recognize both the benefits and the complexities of utilizing a broader lens when considering the representations and utilizations of its human capital. Thus, companies that recognize the value of a diversified collection of employees and are willing to invest the time, effort, and resources necessary to support this collection are likely to make diversity management a topmost strategic priority.

Defining Diversity Management

Diversity management within organizations is represented through various systems and practices. Although there is little consensus on one comprehensive definition of diversity management, fundamentally, diversity management uses research, theories, and proven best practices to inform strategic decision making, organizational change, and sustainable processes and practices that positively and affirmingly support the existence of all within an organization; seeks to find and eliminate underrepresentation in all areas of the organization, and actively works to eliminate barriers in order to improve the health and effectiveness of organizations, while affirming the values of respect for human differences so that all stakeholders feel a sense of belonging.

As research strongly asserts the importance of diversity management as an avenue for providing a competitive advantage for organizations (Mousa, 2018), companies have focused resources to create better human resources departments, hire personnel dedicated to managing diversity initiatives, and create strategic plans focused on the recruitment and inclusion of future and current employees. Although diversity management has previously been viewed as a way to keep organizations out of legal trouble, many organizational perceptions have shifted to those seeking the advantageous benefits of diversity. Sharma (2016) notes, historically, “a firm with a diverse workforce could argue that they were not guilty of discrimination

because of the prima facie case based on their workforce demographics representing the demographics of the local community” (p. 73).

However, today’s perception of diversity has changed to one as advantageous to the workplace as a whole. Further, creating a clear distinction between diversity and inclusion provides clearer understanding of the necessary components of diversity management initiatives, with diversity being the characteristics, culture, memberships, intellectual capacity, and beliefs which employees bring into the organization; and inclusion being the actions necessary to ensure fairness and the presence of diversity (with these voices being heard and utilized) at various levels of an organization. To harness the full strength of diverse workforces, organizations must seek a systematic and planned way to increase representation of diverse individuals throughout the organizational hierarchy, attend to the social processes that emerge once diversity is present and foster an organizational climate that supports the full inclusion of diverse individuals.

Diversity management is a rather new model, with a historical span of only three decades. Although difficult to pinpoint, the emergence of diversity management within organizations is often traced to the 1960s, which included numerous social movements and enacted legislations, which prohibited workplace discrimination, aimed at specific demographics. However, in the late 1980’s, a broad adoption of diversity management ideals spawned from widely postulated predictions within the Hudson Institute’s landmark study, *Workforce 2000*. This landmark document instantaneously captured the attention of many within the United States workforce, as Hudson forecasted major changes in the diversity found in United States workplaces, specifically noting a prediction of increased representation of women and ethnic minorities in the workforce and the need for organizations to consider how to strategically manage these changes (Johnston & Packer, 1987). To many, these predictions suggested an economic imperative (“business case”) for diversification resulting in many organizations adopting a “valuing diversity” stance. This ideology allowed for the collective movement away from the historic utilization of affirmative action and equal employment opportunity principles as the defining delineation of how organizations welcomed diversity into their various systems and opened the

floodgates for many diversity-related movements that explored various tenets under the wide umbrella of diversity management, including valuing diversity, multiculturalism, and managing and valuing diversity.

As companies began advancements to create diverse organizational cultures, they encountered mixed results through their efforts. Studies showed that successful diversity management had been related to a number of successful outcomes, including employee satisfaction (Allen, 2006; Badal & Harter, 2014), decreased turnover (David et al., 2015; McMillan-Capehart, 2005), and creating a positive impact on an organization's "bottom line" (Chrobot-Mason & Aramovich, 2013; Mannix & Neale, 2005). However, studies also showed that while many organizations strategically plan for and support the implementation of various diversity management tactics; these efforts have produced mixed results within the assessment of overall outcomes effectiveness (Allen, 2006; David et al., 2015). These variegated outcomes established the need for the systemic approach for managing the various aspects of having and effectively maintaining diversity within the workforce.

Today, diversity management comprises strategies and initiatives that develop and support a diverse and inclusive workplace (Madera, 2017). Diversity trainings, employee mentoring programs, employee resource and affinity groups, mission statement and strategic plan developments, and new employee orientations are often developed and utilized within collective planning under the umbrella of diversity management. Although they may vary in topic and approach, the overall objectives are often the same: to provide the resources and support needed to recruit, retain and develop employees for organizational growth and access to opportunities while meeting the needs of the organization. Unfortunately, organizations dedicate large amounts of financial resources and labor toward diversity efforts; however, those efforts often result in very little change to the organization (Chrobot-Mason & Aramovich, 2013). For example, Allen (2006), David et al. (2015), and Underwood (2021) note while many organizations strategically plan for and support the implementation of various diversity management tactics, these efforts have produced mixed results within the assessment of overall outcomes effectiveness. Additionally, many organizations do not know the effectiveness of these initiatives, as few take the time or make the effort to evaluate the long-term impact of these initiatives. As such,

this leads to an important question, how do organizations know these efforts to create inclusion truly lead to a sense of belonging for all within their structures? The mere existence of diversity and diversity programs and initiatives can no longer drive diversity management. Today, this missing piece, belonging, has rightfully emerged as the central focus of diversity management.

Belonging within Diversity Management

According to Maslow (1954), a sense of belonging is one of the five basic, innate human needs.

Belongingness encompasses intimate relationships, friendships, trust, respect, and affiliating with a group. In his groundbreaking work on organizational belonging, Strayhorn posits:

Sense of belonging matters and it is sufficient to drive human behavior;

Sense of belonging is vital to our existence and optimal human functioning; thus, we constantly monitor for social cues that signal our belonging status;

Experiences of alienation or social isolation can cause cognitive dissonance expressed in observable ways; and

A sense of belonging leads to positive outcomes and organizational success. (2018)

Given this level of importance, one would assume organizations would make belongingness a high-level priority and all leaders proactively work to ensure their respective employees feel that they belong within organizations. Unfortunately, belonging has only recently emerged as a strategic outcome for many organizations. Specifically, the tumultuous social events of the past two years have underscored the imperative that diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) present to society as a whole, and especially to businesses (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). The disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on underrepresented groups, and the protests following the killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor highlighted the entrenched inequalities that continue to afflict and limit American society and workforce. Unambiguously, the concept of belonging emerged in the workplace through the persistent societal and political questions of who “belongs,” how belongingness is currently experienced by various groups, and in what context should specific demographical groups experience belongingness.

“The Great Resignation” is a term coined by organizational psychologist, Anthony Klotz, who posited that the Covid-19 pandemic would have an impact on the workforce that would include mass resignations and retirements due to many American workers using this time to reevaluate their lives and making career defining changes (Cohen, 2021). Following this early 2021 prediction, we did indeed see millions of American workers make career changes at record highs. According to the 2022 Career Optimism Index, over 50% of employers say turnover is higher than in previous years and 28% of employees note they would consider quitting their careers, even without having another one lined up.

A recent McKinsey study notes a sense of belonging as one of the most important factors an employee considers when contemplating leaving their organizations, with over half of participants noting they did not feel a sense of belonging at work (McKinsey, 2021). Moreover, this study also sheds light on the continued inequities many employees of color face within the workforce, stating those who identified as non-white or multiracial were more likely than their white counterparts to leave an organization because the lack of inclusivity and belongingness. Further, the 2022 Career Optimism Index notes, while 91% of employers believe their employees feel empowered in their jobs, 52% of American workers see themselves as replaceable.

Exclusion is a common practice that remains detrimental to the goal of supporting organizational belongingness. Unfortunately, almost half of the U.S. workforce say they feel isolated at work. These feelings of isolation often lead to the lack of commitment to the organization and a lack of engagement in the day-to-day work. In a recent study on exclusion, Reece, Baumeister, and Kellerman (2021) note that exclusion in the workplace can adversely impact productivity, job satisfaction and employee well-being.

Conclusion

As organizations continue to rely on diversity as a critical factor in fostering organizational growth and competitiveness in a global economy, diversity management remains a critical area for overall success and longevity. Although diversity management has a rich history of both theoretical and practical development within its foundation, it is still a field positioned within its infancy stage of development. This presents numerous opportunities for continued exploration of emerging philosophies and development of new research

around this vital area of strategy within organizations, especially in the area of workplace belonging. However, below are some recommendations for all leaders within organizations:

Create Inclusive Norms

Leaders have the responsibility and opportunity to create inclusivity within their teams. Inclusive behaviors help to support a sense of belonging for many organizational stakeholders. Therefore, in addition to modeling inclusive behavior in the workplace, leaders should set clear expectations around desired behaviors and hold all members accountable to these expectations. The role of the conductor within an orchestra is to ensure all musicians are playing in harmony. The same goes for organizational leaders.

Highlight Collaborative Teamwork

When leaders highlight collaborative teamwork, this provides an opportunity to spotlight team members willing to work together and serves as a blueprint for other team members to follow in the future. It is easy to be a cheerleader for collaboration, but without clear expectations, it can be a challenge for some employees to understand its importance to the immediate team and the organization as a whole.

Encourage Courageous Conversations

Some conversations are difficult, especially when they are focused on some component of diversity management. When discussing belonging in the workplace, it can be difficult (and sometimes impossible) to understand employees' experiences and feelings of belonging or exclusion when one does not experience the workplace (and society) through the same or similar lens. If a leader has not had a specific experience in the workplace, it does not mean that that experience does not exist for others. Leaders should create a safe space for these types of conversations and be willing to act upon them, as needed.

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