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'GOOD ENOUGH' IS NOT GOOD ENOUGH (P8)

DEI: It's the right thing
to do (P14)

Blockchain and
privacy: Can they
live together? (P22)

Writing compliance
advice that employees
can use, Part 2: Writing
the advice (P28)



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DEI: IT'S THE RIGHT THING TO DO

by Mónica Ramírez Chimal



Mónica Ramírez Chimal
MBA

(mramirez@asserto.com.mx) is Partner and Founder of consulting firm Asserto RSC in Mexico City, Mexico.

After the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States, there were many inquiries about what could have been prevented. What went wrong? One of the key elements was the hiring policies of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Most recruits were very similar: white, male, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant Americans.¹ How does this affect the CIA? Their agents' mindsets were almost all the same. People with similar backgrounds and beliefs tend to have the same perspective — and same blind spots. Because of what Osama Bin Laden was wearing (a tunic) and where he was transmitting messages (a cave), the agents didn't perceive him as a threat. The threat may have been detected if the CIA at the time had someone more familiar with Islam. What Bin Laden was doing was strategic to attract more martyrs to his cause and make himself seem like a prophet.

The CIA's failure is called "homophily," defined as the tendency for people to seek out or be attracted to those similar to themselves.² The reason is basic: We want to feel comfortable, and we want to trust other people, so when we gather we try to be with people similar to us. It's like validating ourselves. We don't like to be challenged or corrected.

Sadly, this didn't only happen in the CIA. It happens everywhere, in governments and companies worldwide. A more diverse group of people with different backgrounds can give better input to problems. That's why diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) are so important.

What is DEI?

Diversity: Acknowledging we are all different and accepting it. Our differences could be gender, race and ethnicity, skin color, age, religion, nationality, language, sexual

orientation, education, cultural background, socioeconomic status, disabilities, and diversity of thought (ideas, perspectives, and values).

Equity: Establishing justice, impartiality, and fairness for all by providing employees the same opportunities and rights. This also involves identifying and removing barriers preventing some people from having the same opportunities and rights.

Inclusion: Incorporating everyone by guaranteeing that every employee is safe, welcomed, valued, and respected; for this, discrimination and intolerance must be eradicated. Inclusion is very important because it triggers a sense of belonging. The more comfortable people feel, the more loyal they are, and the more they want to continue working for the company.

Simply put, "Diversity is where everyone is invited to the party, Equity means that everyone gets to contribute to the playlist, Inclusion means that everyone has the opportunity to dance."³

The first step is to create a diverse workforce by hiring people from different cultural backgrounds. The second step is to give the workforce an equal chance to speak up without retaliation. The third step is to put into practice these principles to make the company a better place.

Keep in mind the common mistakes companies make:

- ◆ Just because the workforce comprises people from different backgrounds, nationalities, or races does not mean the company is inclusive. Inclusive means the entire workforce is valued equally and has the same chances to participate in all aspects of the company — including leadership

positions and decision-making. The company may be diverse but not inclusive if only certain groups have authority or influence.

- ◆ Just because the company's headquarters is from a specific country does not mean that all board members and executive teams must be from that country. On the contrary, the composition of the company's board and executive team should represent the diversity of the geographical areas in which the company has a presence. If it does, employees and customers can easily identify with the company just by knowing that someone from their country or culture understands their needs.
- ◆ Just because there is a diverse workforce does not mean that discrimination, harassment, or stereotypes have been eradicated from the company. It is very common, even with training, that when a problem arises, people support each other instinctually if they are from the same country, gender, religion, etc. Solidarity with someone like you can create a blind spot to an unfair situation. People often put aside facts and support what they think they know, creating more problems or making the situation more discriminatory.

The importance of DEI

DEI has many advantages for organizations.

- ◆ **Better products or services:** If everyone in the company has the chance to speak up and has their opinion considered, products or services can be improved (e.g., how it's made, how it's offered, to whom it is useful, how it

functions). More perspectives mean more insight, so there is more creativity and innovation in what the company can offer.

- ◆ **New markets:** What might be a hit in one country could be a complete failure in another. Launching a product or service in a new market requires input from different mindsets. Different employee backgrounds bring multiple perspectives to the table.
- ◆ **Productivity, effectiveness, and efficiency:** Different ideas and angles can improve products, services, processes, policies, and procedures. Decisions are considered more thoroughly, and problems are solved faster.

Inclusive means the entire workforce is valued equally and has the same chances to participate in all aspects of the company — including leadership positions and decision-making.

- ◆ **Right talent:** Companies that practice diversity and inclusion are more likely to attract the right people to work for them. They also retain the best talent! People are paying more attention to what companies do, and they value those who put into practice diversity, equity, and inclusion.
- ◆ **Retention:** When employees feel valued, safe, respected, and

trusted, companies retain more talent. When people are happy, they want to stay, and they become the best gatekeeper a company can have!

- ◆ **Better internal environment:** When a company has employees from different backgrounds, it improves the environment because people become more empathic to others. If the company continues to show how important respect is while showing transparency and clear communication with its decisions, stress and problems decrease, and more brilliant ideas rise.
- ◆ **Reputation and image:** When a company has people from different backgrounds in all its organizational levels, customers notice, and they can see themselves represented. This shows the company understands its customers. A positive image for the company leads to more customers, sales, and income.

And lastly: It's the right thing to do!

How to implement DEI in your company?

Assess the current state of your company by answering these questions:

- ◆ What is the workforce composition by area? The percentages of all groups can be determined from the total number of employees.
- ◆ Is there any area mostly made up of underrepresented groups?
- ◆ Are the areas made up of balanced teams?
- ◆ How are the positions being filled? How are the evaluations and promotions done? Which factors are considered?
- ◆ What is the composition of leadership?
- ◆ Are there any practices or policies that are exclusionary or discriminatory? Example: Is the company always recruiting people from the same university? Is the language for job ads inclusive? For instance, if it says, "seven to 10 years of compliance experience needed," ask instead for "experience with due diligence and background checks." This keeps the job open to people who may not have seven years of experience but may be good at what the company needs.
- ◆ Have there been any bullying or harassment cases? If so, when they happened, what actions were taken, and what did the company do to prevent them from happening again?
- ◆ Are job descriptions biased? Sometimes the way job descriptions are written can exclude people regardless of their qualifications. For instance, words like "strong," "lead," "dominate," and "competitive" have a masculine bias. They can be replaced with neutral equivalents like "proven," "pioneer," "inspire," and "driven" instead.⁴
- ◆ Are there salary differences? Are all the positions at the same level compensated the same?
- ◆ To whom is the company giving training?
- ◆ Do the company's policies and procedures allow all employees to contribute in a significant way?
- ◆ Is the company's dress code inclusive for the entire workforce?
- ◆ Do company facilities have a wheelchair ramp? Nursing room? Gender-neutral bathrooms?

Seek employee feedback. How do employees really feel about the company? You can design a 10-question survey about different topics. Keep in mind that some people like to talk (it can be an interview), some like to write (survey), and some just want to be anonymous.

Match the results of the previous two steps. What are the common factors? Can you get to the root cause? If so, what needs to be changed?

Improve what must be improved. This includes the company's mission and values, policies and procedures, code of ethics, content of training, and even the way people express themselves. For the code of ethics, make sure that acceptance and respect are included as principles of the company. Emphasize that respect is essential because it promotes appropriate language, behavior, and healthy boundaries. Respect promotes an inclusive working environment.

Make sure employees have a tool to report harassment and discrimination. It can be an email address, a reporting line, an intranet form, or the company's website, but it should be available 24/7 and easy to use. When a report is received, the company must act quickly to investigate and ensure the employee feels heard and helped. If there is something that must be changed, do it, and then reinforce that issue through training and/or reminders (e.g., posters, phrases when people turn on their laptops). The company's main objective should be to stop the problem from being repeated.

Set different actions to show that the company values diversity. Some examples are:

- ◆ Celebrate all holidays, not just ones important for the company. A celebration based on all cultures and religions can make the workforce feel equally valued. In addition, give flexible holidays so employees can choose when to take time off for holidays. The objective is to ensure every employee can celebrate their own holidays and festivities without being obligated to take days off that are unimportant to them.
- ◆ Include other languages in the company's communications based on the main languages spoken by your workforce. For example, if the second and third largest groups in the workforce speak Spanish and Japanese, add keywords or subtitles in those languages during presentations. In this way, they'll feel that they matter to the company.
- ◆ Make sure taking time off is easy and flexible enough to accommodate each person's needs.
- ◆ Install quiet rooms so people can relax, pray, meditate, or take a break. This is especially helpful for those who are sensitive to noise.
- ◆ Participate in different communities' events and/or set a monthly talk that focuses on each community represented in your company. It could be about history, customs, religion, food, clothing, etc. For instance, "How to make sushi as it is done in Japan." Your workforce will learn how it is done and why it is valuable, and they'll have fun and bond.
- ◆ When organizing events (e.g., a toast or annual lunch or dinner), consider people who don't drink alcohol or have dietary restrictions or preferences.

- ◆ Implement a "no email replies after 8 p.m." policy and a "no email replies during holidays" policy, so everyone's personal time is respected and no one feels pressured to answer.

Set "communication and transparency" as a company policy to show inclusion. No matter how busy a person is, make time to listen and be open to suggestions. Transparency also means everyone is included in emails for topics or projects in which they participate. By doing this, the company makes employees feel included.

Set activities for workforce bonding. For example: put everyone in a line. Tell them that when they hear something they do, agree with, want, identify with, or have lived to step forward. Make a list of things from the results of hotline reports, employee surveys, and program assessments, and read them out loud. A case in point could be, "Have you ever tried talking to your boss, but they are typing and not paying attention to you?" Those who have experienced this scenario would take a step forward. This can help show employees that they share common experiences and empathize more with each other. You can also make a list of personal things so they learn more about each other, such as, "Did your dad teach you how to drive?" Personal questions can help them bond.

Provide training to all, including the following topics:

- ◆ **Acceptance and respect:** Emphasize how important these values are for the company and how they can help minimize problems. Accepting diversity and respecting differences

creates a healthy working environment. Respect is crucial to providing an inclusive working environment.

- ◆ **Listening:** Listen to others without making assumptions and be objective. Listening is fundamental to understanding how others feel about something because what is an issue for one employee may not be for another.

No matter how busy a person is, make time to listen and be open to suggestions. Transparency also means everyone is included in emails for topics or projects in which they participate.

- ◆ **Harassment and discrimination:** Understand how stereotypes affect how we treat others. Use specific examples so the message is clear and goes beyond theory. Use games to show people real-life scenarios. How would employees feel if they were harassed or discriminated against? Doing this can raise awareness and empathy among the workforce, and they will understand the impact of harassment and discrimination and know how to prevent it.
- ◆ **Open-minded:** Reinforce with examples of how essential it is to have flexible thinking and appreciate different perspectives. Being open-minded creates more

options and fosters innovation and creativity.

◆ **Zero tolerance for harassment or discrimination:** Implement a zero-tolerance policy without exemptions. This includes any kind of behavior that is unacceptably disrespectful. Repeat it during training, so the workforce knows exactly what the company stands for. But most importantly, put it into action when a case arises.

Provide special training to human resources and management positions to improve the selection process. This helps to remove unconscious biases, stereotypes, and assumptions in interviews. A useful tip is to blur the candidate's photo and name to prevent bias. Also, encourage tough conversations with employees. For instance, "If you were the CEO, what would you change?" Keep in mind that the link managers and employees have is special. Most people quit their jobs because they don't get along with their boss, feel disconnected, or sense that what they do is not valued. Therefore, training for management positions is critical, especially on how to manage a diverse group of employees.

Follow up on improvements. If you want your company to be better, make sure your improvements have been implemented correctly. The best companies are proactive in promoting what is right.

Implement DEI policies linked to the company's mission and values. Use the code of ethics, training, reporting tools, actions to support

diversity, the communication and transparency policy, as well as the recruiting, hiring, and promotions policies, to bond your DEI policies with the company's mission.

Set reminders to raise awareness at every level of the organization. Use posters, newsletters, brochures, messages on the intranet or website, trivia, and quizzes.⁵ Make these simple, concrete, and fun. Reminding people of keywords and concepts will keep your policies top of mind and promote change.


Designate DEI ambassadors. Who are the people willing to help improve and protect DEI?⁶ Choose people from different job levels and responsibilities. Train them on how to escalate an issue and establish that they need to meet once a month to discuss any concern raised. This group can also help escalate ideas or suggestions to upper-level management. If budget and circumstances allow, you can also have a DEI officer who oversees the policies, supervises the hiring, recruitment, and promotions, and encourages DEI efforts.

Lead by example. It's useless to improve processes, have a DEI policy, and create balanced teams if those running the company don't lead by example.

The commitment of upper management is crucial because it will show that there are no exceptions to DEI — there is no impunity, and equity prevails. This will show that your DEI policy is not just words on paper. Actions make your policy credible.

After doing this, keep going. Like the code of ethics, policies, processes, and procedures, DEI is a continuous exercise that must be supervised and improved. The more you listen to the workforce and change what is needed, the faster the company will see the benefits of DEI.

Do the right thing!

Do you want your employees to feel proud of the company they work for? If so, the solution is in your hands. Your company can have a diverse workforce that is treated equally and where everyone is involved, valued, and trusted by the company. Beyond adhering to regulations, DEI is meaningful because it acknowledges we are all different and that those differences make us unique. By giving voice to the workforce, companies enable employees to see themselves reflected in the workplace, contributing to making it better. DEI is, without a doubt, the right thing to do. 

Endnotes

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Takeaways

- ◆ The more diverse the workforce is, the more ideas there will be. The company will have more innovation, better solutions, and different perspectives.
- ◆ A company is inclusive when the diverse workforce is given the same opportunities to fully participate in all aspects of the company. If only certain groups within the company have authority or influence, then the company is diverse but not inclusive.
- ◆ A company can show that it values diversity by celebrating all holidays, giving flexible time off, including other languages in its communications, and hosting talks about each community.
- ◆ The key elements of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) training are acceptance and respect, listening, harassment and discrimination, open-mindedness, and zero tolerance for any kind of behavior that is disrespectful.
- ◆ It's useless to improve processes, have a DEI policy, and create balanced teams if management doesn't lead by example. The commitment from leadership is crucial because actions show that the company supports and promotes DEI.

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