

Think Globally, Act Locally

One-size-fits-all solutions don't work when creating a global diversity and inclusion strategy. Diversity executives must identify which topics are critical to the universal corporate culture, and which should be addressed locally to court success. *By Neal R. Goodman*

Today's diversity and inclusion leaders are finding that, through acquisitions, outsourcing and even organic business expansion, they are responsible for an ever-expanding global pool of employees. For many, their responsibilities have grown into unfamiliar terrain. Those in senior diversity leadership roles tasked with rolling out corporate diversity initiatives onto a global stage are entering a high-risk zone if they fail to make sure that they know what they don't know about the varied approaches to diversity around the world.

As globalization continues to progress, we will see increased attempts to implement universal standards and operating procedures in global companies. Companies will struggle with this, as a U.S.-centric approach to diversity and inclusion (D&I) likely will cause problems outside the U.S.

The historical, legal and social circumstances that make D&I such a compelling issue in the U.S. are not identically replicated elsewhere. This does not mean the topic is not important, but rather the ways diversity and inclusion are defined — and managed — may vary significantly.

For instance, there is no universally agreed upon definition of diversity. In fact, the word does not have an equivalent in some languages, and neither do many related terms, such as affirmative action or equal opportunity. Without an appreciation of this, U.S.-centric approaches will fail and will create more problems than they solve. We must examine and question the fundamental assumptions underlying our understanding of diversity and inclusion to create truly globally diverse and inclusive organizations.

What follows are some key areas of diversity found to vary in scope and importance across cultures.

Nationality and ethnicity: Most countries consider nationality and ethnicity important, yet the general definition of this dimension is concerned with immigrants and their integration into the larger society. This poses a potential issue for diversity training initiatives.

For countries where national identity and citizenship are relatively open, such as the U.S. and Canada, issues of nationality and immigration concern how to value the distinct cultural and ethnic contributions of each group. In countries where national identity is more focused, such as Singapore and much of Europe, different cultural identities represented in immigrant communities can be seen as a threat to national identity. Therefore, the definition of integration varies greatly by country and must be addressed prior to a global training initiative rollout.

Events over the past two years in China illustrate that this will be an ongoing area of importance in the world's most populous country. Likewise, India and Brazil are among the most diverse countries in the world and experience similar situations. Many ethnic conflicts in Eastern Europe simmer due to changed borders.

Gender: Gender is a dimension of diversity identified in nearly all countries that have undertaken diversity and inclusion initiatives. In fact, in some countries, this is the only component of diversity that organizations addressed in diversity training, as the changing role of women in the workplace is an important issue. Of course, due to historical and legal differences, each country has a different idea of what the true objectives for gender issues are and how they should be achieved.

Rohini Anand, senior vice president and global chief diversity officer at Sodexo, which has more than 350,000 employees in more than 80 countries, said that while diversity training has some core universal themes, most diversity training in the organization is localized by topic. Further, gender is a diversity topic that could be identified and addressed in many countries, but with varying degrees of importance.

Age and generation: Age and generational differences are identified in most countries as important topics to address in training, as there is significant range in the degree to which age is venerated versus youth is valued. The rapid proliferation of new technologies and their use by younger employees has

impacted their value in organizations. However, as one Indian executive said, "Technical competence at social networking is no match to wisdom, which only comes with experience."

Race: Race is an important topic for racially heterogeneous countries. However, relatively homogenous countries, such as Japan and Korea, do not see racism as a major issue relative to nationality. In much of Europe, the broad topic of racism is subsumed under issues about national identity and integration. Many countries in Latin America have begun to address this topic in spite of some historical reluctance to acknowledge the issue, but discussions must be approached with great sensitivity.

Women in the Indian Workplace

The role of women in the Indian workplace is so diverse and so complex that stereotypes about women are both contradicted and confirmed. India is a country where women can attain the highest office in the land but also can be subjected to the worst kind of discrimination.

Though India is the second fastest growing global economy, 2009 World Economic Forum statistics placed it 114 out of 134 nations in terms of man-woman equality, making India one of the worst performers in the world. This broad gender gap translates into disproportionate poverty, unemployment, illiteracy and discrimination in health and survival issues and has serious impact on the majority of Indian women's lives.

Contrast this reality with that of educated Indian women who find their way into positions of prominence in a variety of spheres, including politics, journalism and technology.

Indira Gandhi first became prime minister of India in 1966, and the current president, Pratibha Patil, is also a woman. Barkha Dutt is a much-celebrated columnist for the *Hindustan Times* and has gained prominence as a television journalist for her reports on the Kargil War for New Delhi Television, India's leading all-news channel. Arundhati Roy, the Booker Prize-winning novelist and social activist, has gained international recognition for her book, *The God of Small Things*, as well as her political essays and speeches. Kiran Mazumdar Shaw became the wealthiest Indian woman after the initial public offering of her biotechnology company, Biocon, netted her \$480 million.

For every Indian woman who makes headlines, there is a legion of middle class Indian women in the workplace. This is particularly true in the IT sector. India's software trade body, the National Association of Software and Service Companies, reports that 38 percent of all employees in Indian software companies are women — a higher representation than any of its Western counterparts — and these women are on par with their male colleagues in wages and positions.

However, because India's cultural context operates on different assumptions, particularly when it comes to dating and marriage — the vast majority of marriages are arranged by the couple's parents — the way men and women interact in the workplace often plays out differently than it does in the West. Women, particularly when single, tend to associate among themselves except when professional demands call for interactions with male colleagues. This is generally not due to any shyness or sense of inferiority, but because social norms encourage women to ensure their interactions with men are purely professional to avoid any romantic implications.

In line with this social context, one may see corporate measures that protect women's reputations in the workplace, such as shift arrangements that ensure women need not work alone with their male colleagues and corporate-sponsored transportation to ensure safety for female employees traveling to and from work at night.

As is true for many women in the rest of the world, Indian women struggle to balance the demands of work and family. Two factors help them attain work-life balance: the availability of domestic help and extended-family systems. Because middle class Indian women can generally afford some domestic help and because one or more sets of grandparents are often willing to take responsibility for much of their grandchildren's care, Indian women often continue working after their children are born, returning back to work sooner than many of their Western counterparts. Further, where homemaking skills were once the key criteria when looking for a match for one's son, now many middle class Indian parents may be equally inclined to look for a daughter-in-law with earning power to contribute to the family finances. ◀

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Physical ability: Physical ability is an important factor to consider by those in a wide variety of countries, yet few companies are dealing with this as part of their D&I training.

Social class: Social class is seen as one of the most important topics that need to be addressed in a diversity training program. It is particularly critical to certain regions, such as Latin America. Senior diversity leaders from Latin America often require a Latin American-specific series of training programs because most U.S.-based diversity training programs do not address this issue.

Sexual orientation: Sexual orientation is one of the least important factors for companies outside the U.S., but this topic will be an important area for diversity leaders to address globally. In a recent case, LGBT employees wanted to join a U.S.-based corporate LGBT affinity group because they could not start one in their own country due to potential threats to their safety and possible discrimination, and the organization had no way to address their request.

Strategies and Best Practices

When mapping out a strategy for global diversity training, diversity executives must first answer the following questions:

- What is the meaning of D&I in each country where the organization is operating?
- What are the critical issues and concerns about diversity in each country?
- How would diversity programs be received in each country?
- How should the content and methods of delivery be localized to meet the specific needs of each country?
- What are the key demographic and social trends that impact diversity in each country?
- Will affinity groups be available on a global or local level?
- How does diversity and inclusion link to global business strategies?
- Is D&I training linked to cultural intelligence training?
- Are D&I best practices shared across the global organization?

It is incumbent that diversity leaders localize initiatives to avoid the appearance of an irrelevant or even irreverent headquarters-based diversity mandate. This starts with a clear understanding of the business imperatives for D&I.

Samantha Bidwell, director of diversity and inclusion at American Express, said that diversity and inclusion are linked to talent, marketing and workplace transformation. Yet the company's approach varies by country. For example, some countries see gender as a top priority while others focus on generations.

To be successful, global companies need to bring together diversity champions from each country or region to de-

sign a corporate diversity survey focused on the meaning and business case for diversity in each country where they operate. Once this is completed, the next step is to identify which diversity topics and themes are critical to the integrity of the universal corporate culture and which topics should be addressed locally. Where possible, locals should be given autonomy in the design and delivery of diversity initiatives, with support from corporate and local diversity leaders.

Clear and unequivocal support from senior leadership is an important factor for success. One of the key success factors for a Latin American diversity initiative, undertaken by a leading pharmaceutical company in 2008, was that training was localized, delivered by corporate leadership in each country. This gave the topic more credibility than could have been achieved otherwise.

Diversity executives should be prepared for and open to a paradigm shift in their understanding of diversity. They should constantly survey the global news and solicit feedback from global colleagues. For example, there is a need to import workers in many countries due to low birth rates. This has created conflicts and misunderstandings based on the acceptance of guest workers and their children in receiving countries. Further, in many countries, diversity is the result of changing borders due to treaties signed at the end of wars. For instance, currently central Europe is struggling with numerous ethnic enclaves that feel an attachment to their home nationalities across the border.

There are going to be numerous pragmatic issues that D&I leaders will have to contend with. For instance, how do U.S. anti-discrimination laws apply to U.S. companies operating outside the U.S.? Do they apply to local country nationals or only to U.S. citizens? Employee termination for sexual harassment may not comply with local laws. While many countries are just beginning to institute quotas for protected classes, other countries, such as Malaysia, are repealing their quota systems.

Whenever possible, link D&I to initiatives that promote a global mindset. There is a compelling case to be made for understanding how cultural diversity impacts all aspects of business acumen, including marketing, leadership, team building, communications, human resources, supply chain, operations and R&D.

There is a clear need for organizations to work more effectively across borders. Diversity must be seen as an opportunity to be leveraged for competitive advantage, not an obstacle to overcome. Diversity will continue to become more important over the next five years in all countries and companies. In many respects, the global journey to promote diversity and inclusion has just begun. We are all pioneers on this journey, and like pioneers, the more we can do to support and sustain each other along the way, the greater the chances are that we will achieve our goals. «

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