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The Changing Landscape: Ten Red Flags in a Diversity Initiative

The first article in a series.

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The purpose of this series is to identify the Ten Red Flags that undermine diversity initiatives and how to avoid or overcome them.

Surprisingly, these red flags fly even in many “best in class for diversity” companies. But typically they aren’t recognized until the diversity initiative stalls. At that point, Senior

HR and Diversity practitioners call us to discuss how to “reinvigorate” their diversity initiatives, to “gain traction.” They are understandably proud of certain accomplishments in diversity—especially those who have won the coveted Diversity Awards. They are simply “seeking additional tools to get to the next stage.” We hear: “This year we’ve increased our entry level minority hiring, but ...” “We’re doing pretty well for women, but ...” “Our training program has been well-received, but ...” “We have a broad set of metrics, but ...”

After asking a few basic questions, we consistently find common denominators and our answer is resolute: Stop what you are doing and take a step back. No, take ten steps back. After stunned silence, their question follows, “Why back—and not one step but ten?” Because there are ten **primary reasons** for failure of a Diversity Initiative and invariably their organization has committed one if not more of them. Further, not only are there ten opportunities for failure, but these elements are inextricably linked and must occur in a specific sequence. The failure or premature introduction of one will, at some point, bring the whole plan to a halt.

RED FLAG #1

Misunderstanding the Challenge: The Diversity = EEO/AA Paradigm

We cannot solve a problem or leverage opportunities if we (a) don’t understand and clearly define the challenge or (b) don’t rigorously address the challenge we have defined. As obvious as this may sound, these two scenarios frequently chip away at the success of many diversity initiatives.

The first scenario—not understanding or clearly defining diversity—is due primarily to the fact that, for many of today’s corporate business leaders, the concept of diversity originally sprang from concern over compliance with EEO laws, Affirmative Action regulations and the associated emphasis on race and gender, i.e making special efforts to ensure the success of minorities and women. Unless these leaders gain exposure to paradigm-breaking experiences which broaden their understanding of diversity, they continue to think of it as an extension of EEO and AA and fail to recognize the full meaning of diversity and the tremendous business upside of managing it to its fullest level.

If “Diversity” is understood as synonymous with the laws and regulations, two potentially lethal problems are bound to arise. The first of these problems is that most white males will feel excluded. At best this prevents buy-in of key stakeholders who cannot see the “W.I.I.F.M. (what’s in it for me?).” At worst it causes the sidelining or scaring of white males and encourages the view that Diversity is “just a new, politically correct term for special treatment,” breeding cynicism and bad morale. This point of view is rarely voiced publicly, but is far more pervasive than one might imagine, and as certain to eat away at the underpinnings of a diversity initiative as a termite infestation in a damp wooden house.

A less obvious, but equally damaging problem arising from the Diversity = EEO/AA paradigm is that programs, goals and metrics are then designed with gender and race in mind. Training programs tend to focus on awareness so as to combat racism and sexism. Goals and metrics myopically center around representation. If and when everyone has been sent to training and incremental progress is made against these metrics, leaders believe “diversity” is done. One leader of a Fortune 100 firm reports, “We don’t have a problem with diversity. We have x percent women, y percent Hispanics and z percent African Americans. Our people do the right thing, treat each other with respect. We had diversity training for all of them.” While important strides may have been made, this executive is ready to abandon diversity efforts before they have yielded their greatest benefits to the organization.



In fact, becoming “more diverse” and “more aware” does not necessarily make an organization better. If the skills necessary to manage diversity have not been identified and developed, it may actually lead to decreased commitment, ineffective teamwork and lowered productivity along with major increases in conflict and costs.

The second scenario—not addressing diversity issues rigorously even when they are understood and defined with appropriate breadth— is pervasive among companies today. Many organizations state an understanding of diversity as going beyond race and gender to include “differences among people including background, thinking styles, culture, age, family status, physical abilities, regional origin, etc.,” and state visions along the lines of “embracing and leveraging these differences, enabling us to better compete and become an employer of choice.” But, then, they fail to follow through with actions that would reinforce their well-crafted words.

Even a cursory examination of the organization's accountability system can be quite revealing in this regard. Despite all the visioning and carefully rehearsed rhetoric, what is measured and what are leaders actually held accountable for? The answer is that in most cases, leaders ultimately are still held accountable for measurable results in only two areas: increasing the representation of women and people of color and insuring that employees attend training. What about accountability for associates once they attend the training? Usually, nothing specific and nothing measurable. Hence, after all is said and done, the focus of the organization's diversity efforts still amounts to affirmative Action and sensitivity training. The true meaning and challenge of diversity is, therefore, circumvented, and for all intents and purposes the organization is once again operating under scenario one.

Beyond the problems stated in scenario one, this concept-practice disconnect causes an additional problem: Powerful and destructive cynicism among key stakeholders caused by the belief that despite what is claimed, diversity in fact means special treatment for certain groups. One Fortune 150 company, for example, touts a broad definition of diversity and has a comprehensive website stating their inclusive vision. But when asked the definition of diversity during an interview, the Vice President of Sales, a white male, exclaimed, "everyone but white males." He added, "I'm perfectly serious. Look at what is really being done and show me any attention or concern to issues that impact white males." But what about what has been published and is in the CEO's speeches? "That's just window dressing. What gets measured gets done. They should just call it what it is."

The only way to counter this negativity is to create and fully realize a broad definition and vision. Which leads us to the real challenge of diversity: it is not a program or series of special events. It is not a headcount. There is no quick fix or magic recipe. A successful diversity initiative requires a strategic process to change "differences"-related behaviors and achieve enhanced business results. And by behaviors we mean actions encompassing the way all aspects of business are done. Diversity, therefore, requires nothing short of a corporate culture change. The next question is, if it's so difficult, "Why change?" This will be the topic of the next article.

In our next issue:

"What We Don't Know Can Hurt Us"

Red Flag #2: there is no compelling business case for diversity

We'll discuss the need for a *customized*, rather than *generalized*, business case. We'll discuss methods for a comprehensive internal and external needs analysis and offer some specifics on what gets overlooked, such as sales potential and challenges by territory.

Simmons Associates is a nationally-known resource team located in New Hope, PA. The firm has provided consultation and training services in Leadership, Diversity, Human Resources and Organizational Development for Fortune 500 organizations for 25 years, and is known for its integrity, client service and strategic, business results-focused approach to diversity.

If you are interested in reading more from the Red Flag article series, that and other related articles may be found at www.simmonsassoc.com

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