

## Diversity in the Workplace: Cracking the Code

The very title captures your attention, doesn't it? Diversity—in all its dimensions—is such a hot topic today and an essential challenge in every workplace. Consultants, sessions and initiatives abound. No one has mapped the diversity “genome” as yet, but there is progress to report.

*First, a little background.*

*A couple of years ago, United Way of America (now United Way Worldwide) approached us about convening a group to address diversity and inclusion in the nonprofit sector—specifically, those parts of the sector represented by the members of the National Assembly. NeighborWorks America, Girl Scouts of the USA, YMCA of the USA, Boy Scouts of America, American Cancer Society, and others quickly joined in and we commenced on a journey...together.*

*At the same time, some of these same members and others were with us on a journey to address the much-heralded “talent deficit” in the sector, again, our part of the nonprofit sector. Aside from the issue of whether there is an adequate leadership pipeline as boomers retire, recruitment and retention of workers from the frontlines to mid-levels emerged as major concerns. In short, the focus became how does an under-resourced and fragmented human service/community development sector compete for diverse talent with much better resourced public and for-profit employers?*

*Yes, the two challenges are inter-related and our collective efforts became so, too. Diversity and inclusion require focused attention and deliberate action but they are not a separate endeavor—they are very much a part of the overall matter of developing the workforce we need. Pretty obvious but it is common practice for “Diversity” to stand alone, rather being a core component of recruitment, training, employee engagement, leadership development, etc. What's more, these functions often operate beside one another rather than being integrated into a total talent strategy.*

*In terms of action, thanks to grants from NeighborWorks America and United Way Worldwide and a significant amount of volunteer assistance, there is a diversity/workforce strategy underway, the first part of which was creating a common job-posting brand ([www.Careersforgood.org](http://www.Careersforgood.org)) and an approach, hopefully in the near-future, to collaborative recruitment at sites around the country. (Note: The strains of the economy have had an effect on these efforts but they proceed, albeit more slowly than we would like.)*

So, where has this journey taken us in terms of cracking the code for diversity in the workplace? Well, you have seen the first element: diversity and inclusion must be integrated into overall talent strategy, both for individual organizations and for the sector, in order to have a lasting impact on the workforce. (Of course, there are other aspects of diversity and inclusion to be integrated into other operations, e.g., purchasing, marketing.) In short, an organization is taking affirmative steps to address diversity by creating an integrated talent development approach, of which diversity and inclusion are elemental and integral parts.

There are two other insights that are emerging: 1) it's about generational differences, stupid; and 2) engagement is the key.

At a talent roundtable we held recently, the focus was on four generations in the workplace. Aside from recruiting in ways and places that will attract people of color, women and others who are under-represented in our employment ranks, which requires huge attention in its own right, the sense of the roundtable was that addressing the reality of four generations in today's workplace is essential to creating an inclusive workplace. And, with research indicating that diverse workplaces tend to be productive workplaces, addressing generational differences becomes a business imperative.

What we learned and discussed at that roundtable was that becoming a well-functioning multi-generational workplace is not about understanding and accommodating Gen-Xers and Gen-Yers in the context of the traditional workplace environment—the environment comfortable to those in charge (e.g., Boomers) but changing the workplace to be one where all can be comfortable and get their work done. Think of the sessions you've attended and articles you've read about the differences between the generations. Were you left with a sense of what to do about those differences? Are understanding and begrudging tolerance enough so long as everyone toes the line and gets his or her work done? No. We've learned that as the culture has changed with the influences of the different generations now alive, *desirable workplaces* are those that change accordingly. And change begins with listening.

But it is employee engagement that takes us from listening and understanding (or tolerating) to forging the kind of workplace that can suit all generations and be productive for the cause. Again, once you have gotten the right people (i.e., a diverse and qualified set of employees) in the door, how do we allow them to make it their own, to exercise their entrepreneurial muscles, to keep the passion for mission alive, to work in concert with people who come to the job with different mindsets?

I have had the privilege of participating recently in exciting gatherings on diversity from different vantage points, racial and ethnic diversity, generational diversity, gender diversity. Engagement always emerges as an absolutely essential element of a diverse and productive workplace. Not engagement for engagement's sake but engagement that enhances productivity and mission fulfillment.

I don't know about you but I have a lot to learn in terms of effective engagement practices. That may be one of the next great challenges for all employers. Of course, we can begin by listening to and involving current employees.

Jim Collins advises us to get the right people on the bus and make sure that each is in the right seat. In order to develop a diverse, inclusive, well-functioning workforce, we need to heed his advice. We also need to develop practices that attract diverse talent and practices that engage employees, with all their differences, in establishing ways of working that ensure that all are rowing in the right direction and can change course adroitly as conditions change.

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