

FIVE REASONS WHY DEI INITIATIVES FAIL

BY APRIL SIMPKINS, SHRM-CP, PHR

Years ago, a business owner talked to me about his organization's diversity initiative. The challenge he faced was retaining employees hired as part of the diversity initiative. He was perplexed because he and his team put considerable energy into hiring African American employees only to have them quit within months of being hired. He attributed the poor retention to the assumption that "they just don't want to work here," and the diversity initiative was shelved. This conversation stuck with me for many years and pushed me to

learn more about creating successful and sustainable diversity and inclusion initiatives.

Too often, organizations' first step in diversifying their teams is hiring employees from underrepresented communities. This one-dimensional view of diversity can lead to the false assumption that the initiative is satisfied because the "diverse hire" box is checked. This places the goal of retention on the new employee when actually it's the organization's responsibility.

Here are five reasons why diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives

fail and what employers can do to achieve a more successful outcome.

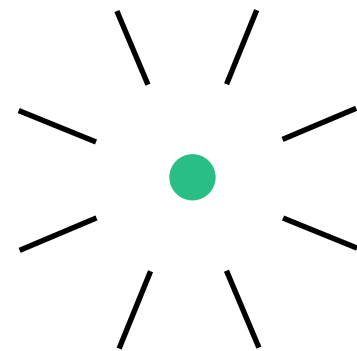
LIMITING DIVERSITY TO GENDER & RACE

Diversity is much broader than gender and race. Diversity is recognizing and celebrating uniqueness. That uniqueness can be internal, meaning traits we are born with, such as race, nationality, gender, and age, or external traits, such as family status, citizenship, religious beliefs, education, and socioeconomic status. Diversity can be organizational; for example, management, non-management, union versus non-union, different departments, etc. Diversity can also be worldview-focused, such as politics or your general outlook on life.



Tip: When developing a DEI initiative, instead of narrowing the focus to gender and race, broaden the definition by expanding—not limiting—its meaning; inclusion becomes a natural byproduct. When organizations recognize the breadth of diversity, it becomes a welcomed part of the culture.

LEADING WITH DIVERSE HIRING

For a DEI initiative to be sustainable, the first goal should be to create a culture of inclusion, not hiring people from underrepresented demographics. This is putting the cart before the horse. According to Gallup, U.S. workers are among the most stressed in the world. This stress is compounded for newly hired employees brought on as part of DEI initiatives. It's a recipe for disaster. In addition to the stress of learning a new job and maneuvering through office politics, these employees are expected to



Diversity is much broader than gender & race. Diversity is recognizing and celebrating uniqueness.



be at the forefront of a culture change, all while being de facto spokespersons for their demographics. Again, all of this while learning a new job. The stress and anxiety brought on by the pressure to “be all things” often drive the new hire to leave.

Tip: Hiring employees from under-represented communities should not lead the DEI initiative. It should be done after the organization has taken steps to create a culture of equity and inclusion. This requires education, training, learning allyship, and preparing support mechanisms for newly hired or promoted employees.

MAKING TRAINING PUNITIVE

DEI initiatives require the culture to change if it is to be sustainable. Too often, employees are expected to “do the right thing” and “treat others with respect.” While those are certainly values and principles to live by, they still require context and definition in the workplace. When an employee fails to meet the organization’s expectations regarding those two principles, the employee is often disciplined and required to participate in diversity or sensitivity training. Employees will subconsciously reject the DEI initiative and related training when these learning opportunities are connected to discipline because it is presented as remedial instead of educational. Employee training should balance learning how to manage uncomfortable situations, how to be an ally, and the benefits of a diverse team.

Tip: Diversity training should include four key topics: how to have a difficult

conversation, how to deescalate a tense situation, how to counter implicit bias, and how to manage a crisis. These training topics cater to both personal and professional development. Every newly hired employee should receive this training during the onboarding process, and the training should be company-wide each year. Imagine if every employee in your organization was equipped with this training at the beginning of 2020. How would it have impacted your business?

TOO MUCH EMPHASIS ON ASSIMILATION

Successful DEI initiatives by design will change the organization’s culture from celebrating assimilation to valuing uniqueness. Assimilation is the antithesis of diversity, and yet, for many, it is still the end goal. We use language like “fit in” and “out of culture” when someone’s uniqueness makes us feel uncomfortable. It could be something as simple as someone’s ethnic hairstyle or garments. Perhaps it’s how they practice their faith. Often, when the culture is introduced directly or implied during the hiring process, there’s a subtext of fitting in and not rocking the boat. The expectation is that you can come here, but you dare not try to change anything because we like it just the way it is—assimilation versus diversity.

Tip: Create boundaries tied to branding and make room for diversity and uniqueness in your culture. Teach employees the difference between the two. This strategy leaves room for employees to be themselves and celebrate their uniqueness without altering the brand. If a DEI initiative is successful, the culture of the organization will indeed change.

NO SUSTAINABILITY PLAN

A successful DEI initiative requires support from leadership, a team to manage it, and a budget to sustain it. Culture is established by the senior-most person(s) based on what they expect, accept, reward, and discipline. When the leadership of the organization rewards diversity, accepts uniqueness, expects kindness, and disciplines bad actors, the DEI initiative moves toward sustainability.

Creating a DEI committee charged with managing the initiative is crucial to its success. The committee, bound by a code of conduct and charged with updating and executing the initiative, becomes the driving force behind sustaining the cultural change. Lastly, the DEI initiative must be adequately funded. Organizations will spare no expense for marketing and branding and suddenly become ultra-conservative

when allocating funds to sustaining a culture shift.

According to a Glassdoor survey, 67 percent of job seekers consider workplace diversity an essential factor when looking for employment, and 50 percent of current employees want their workplaces to do more to increase diversity. This means that organizations that are not intentional about celebrating uniqueness may find themselves losing great employees and failing to attract new ones. For some organizations, the success of the DEI initiative means the survival of their businesses.

Tip: Create a DEI initiative with senior leaders as part of the process. Focus first on the benefit and value to the organization, the positive impact on culture, the increased engagement of

employees, and the impact of this on the bottom line by way of increased effort from employees and reduced exposure to potential discrimination litigation. Discuss initial costs involved in implementing the initiative and create a plan to revisit the budget every six months to determine if additional fund allocation is needed. DEI is not a human resources responsibility. HR may provide analytics and input about training methodology, but DEI should be a company-wide responsibility managed by a highly diverse committee. ■



APRIL SIMPKINS,
SHRM-CP, PHR

Chief Human Resources Officer
Totalhr
Charlotte, North Carolina



“By fostering an inclusive workplace, business leaders can better support employees of all backgrounds, making them feel welcomed and engaged. This not only leads to a **happier and more fulfilled workforce**, but also can have an impact on the rest of the business – from innovation to customer service.”

- Amy Mosher, isolved's Chief People Officer

Discover how the isolved Network can help your PEO and your clients make strides in diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging.

isolved Network isolvednetwork.com

