Promote Inclusion By Establishing Inclusive Practices And Developing Leaders' Mindsets

Q&A with Maria Velasco

Founder & CEO, Beyond Inclusion Group

"The most challenging aspect of creating a diverse environment is recognizing the need to prioritize inclusion. Many organizations are very successful at hiring employees from diverse backgrounds, but they struggle with issues of retention. Thus, it is essential to first take the culture's pulse to identify the underlying strengths and challenges in DEI and to better understand how inequities are playing out in the organization," says Beyond Inclusion Group's Founder & CEO, Maria Velasco.

Maria is a strategic organizational development and leadership consultant for organizations seeking transformational change in the area of diversity, equity and inclusion. She has over 15 years of experience developing and implementing sustainable diversity and inclusion initiatives to help strengthen and leverage diversity for organizations from a variety of sectors with the goal of reducing bias, increasing cultural competence, promoting inclusion and institutional change. Maria uses Appreciative Inquiry and Action Learning methodologies to build cultures of inclusion and to foster intercultural understanding.

Excerpts from the Interview:

Q. Being the Founder and CEO of Beyond Inclusion Group, a firm with a mission of transforming workplace cultures into inclusive and equitable environments for all, how do you think has the year 2020 accelerated conversations on DEI?

Maria: 2020 was a year of awakening for all of us, particularly as it relates to DEI. On the one hand, the Covid-19 crisis has exposed and compounded deep-rooted racial inequities associated with public health and health care access in our society. At the same time, the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery cast a brighter light on police brutality and institutional racism in this country. These events have triggered national and civic unrest in America at a scale not seen since Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination.

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This ongoing public reckoning around racial inequity and injustice has amplified DEI as a pressing moral imperative and influenced the priorities of public officials and organizational leaders. Consequently, organizations across sectors, including the U.S. federal government, have fast-tracked their commitment to racial equity by issuing corporate pledges, launching listening series, appointing Chief Diversity Officers, and delivering antiracism training.

These responses have brought DEI conversations to the forefront. However, we need more than just reactive gestures, as well-intentioned as they may be, as we move along into the lengthy and necessary journey of healing and transformation required to dismantle the status quo.

Q. Becoming an inclusive leader isn't always easy. How can organizations encourage inclusion as the pandemic changes the workplace?

Maria: In 2021, inclusion is a best practice in business and a moral imperative that requires more than good intentions. Organizational leaders must turn intentions into sustainable actions in order to meaningfully shift their workplace cultures into more inclusive and equitable environments. Establishing inclusive practices and developing leaders' mindsets are the two most important things organizations can do to promote inclusion. Even well-coordinated

inclusive practices that are not in tune with leadership mindsets may actually make things worse, adding confusion and inviting cynicism throughout the organization.

Addressing diversity requires an analysis of the self. Leaders need to be aware of their own personal patterns, attitudes, and opinions and have an understanding of prevailing interpersonal and cultural patterns. It is this self-knowledge that allows leaders to be non-judgmental and open. Therefore, a key practice for promoting inclusion is making inclusive leadership a core management competency across the organization and tying executive compensation to progress on DEI goals.

Q. What, in your opinion, is the most challenging aspect of striving for a diverse environment?

Maria: The most challenging aspect of creating a diverse environment is recognizing the need to prioritize inclusion. Many organizations are very successful at hiring employees from diverse backgrounds, but they struggle with issues of retention. Thus, it is essential to first take the culture's pulse to identify the underlying strengths and challenges in DEI and to better understand how inequities are playing out in the organization. The next crucial step is to co-create a compelling vision of an ideal workplace culture among all stakeholders that reflects input from everyone.

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By using a collective visioning process, organizations will elevate all voices and increase buy-in and engagement. The next step to fulfill the vision is to develop inclusive strategies and implement them through collective action plans that engage and inspire everyone. Once the vision is achieved, organizations will be more successful at increasing the numerical and hierarchical representation of underrepresented minorities at all levels of the organization.

Q. **The crisis has resulted in increased challenges for various groups, including women, people of color, LGBTQ+ employees, single parents, working parents, and so on. What strategies do you suggest to address these challenges?**

Maria: Organizational leaders can leverage the disruption created by the intersecting crises of racial injustice and the Covid-19 pandemic as an opportunity to reinforce or launch more effective ways of addressing systemic disparities and inequities. The first step is diving deep into the data to understand the inequalities and disadvantages within their employee population. Next, leaders must reflect on how to support employees who are most marginalized and be sure to hold those employees at the center of their planning moving forward. At that point, leaders must make firm decisions about what they need to keep doing, stop doing, and start doing to take advantage of this crisis to more deeply implement diversity, inclusion, and equity in their organizational culture.

Q. **What should be the key priorities of DEI leaders in 2021?**

Maria: DEI leaders should take advantage of the current momentum by engaging organizational leaders, managers and staff at all levels into DEI by using an all-inclusive approach. We know that transforming cultures requires engagement and collaboration from all its leaders, members and stakeholders.

One way not to do this is, as research has shown, is by mandatory programs and control tactics that end up activating bias and increasing resistance. Another way to do this is by establishing organizational responsibility and encouraging managers' involvement, through engagement in the normal course of work. Engagement has proven to be highly effective in increasing the share of white women, black women, and black men in management. Similarly, engaging all managers in recruitment and mentoring programs voluntarily increases their support for organizational diversity.

Making diversity a key performance indicator and increasing day-to-day purposeful contact with a wider variety of co-workers have proven successful. Establishing mentoring programs and assigning responsibility for diversity to a diversity manager or a task force of managers from different departments have also proven successful. In fact, employee-driven diversity committees have raised the proportion of black women in management by 30%.

Additionally, DEI leaders should welcome and embrace employee's resistance as an essential force for change. When leaders can identify resistance and its sources, they can engage with it as a positive catalyst for sustainable change. A recent action research study I conducted about resistance in DEI initiatives revealed employee resistance to change as an important and necessary lever for transformation. The article includes a series of strategies to address and harness the power of resistance. ■

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