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Beyond the quotas

Leadership, culture, and inclusion



Hiring diverse talent is just step one. Making sure they feel valued, heard, and have equal access to opportunities is the real work – and the real reward.
Photo: Adobe Stock

by Janice Otremba

Under Canada's *Employment Equity Act*, employers play a role in eliminating employment barriers and ensuring that persons in designated groups are represented in their workforce. But are we really doing enough beyond checking the boxes?

Diversity without true inclusion is like planting a seed without watering it: those leaders will not thrive in isolation. We've all heard it: diversity this, diversity that, quotas are set, and boxes are ticked. Your company gets serious about hiring diverse talent, sprinkles new hires across departments, and – bam! – mission accomplished, right? Not so fast.

Here's what really happens: when the focus stops at hiring, inclusion gets left

behind. Diverse employees are added to teams like ingredients in a recipe, but no one checks if the kitchen even has what they need to succeed. Onboarding is generic; feedback loops are absent; mentorship is missing; and instead of thriving, these employees feel like outsiders who are supposed to be grateful just to be there.

What is worse is that organizations pat themselves on the back for "doing the work" while those same diverse employees quietly consider leaving because they do not feel like they belong. Inclusion is not a side dish; it is the foundation. Without it, all those well-intentioned diversity hires are likely to walk right back out the

door, leaving behind the same homogeneous culture you started with.

Diversity does not equate to inclusion, and that is where the whole thing starts to crumble.

Beyond Leadership: Problem Not Just at the Top

Companies love to wave the "we're so diverse" flag like it is a gold medal, but when diversity is treated as a numbers game, the most critical element is left out: inclusion.

As Vernā Myers, former vice president of inclusion strategy at Netflix, said, "Diversity is being invited to the party; inclusion is being asked to dance."

Diversity is the “who”: the demographics. Inclusion is the “how”: how people are treated once they are in the door. Without inclusion, you are just collecting people from different backgrounds and hoping for magic without giving them the tools, support, or the environment to thrive. It is like planting a garden and forgetting to water it – no surprise when things wither.

This is not just about slapping diversity hires into leadership roles and calling it a day. The issue runs across all levels of an organization. From entry-level to C-suite, employees from underrepresented groups often find themselves navigating unfamiliar waters alone.

Diversity hiring initiatives often focus on optics – making sure the team photo looks balanced – but ignore the deeper need for cultural awareness and systemic change. And here is the part that really stings: the responsibility for fostering inclusion often falls squarely on the shoulders of those very hires.

Do not expect diverse employees to be the sole champions of diversity and inclusion efforts. That is not leadership; that is outsourcing the real work. As Jeff Schwartz, Brad Denny, David Mallon, et. al., state in the 2020 Deloitte Global Human Capital Trends report, true inclusion requires shared accountability across all employees, from the intern to the CEO.

Psychological safety – the feeling that one can express themselves without fear of negative consequences – is critical to creating an inclusive workplace. Yet too often, diverse employees are left to carry the burden of educating colleagues and advocating for cultural awareness on their own. That is not inclusion; that is exhaustion.

Steps to Avoid the Tokenism Trap

Hiring for diversity without systemic inclusion often leads straight to tokenism. According to one Catalyst report, employees from underrepresented groups frequently experience a sense of isolation, citing they are excluded from decision making and leadership pipelines.

Worse, they become symbolic hires, expected to “prove” that diversity initiatives work, all while battling stereotypes and undercurrents of exclusion.

It is a lose-lose situation. Not only does this hurt the individual, but it also

damages the organization’s credibility and performance.

In “Diversity wins: How inclusion matters,” McKinsey & Company has repeatedly shown that companies with genuinely inclusive environments outperform those that treat diversity as a superficial add-on.

Inclusion is everyone’s job. Building an inclusive culture is collective work. It is not the job of diverse hires to “fix” the culture – they did not break it. Shifting this responsibility starts with embedding inclusion into every process, from onboarding to performance reviews, from informal interactions to how meetings are run.

Think about this: Do employees across your organization feel empowered to speak up, share perspectives, and challenge norms? Or, are diverse hires still expected to play both employee and cultural ambassador at the same time?

Inclusion means active listening, shared power, and valuing all voices. It means every employee takes ownership of creating a culture where difference is not only accepted but leveraged. The following is how organizations can walk the talk:

- **Mandatory cultural competency training** – Equip every employee, not just diverse hires, with the skills to recognize bias, foster psychological safety, and contribute to an inclusive culture.
- **Inclusive leadership development** – Support managers and leaders at all levels to create environments where everyone has a fair shot at growth and influence.
- **Employee resource groups and ally networks** – Establish employee resource groups to provide safe spaces and invest in allyship programs to engage the broader employee base.
- **Inclusive policies and processes** – Regularly audit recruitment, promotion, and decision-making processes to root out systemic biases.
- **Check your meetings** – Make space for everyone to speak and ask quieter voices what they think. Notice who is getting interrupted and redirect. Do not let dominant voices drown out diverse perspectives.
- **Acknowledge and credit contributions** – When someone brings a great idea to the table, make sure they get

credit. Give shoutouts in meetings, newsletters, or internal channels. Recognition matters.

- **Be curious, not defensive** – If someone raises a concern or shares an experience of exclusion, believe them. Listen with empathy and curiosity, not ego.
- **Practice daily allyship** – Step up when you see bias at play, whether it is subtle or blatant. This includes calling in colleagues privately or supporting someone who is being overlooked.
- **Celebrate all identities, genuinely** – Recognize important cultural dates, events, and achievements in meaningful ways that do not feel like performative lip service. Invite employees to lead these initiatives if they choose, but do not require them to carry the full load.

Quotas Don’t Build Culture, People Do

Inclusion is not a feel-good add-on; it is a competitive advantage. According to “How Diverse Leadership Teams Boost Innovation,” a 2021 Boston Consulting Group report, organizations with diverse and inclusive teams see 19 per cent higher innovation revenues and outperform peers in financial metrics.

But, beyond metrics, inclusion is about building workplaces where people want to stay, grow, and contribute fully. Diverse talent will not stick around just to check your box; they want to thrive, lead, and shape the future.

Hiring diverse talent is just step one. Making sure they feel valued, heard, and have equal access to opportunities is the real work – and the real reward.

No one wants to be the “diversity hire.” People want to be seen as contributors, leaders, and changemakers, valued for their expertise and ideas, not just their demographics.

So, let’s stop checking boxes and start creating cultures where everyone shares the responsibility for inclusion. That is how you build lasting impact – not just a flashy report. Water the plants, people.



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