



CUTTING THROUGH THE FAÇADE - 6 LESSONS FOR DEI RIGHT NOW

As gaps in access and resources have come to the forefront of public consciousness, sparked in part by the Movement for Black Lives, #MeToo, #TimesUp, and the more recent Farmers' protest in India – people around the world have been moved into action, including organizations and the leaders that govern them. We are in the midst of social change that impacts all sectors, from sports and entertainment to education and business. Nasdaq has put forward a proposal to advance diversity on boards, whilst the Investment Association is pushing top UK firms to increase gender and ethnic diversity, too.

As organizations look to affirm and extend their public and private commitments of the last year to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), every business and its leaders should consider these six reflections to avoid common pitfalls and to increase the likelihood of achieving meaningful, sustained impact.



REFLECTION 1: WE SKIPPED THE BASIC FOUNDATIONS IN OUR ATTEMPT TO BE SEEN AS 'ADVANCED'

Representation has never mattered more. The Movement for Black Lives recentered an important focus on racial equity, and COVID-19 disproportionately impacted communities of color. We have learned that despite companies adopting sophisticated language and efforts around DEI in the workplace, these efforts rest on shaky ground if we continue to lose sight of the foundations: demographic diversity. As organizations take a more focused look at representation, the challenge will be navigating the fine line between setting meaningful aspirations and avoiding tokenism. Representation is essential, but it is insufficient if we continue to bring in difference within unchanging environments.

Get clear on why diversity matters to you. Efforts to increase representation should be firmly rooted in your organizational values, unique business, market, and regional context. Your people should mirror your customers, clients, and communities. Organizational environments that are tied to a clear value for diversity need to also consider how they create practices and processes that enable genuine inclusivity.



REFLECTION 2: QUICK FIXES ARE JUST PLASTERS OVER DEEP WOUNDS - DEI NEEDS MORE SUBSTANCE

With increased pressure to 'take action', organizations will need to balance immediate response with thoughtful and strategic intention. It is tempting to treat DEI as a series of ad-hoc interventions that are plugged in to the most obvious gaps. But DEI issues run deep and are interconnected, often embedded in structural and deeply held biases that evolve over time. Applying quick fixes usually only addresses the surface issue and leaves the underlying causes untouched.

Organizations need to reflect on how to trigger a shift in mindsets, behaviors, values, and process that expect diversity consistently and demand inclusion sustainably. It is important to establish the principles that sit at the heart of your DEI approach and to weave those principles into your cultural values, leadership capabilities, recruitment practices, people, and development policies and processes. When DEI is embedded across layers of your organization, it ceases to be an isolated area of challenge requiring quick 'fixes' and instead, shapes the employee experience and routine behaviors that make up the collective sense of culture.



REFLECTION 3: INCLUSION GOES BEYOND THE WALLS OF OUR ORGANIZATIONS

In 2021, a key signal of success will be how leaders carry the principles of DEI beyond the parameters of their organizations. Leaders are under a social spotlight when it comes to what they advocate for, the behaviors they demonstrate in public, and the values that underpin their everyday approach. Their words are a helpful start, but their actions should and will be scrutinized.

Leaders have a unique opportunity to engage in self-reflection and clarify their sense of purpose, considering where personal drivers of satisfaction align with the agendas that they champion inside their organizations. What is the common thread that underpins your personal values with your leadership? Uncovering this level of alignment will not only be important for a personal sense of fulfillment; it also empowers leaders to be more intentional, confident, and genuine in how they navigate the world outside of work.



REFLECTION 4: THE BUSINESS CASE SHOULD NOT BE OUR ONLY REASON FOR CHAMPIONING A DEI AGENDA

The business case for DEI continues to evolve and is often positioned at the forefront for why leaders should take this work seriously. But for leaders who are primarily wedded to the business case and overlook the moral imperative, there is a risk that DEI will always be kept at arm's distance, readily deprioritized the second another critical business priority emerges. Without being personally invested, leaders' commitment may risk being quickly compromised, which in turn sends a message to employees, customers, and broader communities, that DEI efforts are purely transactional.

Take some time to reflect on why DEI is meaningful to you. How do you personally connect to the experience of feeling excluded? When have you held back elements of your identity? Which of your friends and/or loved ones cover, suppress, or erase core elements of their identities to effectively fit in? How has the experience of shielding core parts of their identity shaped them and their interactions with people and (work) places?



REFLECTION 5: DEI IS POLITICAL, AND IT SHOULD BE

The core elements of a DEI agenda are often used to serve divisive arguments and sensationalize deeply personal parts of people's lives. But DEI is about people, their identities, and their experiences of the world – plus the systems that shape those interactions. All of these overlap with politics. It is impossible to have meaningful discussion about DEI without being political – and we need not fear that. Rather, we should be clear about our expectations of each other amidst highly charged discussions.

While we cannot avoid the politicization of diversity, identity, and efforts to increase equality, we can remain focused on what's important for our employees, customers, organizations, and broader community, ensuring we are always operating in their best interest. This may very well lead us to take a seemingly political stance – the real question becomes, to what extent can we navigate this natural overlap? And what do we risk losing, damaging, or destabilizing, when we attempt to distance ourselves from efforts designed to generate greater DEI? In the end, we can never fully detach people and their identities from politics. And what we stand to lose (e.g., trust, sense of belonging, empowerment and engagement) is far greater than what we may gain from intentional silence and apathy.



REFLECTION 6: SOMETHING UNPREDICTABLE WILL HAPPEN BUT REMAINING FOCUSED ON DEI IS WITHIN OUR CONTROL

The world has continued to surprise us with its familiar uncertainty. While we cannot control what lies ahead, we can control our commitments to DEI. If organizations learned anything from the pandemic, it was that to survive and thrive through difficulty, companies must remain flexible in approach, attentive to changing demands, accommodating to the needs of people, and innovative in response to change.

At the heart of this recipe for success are core inclusive leadership behaviors: remaining curious to varied viewpoints and new ideas that may be different from our own, leaning into courage to push beyond comfort zones and embrace new ways of working, and prioritizing connection to enhance a sense of shared purpose and collaboration. Leaders who can turn to the value and opportunity of DEI during uncertainty stand a better chance of moving from a rocky road to a more prosperous path.

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