

The Next Step in Your Organization's D&I Journey – Leadership

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In our last article, we began our series on implementing diversity and inclusion (D&I) in organizations by looking the role you as an HR professional play, both in your organization and in your own inclusion journey. Let's talk now about the next step – getting leaders on board, if they aren't already.

More and more, we're seeing top executives play a significant role in diversity and inclusion. [A recent article in Harvard Business Review](#) highlights what various CEOs have learned about leading diversity and inclusion at their organizations. In addition, the [CEO Action for Diversity and Inclusion](#) initially had more than 150 CEOs who signed, committing to advance D&I in their workplaces and share best practices. Since its launch in mid-2017, several additional CEOs have signed on – for more than 270 total as of today.

But what if your senior leaders or even leaders throughout your organization aren't quite there yet? Where do you start?

Like any initiative, start with the business case. You, your leaders, and everybody in the organization should be able to see D&I as crucial to business success. While there are common themes that span industries – hiring the best talent, diverse perspectives driving innovation, and reaching untapped customer markets – putting your business case into language and specifics that resonate with your business leaders is critical. It is also important that it ties back to your company's vision, mission and/or values and includes facts/figures that bolster your D&I business case.

Once you have the business case in hand, you can begin sharing it with leaders, learning both where your leaders are in their own inclusion “journey” and understanding of D&I overall, and their interest in continuing their journey and being an advocate for D&I. This part may take some time both initially and in the long-term. While more and more leaders have bought into D&I, each person is an individual in terms of their understanding of D&I nuances, as well as their willingness to put themselves out front in leading this initiative. Be patient: this work is often accomplished with small steps rather than giant leaps – although those can happen too. Take the time to learn about your leaders' connection (or lack thereof) to D&I and what's most important to them about this work.

Based on your conversations, you'll also need to start thinking about how to provide all of your leaders with a solid D&I foundation, so that they are prepared to tackle topics like unconscious bias, inclusive leadership practices, and more. For many organizations, this takes the form of some type of training to level-set with leaders, or even all employees. If D&I is not your area of expertise, it's a good idea to look for external resources. There are many good firms who specialize in D&I and can help you get this type of initiative off the ground.

Start thinking about structure and the role your leaders are willing to play. Some companies have a diversity council – often with executives, up to and/or including the CEO as members. The council serves as a governing body to help evaluate what steps are needed to

advance the D&I in the company and set strategy. At a minimum, your senior leaders need to support and be closely tied to your council – or whatever structure makes sense for your organization.

Engaging your leaders can often be the most time-consuming part of this work, but it's critical. Companies that simply rush forward with “mandatory” or “required” diversity and inclusion, without creating advocates within leadership or their employee base, often face backlash and setbacks. Be persistent, leverage your consultative skills, and be willing to explore leaders' perspectives and even potential fears around D&I. Then, find ways to get them engaged that are meaningful to them. Your leaders' connection to D&I is part of the foundation upon which you can then build. In our next article, we'll talk about how you can then begin to engage the broader employee population.