

## **Inclusion and diversity at work - a guide**

### **As an employer, you need to understand the difference between inclusion and diversity so as not to appear like a dinosaur.**

Doing business in today's world is tough. Competition is intensifying with unknown disrupters around every corner; consumers demand more as they surf the global marketplace; employees are expectant of a dynamic workplace with endless opportunity; business processes require almost constant reinvention; regulatory oversight has intensified, and the war on talent continues.

Over the last two decades or so, a new business strategy has emerged which offers companies a clear solution to many of their key challenges. This approach is often misunderstood, undervalued and poorly implemented.

#### **Tip 1: Understand the difference between inclusion and diversity so as not to appear as a dinosaur**

Diversity is any dimension that can be used to differentiate groups or people from one another (e.g. gender, age, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and disability).

Inclusion is a state of being valued, respected and supported. It generates a sense of belonging.

Diversity, on its own, is not the answer. A culture of inclusion is essential to harness the power of individual diverse elements. Otherwise, the progress of organisations and governments is limited to that of a DINOsaUr ('Diverse In Name Only').

#### **Tip 2: Be diverse about diversity and inclusive about inclusion**

Initiatives to support gender equality are very often the first, and only inclusive tool thoughtfully applied in organisations. While easy to measure and important to implement it is vital to see beyond gender equality and into all aspects of diversity.

Moreover, a common pitfall is whereby organisations focus on equality between the sexes or on supporting a particular minority but fail to generate allies to the cause or involve the whole of the organisation in the change. The key to unlocking the gender debate is around engaging men, and the push for disability, LGBT, and others' rights and accommodations.

#### **Tip 3: We're 99.999996% unconscious so let's understand unconscious bias**

Our brains are complex machines that are bombarded with over eleven million pieces of information every second through our senses, and yet our conscious mind can only process 40bits per second (equivalent to just 0.000004% of the stimuli received).

To make sense of it all, our brains categorise the world around us. This automatic processing enables us to know what to expect and how to react to certain objects. It also means we automatically classify other human beings. And it happens very fast. It takes just 50 milliseconds to recognise gender and 100 milliseconds to recognise race. Our brains gravitate us towards people and things that are similar, and this is the driver behind the levels of bias we all have and experience on a daily basis, for the most part without realising it.

So, let's give us a moment when we are assessing someone, reviewing an application, attending a meeting or delivering a pitch. Be aware of the bias that exists and move it from the subconscious to the conscious. Then you can park it and review and react objectively

#### **Tip 4: Keep it simple**

Too often, organisations engage with groups of passionate volunteers who draw up long lists of top priorities from the wonderful to the wacky. While this is energising and can be a real eye-opener to the less initiated managers, it can create noise without action and waste time without direction and a clear link to the business.

If starting out, stick to proven measures such as committing publicly to inclusion and diversity

strategies and targets, addressing unconscious bias, providing agile working options. Also, encourage family-friendly and gender-supportive policies and practices such as parental/carer leave and worker returnee programs.

Also, sponsorship of female talent has proven to be the key to unlocking career success for women by bypassing the male-biased infrastructure around networks and exposure. Sponsorship, where the sponsor talks about the sponsored outside the room, rather than mentoring, where the mentor/mentee conversation stays in the room, is cost efficient and can produce timely and measurable results.

### **Tip 5: Do the two-minute diversity health check**

Take a walk around your offices in a particular city and ask yourself these three simple questions:

Do I see my city? Do I see my customers? Do I see the customers I need for tomorrow?

Chances are you will answer No to at least one if not all of these questions.

The world around you and your business is changing rapidly and becoming more diverse – are you keeping up?

People think the US is a diverse nation and indeed 11% of those who live there are not from the US. For Ireland, the number is 17%. Dublin is 25% and growing – more than one-in-four people who live in Dublin are not from Ireland. Does your company reflect this?

If not, you and your colleagues are risking not being able to relate to or understand your customers to the fullest extent to be able to serve them the way they want.

### **Tip 6: Recognise the business case**

An inclusion and diversity strategy helps you with every firm's top three challenges.

Firstly, it strengthens the culture internally and develops an employer brand of choice to retain and attract the talent you need. Secondly, it enables you to deal with any 'no' answers to the health check noted above, i.e. by mirroring your customers, you can understand and connect with them more effectively. Thirdly, as Tim Cook (CEO of Apple) says: 'Inclusion inspires innovation'.

Diverse teams are smarter, more likely to generate new product ideas and enter new markets.

## **Tip 7: Leverage employee networks as a source of inspiration, ideas and initiatives**

Well-supported networks focused on women, or minority grouping are a huge source of help for the organisation in developing new initiatives and rolling them out. But watch out. You need to ensure that your networks are diverse and include members of the minority and their allies, e.g. women's networks need to have at least 20% male membership to be truly effective.

## **Tip 8: Drop barriers, without dropping standards**

Contrary to some beliefs, increasing inclusion and diversity in the workplace does not require a dumbing down of assessment criteria for selection, development or promotion. The most talented individual should still have the best chance. But it is crucial to think broadly and deeply about what talent is and what skillsets and competencies are required for a particular assignment or role.

Too often, roles are defined along narrow technical lines, and the ability to communicate, to build relationships, to involve and inspire is less well understood and appreciated.

Diverse organisations with a culture of inclusion enable everyone to articulate their strengths, values and motivations. They are democratic.

## **Understand and embrace**

The solution lies in embracing diversity and understanding inclusion, not just in the confines of the HR department, but in the heart of the business and throughout the organisation. This simple guide can act as your starting point.

*This article is by Mark Fenton CEO and founder of [MASF Consulting](#), a specialist advisory firm on inclusion and diversity.*