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Business

10 Impactful Ways to Promote Diversity – Beyond the Obvious

Contribution to the (Un)Learning Series of BMW Foundation Herbert Quandt by Michael Stuber, December 2020

With his background of more than 20 years of grassroots activities, diversity research, social impact work and inclusive leadership development, Responsible Leader Michael Stuber encourages us to step up and, in each of their spheres, to make a difference in Diversity & Inclusion (D&I). This concept that emerged from equality and equal opportunities mostly in the business world.

#MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter or IDAHOT show the vast needs to tackle both everyday and systemic issues of equity across the spectrum of diversity. D&I allows us to reframe the human rights and equity agenda based on win-win considerations, and hence broaden and deepen the scope of action. In face of growing dissatisfaction in recent years on success and progress, I'm sharing my 'Engineering D&I' analyses of what (un)learning is required to create significant and sustainable impact. I'm aware that these ten (un)learning items are neither simple nor obvious – each merits its own discussion, some of which is found in embedded links below.

1. Understand where we come from and what's next in the long-term development of equity

Changing a system requires to address structures, leadership and underlying norms. The latter is the tricky – and sticky – part as cultures develop over years into a stabilised system, i.e. they prevent change. Understanding the emergence of deep rooted convictions or, e.g., racism, and how underlying assumptions relate to accepted behaviours and supporting structures is an essential prerequisite to creating a change impact. In my Mumbai Trilogy 'The Future of D&I', I outlined how D&I can achieve traction by becoming more relevant as a political or business concept. Let's ensure we understand our long-term journey and focus on the next milestone.

2. Be context conscious with your messages, arguments and demands

Orders or intrinsic motivation – which impetus creates more sustainable change? Both research and experience show the power of meaningful, insight-driven, D&I strategies that are consistently aligned with business purpose or overarching political agendas. This requires us to be mindful of the contexts from which our messages emerge from and where we apply them: Workplace, society or politics – each offers its specific opportunities to create momentum. Simply transferring storylines from one area to another can easily create backlash, as one of the most powerful businesspeople, Larry Fink, had to experience. Let's ensure we are mindful when choosing our messages to address audiences we want to win as champions of change.

3. Consider members of dominant groups as a key D&I ally group

#HeForShe and straight LGBT allies illustrate the power of involving so-called 'dominant groups' in D&I. Wait - aren't those that same people who prevent change to protect their unearned privileges? Yes, and D&I must therefore reflect how the strong focus on issues and target groups has become toxic and created unprecedented resistance, as exemplified by the so-called Google memo case. Meanwhile, research shows that the mainstream can benefit from a consistent implementation of D&I – in society, economy and in the workplace. Let's ensure we approach D&I in a way that includes those who can create an immediate impact in the first place.

4. Watch out for the biases you warn others about

Working with those we want to change can easily trigger assumptions about 'them'. I got some of my strongest inspirations for integrative work from black trainers in South Africa in the reconciliation era. In recent years, however, I have to justify myself, at times, for being a white male D&I expert. I know examples of diversity-bashing event organisers and speakers using a feminist label to enlist large support for hostile message. And I see D&I managers involved in nepotism, group-think and non-meritocratic selection procedures. Is this how we can progress on human rights, equity and D&I? Let's ensure we are self-critical role-models for both diversity and inclusion whenever we get involved in the topic.

5. Choose your language and calls for action

Hand on heart: What is our pledge for Diversity & Inclusion as Responsible Leaders? Are we accusing previous generations for having created inequities? Are we blaming large corporations for not mirroring society? Are we demanding the replacement of political leadership? All this could be justified and may well receive support from our followers. However, based on historic learning from some revolutions that started with positive goals and ended in despotism, we should be mindful of where and when to call for a fight. I chose marching as it was the best I could do and I see the impact Responsible Leadership can have going forward. Let's ensure our messages are constructive and instigate collaborative processes.

6. Move from segregation and rivalry to integration and the third option

The concept of diversity seems to split up any given group into natural sub-segments. While this was an important step in terms of visibility 20 years ago, we see more competition and even cannibalisation between the topic areas today. At the same time, intersectionality and individuality describe contemporary realities more accurately and adequately.

My colleague Lily Adhiambo refers to the third option in this respect. Thought leaders have been suggesting for a while to break up the silos and boxes that have anyway become too small for D&I. Let's ensure we address D&I in a way that allows us and our audiences to identify with it.

7. Drop the obsession for representation numbers and embrace the scope of systemic change instead

The caucus and constituency element of D&I is intrinsically tied to representation numbers. The focus on these has been a major element in addressing inequalities with seemingly no alternatives and with a readiness to pay any price to keep up targets, quota, KPIs, EEO reports and the likes. Both research and experience show that the need to reconsider the rigidness of numeric frameworks in the light of the vast unwanted and even inverse side effects in the workplace and business contexts. Let's ensure we understand what quantitative indicators tell us and how they can facilitate change.

8. Focus on content and impact rather than window dressing or branding

Numeric gaps or drastic exclusion – it is easy to make a case for equality and offer a simple solution. Hundreds of cool tools and pretty programmes are now offered and organisations spend substantial budgets to 'try them out' (sic)! 'Doing a lot' has become an improper narrative of success. Should not impact be the mark? Let's be honest and modest: We are humans that are more easily influenced by emotional dynamics than by dry data. Hence, echo-chambers also exist in D&I and provide re-confirmation through self-affirming awards, ratings and rankings. Let's ensure we are aware of our human shortcomings and check facts also in D&I.

9. Recognise current strengths and weaknesses instead of relying on disruption or the next generation

Where do people think is Diversity most advanced? In the U.S.? In hi-tech start-ups? Among the young generation? Each of these areas has certain strengths related to D&I and a deeper dive shows vast – and partly unexpected – deficits: Legal barriers of change, sector specific biases, overconfidence and blind spots. Each geography or industry has its D&I strengths that we must appreciate. Trusting in and waiting for future generations would be as dangerous as it was in the past. Let's ensure we build on successes and continue to watch out for warning signs.

10. Discover the D&I aspect in your role and commit to leading sustainable change

As Responsible Leaders, we all have the privilege of have possibilities to influence others. Including D&I as a broader notion of social equity in our work is more complex than most of us think. For it is not only about providing fair shares to previously disadvantaged groups. It is about understanding how our systems became what they are and what it takes to change the fundamentals in a way that differences are accommodated and acknowledged as facts and assets of our modern societies. Let's ensure we all identify these in each of our spheres and understand how we can propel their potential.

Further Reading: <http://en.diversitymine.eu>

Author's Website: www.european-diversity.com

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/michaelstuber/>

Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCcOMO-9ZNxWQk1nrWYViQkg>

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