

INVITING NEW PERSPECTIVES FOR DIVERSITY BEYOND LIP SERVICE

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As a coach specializing in DEIB (diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging) with decades of experience in corporate organizations, I understand the pervasive and limiting effects of less-than-optimal diversity and inclusion practices—what I call D&I lip service. I know firsthand how the superficial expression of support for a diverse and inclusive culture without any corresponding action or sincere intent to effect meaningful change can hinder companies' talent acquisition, retention, and—perhaps above all—bottom lines.

PwC's 2017 "Diversity & Inclusion Benchmarking Survey" found that although companies are providing programs and building awareness of the need for greater inclusion through affinity, networking, and resource groups, they are not taking those efforts to the next level and using them to address business priorities.

Coaching + D&I = Δ Behavior

Collectively, we can assist with this process by creating a judgment-free environment where majority group leaders are encouraged to explore their role in the power construct. Removing judgment and blame helps establish a foundation we can build upon in order to reframe the role of privilege as a platform to share power and to ensure that all people are valued and respected and that all voices are heard.

We can choose to completely turn privilege on its head by transforming what has historically served as a barrier into an enabler of inclusivity—but it will require a fundamental shift in how we approach D&I.

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Traditional efforts have been oriented from the “outside in.” We’ve spent decades telling people what they should think, say, and do relative to inclusivity. I’m proposing an “inside out” coaching approach that encourages individuals to go deep within to own where they are, embrace radical truth, and do the self-work needed to progress along their diversity and inclusion journey. It is from this precipice that I introduce a new inclusion model and a coaching platform—Inclusion Coaching—

based on the most up-to-date research and best practices for creating sustainable and meaningful behavioral change. I also provide an action-oriented process—COMMIT—with simple techniques to shift mind-sets and encourage more inclusive behaviors (see Figure 1):

Commit to Courageous Action

Open Your Eyes and Ears

Move beyond Lip Service

Make Room for Controversy and Conflict

Invoke New Perspectives

Tell the Truth Even When It Hurts

By introducing a new approach at the intersection of coaching and D&I, I am offering your organization a viable solution for the “how” of everyday inclusion. I explore these areas in detail in my recent book, *Diversity Beyond Lip Service: A Coaching Guide for Challenging Bias*. In this article, we will focus on “Inviting New Perspectives.”



FIGURE 1. THE COMMIT MODEL

Diversity is the spectrum of human difference.

Lip Service and Beyond

In order to go deeper into our journey toward greater diversity, equity, and inclusion, let me define exactly what we are talking about. Diversity is the spectrum of human difference. Equity refers to equal opportunity for all humans—an environment free from bias, harassment, and discrimination. Inclusion empowers all people to access the same opportunities and challenges; to receive the same level of respect and value; and to be treated as they desire to be treated, regardless of inherent or perceived differences.

So, then, what is D&I lip service? Think of lip service as a company hiring one or two people of color and putting them on display on their website as “diversity” has been achieved.

Lip service is also an “Everyone is welcomed here!” corporate declaration that is not backed up with action and accountability. There is intentionality about diversity in visual marketing, but the employee experience does not align with the words in the mission statement or the assortment of diverse smiling faces on the corporate website. This misalignment often shows up in the hemorrhaging of diverse talent. They quickly exit the organization due to not feeling included or valued. For some companies, going “beyond lip service” would start with engaging inclusion strategies before employees were even hired, such as connecting them with the appropriate internal employee resource groups, mentors, or other support and resources that would set them up for success. Hiring professionals at large organizations often feel that they have done their job when they have brought in “diverse” talent, but there is a big difference between acquiring greater diversity and achieving true inclusion. Hiring to create

diversity alone—checking off boxes on a corporate hiring profile by increasing the representation from a few target populations—is not a wise maneuver. Here’s why: Unless you’re working toward real inclusiveness, you may find that within a year, an alarming number of those hires have left the organization. Their exit interviews may reveal additional clues about the limitations of diverse hiring strategies when there are not systemic inclusive policies and practices in place to support the engagement and success of all employees. And it’s truly a lose–lose situation when new employees are hired and trained, only to leave the organization before realizing their potential for optimal performance.

In fact, the 2017 Tech Leavers Study, conducted by Kapor Center, found workplace culture drives turnover, significantly affecting the retention of underrepresented groups, and costing the industry more than \$16 billion each year. The Tech Leavers Study is a first-of-its-kind national study examining why people voluntarily left their jobs in tech. The Kapor Center and Harris Poll surveyed a representative sample of more than 2,000 U.S. adults who have left a job in a technology-related industry or function within the last three years.

When employees experience unfairness and cannot contribute in a manner they find fulfilling, they must set out in search of companies where they feel truly welcomed, valued, and rewarded, where their unique perspectives are exactly what the business is looking for and their insights are put to good use.

The good news is there are some practical steps that Tech companies can take to drive positive culture shifts and reduce turnover. A few promising findings from The 2017 Tech Leavers Study were:

- Nearly two-thirds of tech leavers indicate that they would have stayed if their employer fixed its culture.
- Having a diversity and inclusion strategy was associated with fewer reports of unfairness, significantly lower sexual harassment, bullying and stereotyping, and lower rates of leaving due to unfairness.

- Having a *comprehensive* diversity and inclusion strategy in place had a much greater impact than having individual initiatives (e.g., unconscious bias training).

Invite New Perspectives

- Who are you becoming?
- What is possible?
- What will you do to stay aware of others' perspectives?

These are a few questions to reflect upon as you think about yourself and the pulse of your organization. Is your corporate culture open and supportive to new ideas and diverse perspectives? Let's take a look at a few ways to help foster an environment that genuinely invites and values new perspectives—starting with who's at the table.

- How do you know if there are a variety of perspectives at your table?

If everyone agrees most of the time whenever there is a vote to be taken or a decision to be made, you probably don't. If you and I am on a team and we think very similarly, then one of us is not necessary in the room.

We need people to put out new ideas, others to challenge them, and still others to address them from a different angle. Different voices, different experiential backgrounds, and different ways of thinking are how we find ways to tap into new markets and expand our businesses. They help us understand why something we are doing today may not be working and offer new ways of operating that could be much more effective.

Lean Into Curiosity

My work as a coach and mentor hinges on the idea that when we become truly curious about the inherent value in every human being, we can build bridges that enhance all of our interactions, increasing our ability to be inclusive, to adapt, and to make meaningful connections. Those fully formed interactions often lead to the kinds of ideas that break the mold.

If leaders are curious about other people—how they think, the way they approach a task or challenge,

and the manner in which they respond to particular situations—they can harness these unique insights to the great advantage of their businesses. Alternatively, if leaders have no desire to understand the different perspectives, values, and priorities of their team members, how can they provide meaningful guidance and support? How can they be truly effective leaders?

Suffice it to say, that is not the best way to lead a team for the long haul. Folks will burn out or quit long before any sustainable impact can be realized. These leaders are the ones that rise to prominence seemingly overnight with sudden success and then quietly exit the organization or find themselves in hot water with employee relations. I've seen several managers' careers derailed because they were not curious about different ways of doing things, let alone about people different from themselves. They operated with a one-track mind that ultimately led to their demise. In retrospect, it was like they could not get out of their own way.

I encourage executives to consider embedding a healthy sense of curiosity in your core leadership competencies throughout your organization.

Instead of becoming defensive, angry, or disengaged, lean into curiosity to try to understand why someone holds a different opinion or behaves in a certain, unexpected way. It's pretty much impossible to be judgmental and curious at the same time. I'm proposing that we really tap into our curiosity when things and people don't make sense.

Honest Opinions Welcome

In order to invite new perspectives, an organization must establish an environment in which people are encouraged and rewarded for providing their honest opinions, even—and especially—if those opinions are counterintuitive or challenge the usual approach. There are many proven ways to encourage honest opinions and invite new perspectives, including employee-engagement surveys, as in the following example.

An international textile company recently conducted an employee-engagement survey with questions surrounding employee culture, leadership, and professional development. The survey was rolled out

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on a global scale, reaching the company's tens of thousands of employees.

Eddie Floyd, senior vice president of human resources at the textile company, was charged with evaluating and addressing the data with his team. He took a deep dive into the employee-engagement survey findings, curious about what the insights meant for the organization and its talent, and about what steps they could take to improve. He resisted the urge to cushion or explain away what could be perceived as negative feedback and instead saw it as a valuable gift that should be embraced and explored.

Actively engaging his curiosity allowed Eddie to rise above insecurity. He encouraged the leaders who reported to him to do the same; however, reactions from the managers on his team varied broadly. Some were quick to say, "These results are not reflective of our department," in response to any feedback that could be perceived as negative. Others were open to all they heard. Eddie seized this leadership moment by using coaching skills to ask powerful questions and create a space for judgment-free exploration and ideation. His approach led his team to a place of curiosity and understanding, rather than their going into defensive mode. Eddie then worked with his peers and his team to put in place action plans with prioritized, time-bound objectives. As a result of Eddie's proactivity, stakeholders agreed that the survey was a worthwhile investment. Employees felt that they had been heard and that their input was taken seriously. Moreover, the engagement generated by the survey—and Eddie's openness to

new perspectives—led to increased productivity and performance for the organization as a whole.

This level of leadership requires humility and vulnerability to not put a "spin" on any feedback that could be considered constructive or negative. Many insecure leaders dismiss constructive feedback as "scuttle" or "noise" to avoid accountability. Eddie's authentic invitation for, and receptivity to, all forms of feedback created a space where his team could tap into their resourcefulness and bring forward innovative solutions.

Other ways to invite new perspectives include holding feedback sessions, crowdsourcing opinions on internal social media channels, and using texting platforms for instant polling to address specific needs with short timelines. Technology's constant evolution creates endless possibilities for gaining new perspectives for our people, our processes, and our business.

Creating a Safe Space

In order to understand what others are trying to say—to listen without judgment—we need to be aware of the filters we have that may affect what we're able to hear. This awareness requires us to go deep within and deal with our truth. For instance, we know that we all have unconscious bias. How does that bias influence our ability to hear and process ideas from others? What filter do we place on ideas coming from a female, Latino, differently abled, or openly gay individual? These are just a couple of questions to consider when we are looking to maximize our ability to listen deeply.

And to take it a step further, how do we listen with an understanding of cultural differences and preferences?

If we approach every conversation with the belief that all individuals have inherent value—and the understanding that what they share could be key to the success of our team, or even the organization itself—we will pay attention accordingly. Listening deeply goes beyond making sure that you have heard accurately what someone has said; it's about the impact, the motive, and the intent.

Create a mind-set of “harvesting.”

Creating a safe space can lay the foundation for deep listening, as well as advancement and innovation. To do so, you need to set ground rules for yourself, your team, and your organization:

1. Set the context for your conversation as one of authentic exploration and ideation. Let the group know that this is the time to share ideas, explore, and refine ways of working. Let them know that you really want their honest opinions, regardless of how they think those opinions may land—and mean it. Lead the way by exposing some of your vulnerabilities.
2. Create a mind-set of “harvesting.” Remove the need for immediate action and open up the process to explore possibilities. When I’m coaching a group that is very entrenched in its thinking, sometimes I’ll raise the bar on the process itself and say, “We are simply harvesting the concepts, musings, and thinking that surface relative to this topic.” Then, that meeting—and that moment—is reserved exclusively for new insights and possibilities.
3. Allow people to bring their whole selves to the table. Cultivating an environment of curiosity and cultural humility empowers individuals to fully express their wholeness. No one has to check part of him or herself at the door or wear a mask to fit in or assimilate to the dominant culture.

A question to consider is: What cultural, socioeconomic, geographic, and even spiritual experiences can add a layer of richness and refinement to ideas and solutions, and yield tangible business results?

4. Ask permission when addressing others’ ideas as a form of emotionally intelligent debate and

negotiation. By asking permission to share your thoughts, rather than immediately challenging a particular contribution, especially when addressing sensitive topics, you’ve already let down a little of your guard, as well as someone else’s. The next step is to add some qualifiers, framing your input as a request or a suggestion. That allows the person to whom you are responding to say yes or no, or to change or tweak your offering, further opening the door to collaboration.

Embrace the Unknown

We’re all pretty clear about the things we know well. Let’s explore what we don’t know. To be truly innovative, our organizations have to be places where it is OK—even encouraged—to ask questions without having answers, to take risks, and to do things that have never been done before. And make room for things to get a little messy and ambiguous along the way. It’s all a part of growth and innovation.

What if, rather than expecting people to bring all the right answers to a meeting, we tasked them with bringing the right questions? From there, we determine what perspectives are missing around the table, what we need to be curious about, what truths are being revealed, and what we don’t know that can help us and our business. Your organization will be poised to be more intentional about how you address—and assign value to—the diverse perspectives that are shared.

Conclusion

A 2017 study, “High-Impact Diversity and Inclusion: Maturity Model and Top Findings,” conducted by Bersin by Deloitte found that inclusive organizations were six times more likely to be innovative, six times more likely to be able to anticipate and respond effectively to change, and twice as likely to meet or exceed financial targets, compared with their exclusionary counterparts.

In addition, the research offers some universal steps for creating inclusive cultures. Specifically, it reveals

six principles that are key to creating a more inclusive organization:

- Treat the evolution of diversity and inclusion as business critical, not compliance necessary.
- Move beyond diversity to inclusion and diversity.
- Prioritize inclusive leadership.
- Reinforce an inclusive culture by integrating both demographic diversity and diversity of thought into all talent management practices.
- Provide diversity and inclusion resources that empower individuals to take action.
- Drive accountability, not metrics tracking.

My personal interest in learning and growing from cultural encounters has helped me in the workplace, supporting my success at multinational Fortune 500 companies throughout my career. Living my life with an eye toward learning from, connecting with, and empowering a wide spectrum of people from all walks of life, personally and professionally—as well as having compassion for and awareness of my own background and insights—has sharpened my decision-making and problem-solving skills and opened me up to some of the best moments of my life. Our existence is so much better when we get out there and embrace the opportunities and challenges that come along with living inclusively. I encourage everyone to remain curious about the treasures that lie in people unlike themselves.

This article is adapted from the book *Diversity Beyond Lip Service: A Coaching Guide for Challenging Bias*, by La'Wana Harris (Berrett-Koehler, 2019).



La'Wana Harris is a certified diversity executive, an ICF credentialed coach, and a global diversity consultant who has two decades of professional experience with large multinational organizations. She is currently serving on the global board of directors for the Healthcare Businesswomen's Association working to advance gender parity. Her most recent recognitions include PharmaVoice Top 100 Most Inspiring People in the Life Sciences Industry and Women in Leadership from the National Black MBA Association. Her most recent book, Diversity Beyond Lip Service: A Coaching Guide for Challenging Bias, introduces an "inside out" approach for diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging work.