THOUGHT LEADERSHIP SERIES

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion: Lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic and how we must respond

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Important issues amplified by the global pandemic offer an opportunity for companies to tap into diversity and foster a culture of inclusion.

The global pandemic has upended the way we live, work and connect with each other. It has dramatically altered the lives of Canadians and exposed striking health disparities that disproportionately impact racialized communities thereby accelerating the need for meaningful change, especially in the workplace.

While race-based data are not consistently available across Canada, numerous reports cite that **racialized communities are being disproportionately impacted by COVID-19**. These trends are not unique to Canada; evidence from other high-income countries, such as the US and the UK, also indicate a higher impact of COVID-19 among racialized communities.

In times of increasing disruption and uncertainty, it is more important than ever for companies to prioritize diversity and inclusion for the benefit of their culture – and their bottom line. While companies might have switched to survival mode during the pandemic to keep business running and perhaps viewed diversity and inclusion as a "nice to have", this past year has solidified that diversity and inclusion initiatives are key to a socially responsible business.

The shift in our experience brought on by the pandemic provides us with an opportunity to learn and improve the way companies and individuals embrace diversity and ensure equity and inclusion. Diversity is more than just optics; it is an opportunity to examine what we can learn and implement from these different perspectives and experiences to grow stronger, together.

Here are three principles to adopt to advance a culture of diversity, equity and inclusion in your business.[1]

1. **Challenge the status quo to accept differences and diversity:** Eliminate unfair and unjust barriers for underrepresented groups. Regularly assess and examine the status quo at all levels of your business or community and proactively find areas to improve.

2. **Honour the human in front of you.** Everyone has a story to tell, so take the time to listen. We all need – and deserve – to be seen, heard and valued. True diversity and inclusion begin with listening and bearing witness to another's experience. When we are open to learning, we can do better.

3. **Find common ground through inclusion:** Commit to ensuring people feel comfortable being themselves. Create an environment of empathy and inclusion. The more we understand each other and treat each other with dignity and respect, the stronger we will be.

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As communities diversify at considerable rates, so must businesses to adequately represent the community that it serves. While this has been a challenging year on a global scale, the COVID-19 pandemic provides an opportunity to reimagine the future of work as it pertains to workforce representation.

Diversity and inclusion help companies recruit and retain top talent, strengthen innovation, creativity, adaptability and performance, and boosts a company's brand. It is critical to driving the creation and execution of new products, services and business processes.

A **Forbes Insights survey** of more than 300 executives at large global enterprises ($500 million-plus in annual revenues), and who had direct responsibility or oversight for their company's diversity and inclusion programs, found:

1. Diversity is a key driver of innovation and is a critical component of being successful on a global scale.

2. A diverse and inclusive workforce is crucial for companies that want to attract and retain top talent.

3. Nearly all respondents reported that their companies have diversity and inclusion strategies in place.

4. Responsibility for the success of companies' diversity and inclusion efforts lies with senior management.

5. Significant progress has been made to build and retain diverse workforces, but there are still some impediments to companies' efforts.

Companies can take an active, strategic approach, factoring in individual and collective experiences, with different ways of thinking and diverse communication styles. An inclusive environment enables us to see people's potential, innovate and solve important business problems that are critical to a company's mission.

It also fosters a sense of belonging across an organization that, with increased and mandatory physical distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic, is more important than ever. A sense of belonging leads to better collaboration, employee retention and improved business performance. Companies that embrace diversity and inclusion also have a stronger culture, higher creativity and access to new talent pools to boost the bottom line and meet the needs of clients.

Companies can implement diversity and inclusion in the workplace by:

- Developing an enterprise-wide approach to inclusion and diversity by establishing cross functional teams and embedding initiatives into business priorities with clear commitment from an executive sponsor;

- Fostering relationships with business leaders in other industries to develop and implement high impact initiatives;

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- Ensuring diversity, equity and inclusion principles are built into functional and overall business plans;

- Evolving recruitment and development strategy to conduct internal audits and regular monitoring of diversity and inclusion efforts, which target the recruitment, retention and promotion of diverse employees;

- Implementing company-wide programs that support and reinforce a commitment to diversity and inclusion;

- Developing an inclusive leadership and development program that supports underrepresented employees by giving them and their supervisors an opportunity to explore unconscious bias and the practice of cultural awareness;

- Providing unconscious bias training designed to ensure that decisions around hiring and promotions are focused on abilities and qualifications as well as the mitigation of unconscious bias in the hiring process;

- Developing dashboards and methods for analysis of metrics to regularly measure progress and effectiveness;

- Supporting messaging and storytelling that captures a clear and consistent vision;

- Translating best practices and market trends into meaningful initiatives;

- Ensuring applicable legislation and internal policies, programs and procedures are adhered to and improved upon; and

- Developing culturally competent partnerships and creating value for emerging communities.

These actions are only the beginning. Diversity and inclusion are core business priorities that should be committed to, then followed with, an active, strategic approach.

While the pandemic has changed the social landscape, as employers we must remain educated and vigilant when it comes to diversity in today's business world. It is only right, then, that this long overdue social discourse be reflected in business. We must continue the conversation and make progress.

When we express diversity, we create a space for everyone. When we embrace inclusion, we create a better world. Together we can embrace and foster a culture of belonging and equity that positively impacts our people and the communities we serve.

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[1] https://www.cigna.com/about-us/newsroom/community-impact/celebrating-diversity-equity-and-inclusion

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