

Leveraging inclusiveness: smart ways to diversify your organization

Harvard's Kathleen L. McGinn looks at what companies can do to really promote inclusion. In this interview, she reveals some of the keys for fostering egalitarian gender attitudes and more inclusive organizational cultures, leading to better outcomes for all.



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In recent years, many companies have made strides in increasing the diversity of their

teams. In order to gain the benefits of diversity, however, a feeling of inclusiveness has to be present. While diversity refers to the makeup of your organization, inclusiveness is the extent to which members of diverse groups feel they belong and can contribute in meaningful ways. In this interview, [Kathleen L. McGinn](#), the Cahners-Rabb Professor of Business Administration at Harvard Business School, explains why companies are increasingly investing in inclusiveness as a way to gain competitive advantage.

Why has inclusiveness become a priority in companies?

Inclusiveness is not about being good-hearted, as some might think. Organizations are increasingly investing in inclusiveness, not just because they believe it's the right thing to do, but because it brings results. When implemented well, it forms part of a sound business strategy: it allows companies to tap a much larger talent pool and boost their market competitiveness. And in this time of social and technological upheaval, we need the best people in our organizations.

Diverse groups of people are better at creativity because they have different backgrounds and competencies. They think in different ways, so they come up with better and more creative solutions. But the payoff only comes when this diversity is accompanied by a sense of inclusion. In our research at Harvard, we've tried to figure out what companies and executives can do to really foster inclusiveness.

What's the most challenging part about developing inclusiveness?

A key problem is that people often feel they are either *insiders* or *outsiders*. For instance, men more often consider themselves insiders in terms of decision-making and influencing the company. Women, on the other hand, often feel like outsiders.

These kinds of stark differences show up in many interesting ways, such as the emotions felt at work. For example, we asked workers in a tech company to give us four words that described how they felt about working in their company. The four words that men most often gave were "exciting," "learning," "fun" and "chaotic." When we asked women in the company the same question, they also said "fun," but the top two words they reported were "challenging" and "frustrating." These women thought of themselves as outsiders.

Is it possible to have an organization where "exciting" and "learning" are common responses among everyone, regardless of gender? In other words, a company where inclusion worked? That is what my colleagues and I set out to find.

And does such an organization exist?

Yes. We identified one very successful organization that had, in many ways, done exactly what needed to be done. It was a professional services firm that had been implementing a strategy to drive inclusiveness for 20 years. At the early stage of implementation, the company was a slight market leader. As they developed their strategy, they became a clear leader.

To understand how they did this, my colleagues and I gathered all the public data and internal documentation available about their inclusiveness efforts. The information showed us that they had experienced repeated cycles of what we call "analysis and action." By this, we mean they didn't just rush ahead and institute a new policy. Instead, they first studied what was going on, trying to understand the problem in the organization (analysis). Then, they brought people together from across all levels of the organization. This was critical for action -- to make sure what they were doing was relevant and also to get buy-in. They also brought in external advisers to give credible answers to the questions that people were asking. Together, they came to understand what sort of solutions would work for the problems that arose at each stage of analysis. Each action period would drive a subsequent period of change.

How does bias show up in an organization?

There are many ways that bias or discrimination in the workplace can play out. Bias can be rooted in beliefs about certain cultures, age groups or gender. It's often unconscious. Ultimately, it means that some people don't have access to the same information or opportunities that others do. And this has a significant impact on the overall agility and speed of an organization.

In the case of the professional services firm we studied, they found evidence of a widespread belief that women simply could not, would not and should not be doing work as good as or equivalent to men. To address this, they carried out inclusiveness training and, importantly, diversified the ways that women and men worked together. A key factor was the CEO, who was actively involved every step of the way. Working both top-down and bottom-up was essential.

After a few years, they found that bias was going away, but women were still underrepresented. So, they entered another phase of analysis. This led to a new set of

recommendations in terms of structural change and rearranging the way work was done in the organization. This, in turn, led to new actions supported by leadership and bottom-up activities. They continued on and on in this way.

At one point, the CEO was less involved, and they saw a dip in results, so he became more involved again. They were able to see this because all changes aimed at driving inclusiveness were tied to metrics and consistently followed. They were integrated across the organization and into the broader strategy of the company. Today, the company is a leader in gender inclusion.

It's no surprise that organizations that rank as the best places for women to work are also places where everybody wants to work, regardless of gender. They are places that allow individuals within the organization to thrive in very different ways than organizations that don't foster inclusiveness.

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