Diversity at Work: The Practice of Inclusion

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“You are asking people to do what is not natural,” an executive once said to me. He was right, in part. He was referring to inclusion. What he was really talking about, though, was inclusion across differences. Inclusion—being included, including others, valuing and respecting, engaging, fully contributing—comes easily for those who perceive themselves as similar, like-minded, and sharing values, perspectives, and experiences. But across differences, inclusion indeed requires attention, intention, and practice.

As a corporate diversity leader, I approach my work with this dilemma in mind—that as desirable as it is to be included, and as important as inclusion is for business, it is not natural across differences. It is a powerful matter of nuance, a subtext that influences everything I do. To address the challenges posed by this dilemma, I find using a cross-disciplinary approach critical to success. The ability to draw upon my knowledge of or research in psychology, group dynamics, organizational behavior, organization development, instructional design, adult learning theory, sociology, and systems theory gives me insight, tools, and tactics for effectively implementing and leading the implicit and explicit elements of a corporate strategy.
This is why I find the arrival of this book, *Diversity at Work: The Practice of Inclusion* (hereinafter referred to as *The Practice of Inclusion*), so timely and valuable. As a diversity leader, I believe it is extremely important to approach strategy and tactics with the individual, interpersonal, and organizational perspectives in mind, which is how the chapters are organized. The chapters in this book provide a systematic framework for thinking about and practicing inclusion in the context of work. While they draw on a wide array of perspectives, disciplines, and models, the authors also offer many practical examples and tactics. I especially appreciate the book’s cross-disciplinary approach, its contributions to expand the rationale for inclusion, and the deeper dive into inclusion’s myriad complex issues. I can easily say the book models inclusion.

The editors and authors offer a great service to the diversity professional by creating and contributing to an easy-to-use, one-stop shop of in-depth information presented in a cohesive way. Seeking out these perspectives and works separately would be a timely and challenging endeavor. The chapters proactively and substantively address many of the issues I have observed and present below. They reinforce what I know, yet provide me with new insights. This is a book that I believe corporate leaders have needed for a long time.

Inclusion takes ongoing conscious effort and work, a reality completely supported by the authors in this book. It is not the easy route, but it is essential for the workplace and, ultimately, for society. Why? Diversity is a global demographic fact, and we must understand its implications for talent, the workplace, and the marketplace. Moreover, where barriers exist across differences, those same barriers can inhibit performance and success. Inclusion, on the other hand, can enhance performance through greater engagement, stronger teams, and more creativity and innovation.

With twenty-plus years in the field of diversity and a unique background, I have developed some strong opinions about what works, what does not, and what is needed to move the field of diversity and inclusion forward. Drawing on this experience and focusing on my current corporate role with responsibility for building and leading a results-oriented strategy, I want to share what I believe is needed to be effective and successful. Along the way, I indicate how I think this book, *The Practice of Inclusion*,
aligns with and supports a corporate leader’s work. I include key observations on the field of diversity and inclusion and make recommendations for how professionals and the field of diversity and inclusion (or “D&I” as we practitioners often refer to it) can evolve into the future.

What Needs to Be Either Present or Put in Place to Create Inclusion

To build and drive effective, sustainable, results-oriented, and truly transformational strategy—beyond benchmark practices—there are key considerations, tactics, and competencies that need to be either present or developed and put in place. Before I explain, here is what I mean by some of the words I just used:

• Effective: In simple terms, it works; it gets the expected results.
• Sustainable: It lasts; it becomes part of the fabric of the business and its way of doing things.
• Results-oriented: It provides outcomes, measured qualitatively and/or quantitatively.
• Transformational: It enhances the motivation, morale, and performance of people and the organization.
• Considerations: It encourages us to think in the broadest sense.
• Tactics: It means taking action.
• Competencies: It requires personal and organizational capabilities.

I make a point of defining these words because in business we often throw vernacular around as if universally understood or supported by action, when without shared and understood meaning and without behaviorally and process-based application, these words are just words. Hence, my recommendations that follow begin with establishing clear definitions.

Establish Clear Definitions with Shared Understanding, Actionable Behaviors, Processes, and Outcomes

Clear definitions and shared understanding help establish strategy, tactics, expected outcomes, metrics, and more. It is not that
every company needs the same definition; rather, it is important that everyone within a company have clarity on what they mean when they say diversity and inclusion. Throughout The Practice of Inclusion, contributors define terms and ensure clarity of purpose and content. Scholarly rigor may seem arduous at times to the business person, but in fact there is much to be learned from the specificity with which scholars operate.

**Be Clear on Context**

Let’s be clear: the first part of this book’s title is Diversity at Work—we are talking about the workplace! Our definitions of diversity and inclusion, our strategies, and our tactics must be framed in the context of work. I need to use language and definitions that have meaning in the context of what the company is about. Personally, I rarely use the term inclusion. (Yes, I’m bucking the trend of most of my colleagues.) I do, however, use the word diversity. My infrequent use of inclusion does not mean that it is not important to what I do. In fact, I consider inclusion to be mission-critical. Nevertheless, my preference is to use more business-oriented, less altruistic-sounding terms that tend to have more meaning in the business context, such as “engagement,” “reducing barriers,” “finding new sources of talent,” and “unleashing potential.” As the concept of inclusion becomes clearer and more connected to work, it will be easier to use and better understood.

**Start with the End in Mind**

To use Covey’s (2004) concept and phrase, I believe starting with the end in mind is absolutely essential. The organization’s goals and objectives are critical to accomplishing its mission. Understanding and communicating how diversity can support business objectives (as well as how exclusion can inhibit performance) will help drive a successful strategy, and it will help engage the commitment and support of the organization’s leaders, managers, and employees.

**Balance the Business Case with the Right Thing to Do**

I agree with Hayles’s assertion (in Chapter 2) that facts are not enough when communicating about diversity. A business case argument without understanding emotional issues and
responses can backfire, stall, and even halt a process. Emotional connections can also be used to leverage progress. Sometimes, when facts do not work, an emotional appeal to altruism may work. The “head, heart, and hand” model that Hayles explains is extremely valuable and influences everything I do. If I consistently consider each, I develop better solutions.

When I wrote my first report on the “Business Case” (Wheeler, 1995) someone said to me, “Michael, there was a business case for slavery.” That comment was seared into my memory. That individual was right. The business case, while critical, is limited. There are reasons for laws, checks, and balances. Human rights and dignity and emotional well-being are ultimately critical to healthy businesses and society.

Develop (for Self) and Build (for Others) Cultural Competence

This recommendation applies to leaders, including diversity leaders, employees, teams, and even the organization. I see my job in part as helping these constituencies develop cultural competence. I accomplish this with information, education, training, and dialogue.

Cultural competence is not a separate capability, but a truly integrated intelligence that is part of and woven into every other skill and competency. I consider cultural competence to encompass “multiple types of intelligence—social and emotional” (Wasserman, Chapter 4, this volume). It requires the ability to use “head, heart, and hand” (Hayles, Chapter 2), as well as having “cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills and characteristics that support appropriate and effective interaction in a variety of cultural contexts” (see the definition of intercultural competence in Bennett, Chapter 5).

It is important to call out a critical component of cultural competence that I call nuance. Just about any professional who knows how to get things done can implement a diversity strategy. But not everyone is culturally competent or understands nuance enough to do it well. Nuance is seeing what others do not see. It is about understanding the background, history, and complexity of the issues at play in the workplace and in the world. The following are a few examples of understanding nuance:
• Not assuming that because an individual is Asian he or she understands the “Asian marketplace,” which encompasses a broad array of countries, cultures, and people.
• Knowing that, although the term Hispanic represents a common language—Spanish—the nations and cultures that speak that language are actually quite diverse and that Latinos in the United States are mostly native-born. In Miami, a mariachi band might not be the right choice for a Hispanic or Latino marketing event!
• Knowing why the term sexual preference is a hot button for the LGBT community.
• Observing the subtle differences in body language and interactions across a diverse team and how microinequities and microaffirmations are constantly at play (see Offermann & Basford, Chapter 8; Wasserman, Chapter 4; Winters, Chapter 7).
• Recognizing that U.S.-based HR demographic metrics do not apply outside the United States. This one may just be good common sense, but it remains an issue globally (see Jonsen & Özbilgin, Chapter 12; Offermann & Basford, Chapter 8).
• Noticing who is not present as well as who is present in the boardroom, in interviews, and on teams across the company (see Gallegos, Chapter 6; Wasserman, Chapter 4).
• Understanding why diverse people might actually be an exclusive term (see Ferdman & Roberts, Chapter 3).
• Knowing why, as Hayles (Chapter 2) points out, “fact-based” communication about diversity and inclusion is not enough to support change.

The diversity executive must have radar tuned in to frequencies to which others are not necessarily attending. This comes as a result of experience and education, knowledge acquisition, and practice. And, of course, exposure to, interaction with, and feedback from people different from one’s self.

I would also reinforce the importance of the “inherently interdisciplinary” aspect of cultural competence highlighted by Bennett (Chapter 5), spanning “sociology, business, linguistics, intercultural communication, counseling, social work, cultural geography, anthropology, and education” (pp. 157–158). Addi-
tionally, systems theory (see, for example, Katz & Kahn, 1978; Parsons, 1977; von Bertalanffy, 1969)—which involves understanding how the components of a larger whole are interconnected and each is influenced by the others—can help one identify and make connections between seemingly disparate fields and disciplines. Specific tasks at hand can help corporate practitioners pull it all together and more effectively determine strategy. *The Practice of Inclusion* conveniently helps us make the connections between scholarly research and its workplace applications, between theory and practice, and among different fields and disciplines. This ability to make connections is itself a key component of cultural competence.

**Engage Different Perspectives**

As someone who attempts to be constantly aware of inclusion, I often ask myself, “Who is not here?” or “What other perspectives should I seek out?” In the business context it is very important to engage different roles and functions to help create inclusion. I need to talk to marketing, research and development, sales, human resources, and finance to gain better understanding and to garner buy-in. They need to learn to talk to each other. I also need to leverage employees’ and leaders’ involvement through dialogues, employee resource or affinity groups, and diversity councils. These are structurally integrated ways to ensure inclusion. *The Practice of Inclusion* models the engagement of different perspectives for the practitioner, which significantly enhances our understanding, raises our awareness, and identifies models and tactics to aid in our work to create inclusion. Having interpersonal, organizational, social, and business models of inclusion available to turn to is extremely valuable.

**Leverage Benchmark Practices**

For as long as I have been doing this work and served as a resource to corporate leaders, I have frequently been asked the question: “What works?” My answer always is, “It depends, but . . .” The “it depends” simply means there is no one-size-fits-all. The “but” means there are some core components of any strong,
comprehensive benchmark strategy. O’Mara and Richter (see O’Mara, Chapter 14) have effectively compiled, in their Global Diversity and Inclusion Benchmarks, the core items that I believe are needed for any successful strategy. Hundreds of years of combined experience and insights went into the development of these benchmarks. Every strategy should incorporate as many of the benchmarks as are pertinent, but that does not mean all strategies will look the same.

**Observations in the Field of Diversity and Inclusion**

In the early 1990s, I was asked by a reporter if diversity was a fad, the “latest flavor of the month.” My response was, “No. I don’t know what it might be called in twenty years, but diversity is a force of change that will force change.” Twenty years later, now that we see how what we call “diversity and inclusion” has become well established, I can say I was right. No brilliant insight on my part! Diversity represents a simple yet powerful global force for change.

We can measure progress, in part, by the large number of chief diversity officers (CDOs) sitting in the C-suite, the fact that most Fortune 500 companies now have some form of D&I strategy, and the creation of an entire diversity industry. Current statistics tell us that employees in corporations reflect much of the diversity of the workforce. Almost everyone in the corporate world in the United States has had some kind of exposure to a diversity initiative. At the same time, the diversity of the population has exceeded prior predictions. Progress on diversity initiatives can be attributed in large part to historical events, key figures in time, corporate diversity pioneers, advocacy groups and organizations, legislation, and customer and business demands resulting from changing demographics.

Amid progress there remain numerous challenges. Despite the fact that many corporations reflect the diversity of the population, distribution and representation across levels and functions remains disproportionate in many cases. Exclusion continues to be easier than inclusion. Systemic forms of discrimination and oppression (such as racism, sexism, heterosexism) still exist. The
progression of the field of diversity and our corporations gets stalled for a variety of reasons.

**Why We Have Not Made More Progress on Inclusion in Corporations**

Considering the context of this book, and from my point of view as a corporate diversity leader, I conclude by focusing on what I see as the key barriers to progress. By no means is this list comprehensive. Rather, it is a focused list of key challenges for which I believe there are solutions. I present these issues as high-level observations and provocative food for thought rather than as in-depth analyses.

**Complexity**

The challenges of inclusion are complex; they are systemic, personal and professional, economic and social, organizational and political, and simply the result of the increased complexity that comes from more diversity at multiple levels. This complexity can seem overwhelming and may sometimes contribute to the lack of progress. Wasserman (Chapter 4), for example, discusses some of the challenges involved when people are simply trying to make meaning in a diverse workplace and develop their capability to handle complexity. Mor Barak and Daya (Chapter 13) address the complexities of exploring inclusion both inside and outside the walls of the organization with the inclusive workplace model and the corporate inclusion strategy model. Amid complexity, employers and employees often look for simple solutions not quite suited for complex issues.

**Competing Issues**

At work, people are tasked with deliverables. If diversity and inclusion are perceived as something else to do, without a clear understanding of why it matters to those primary deliverables, diversity and inclusion will fall by the wayside. There is also sometimes competition associated with diversity—within and across groups. There is what I call the “my diversity is more important
than your diversity” phenomenon, in which individuals or groups seeking inclusion exclude others. One key to inclusion is integrating it into the fundamental work of the organization and its people; the various chapters in this book provide many examples and frameworks for doing this.

Lack of History and Credentialing for Diversity and Inclusion

The field of diversity and inclusion is not yet afforded the same credence as other business fields. No one asks what the chief marketing officer does, or the chief financial officer, or even the chief information officer or chief legal officer. But people do ask, “What does the chief diversity officer do?” When equipped with the credentials that have been afforded the CDO’s peers—formal degrees, licensing, accreditation, governing bodies, and associations—there are fewer questions asked, and clearer models and processes to follow. In comparison, a CDO may come from almost any background or discipline, and thus may travel with an incomplete roadmap. This last statement is not a value judgment; it is simply the current case that a CDO’s career credentials may be different from other well-established career paths and institutionalized functions and roles. This can often result in a challenging situation for a leader trying to create change and success in an organization. At the very least, CDOs and their staff, regardless of their backgrounds, must become familiar with the concepts and approaches addressed by the chapters in this book.

Untapped Resources

It is rare to find theories, models, and research under the headings of diversity or diversity and inclusion—whether in the scholarly or particularly in mainstream business literature—that can directly and immediately benefit leaders; this omission remains a huge missed opportunity. It is not that the information does not exist; rather, it lies hidden in various disciplines, such as psychology, sociology, communication, and others. One of the challenges, then, is access. Diversity at work and the practice of
Inclusion involve a cross- and inter-disciplinary proposition that leverages theory, research, models, and practices with substantive foundations and actionable tactics and behaviors. This is one of the reasons why this book is so important. It brings under one cover a wealth of research and frameworks written in language accessible to leaders and practitioners. And it opens a window into the field of industrial-organizational psychology, where a great deal of relevant knowledge, ideas, and insight are housed.

Lack of Inclusion

Most everyone wants to be included; no one really wants to be excluded. Yet not everyone wants to include. If we want to be included, we need to be inclusive. In the United States, where many individuals and groups traditionally have been underrepresented in and even excluded from the workplace, and where race has played such a major role in its historical challenges, it is difficult sometimes not to see the world, quite literally, in Black and White. The White majority and disproportionate distribution of diversity in corporations make it difficult for both Whites and people of color to see diversity in any other way. With the need to address key historical issues, it is sometimes difficult to see diversity outside the context of us versus them, or majority versus minority. With an emerging “majority minority,” we sometimes see pockets of traditional minorities engaging in exclusion. Exclusion and inclusion play out in a variety of ways.

Equipping people with the concepts and the fundamental tools to be inclusive will go a long way toward improving things across the board now and into the future. For example, see Gallegos’s recommendations for developing the relational capacities of inclusive leaders (Chapter 6), Booyesn’s description of ways to develop leaders inclusively (Chapter 10), and Henderson’s account of how Weyerhaeuser developed its inclusive leadership program (Chapter 15). These accounts, together with others in this volume, point to the power of inclusion and its practice as a way to go beyond traditional and often divisive distinctions, while continuing to address historical and persisting challenges.
Programmatic and Simplistic Approaches Rather Than Strategic and Systemic Ones

In the early years of the diversity and inclusion effort, most corporations were training people in D&I. There were mixed results: sometimes it backfired, other times it worked. Training, of course, has a role. But there is good training and bad training. There are matters that training cannot address. In particular, trying to create and sustain inclusion with training alone will not work. Strategic and systemic change requires multiple tactics and a deeper understanding of what it takes to drive change. For excellent and thorough examples, see how Church, Rotolo, Shull, and Tuller (Chapter 9) at PepsiCo are practicing inclusive organization development and changing the way they approach four key practices, as well as Nishii and Rich’s (Chapter 11) suggestions for creating inclusive climates and enhancing inclusion.

Lack of Clarity on “It”

Those who have been in this field for any time at all have likely heard, or even said, “She (or he) gets it,” or “He (or she) just doesn’t get it” with regard to D&I. I have asked people what they mean by “it,” and their response has often been a pause or a stammer. We need to be able to answer that question definitively, particularly in our organizations. Although The Practice of Inclusion does not provide a definitive “it,” the book absolutely provides details of what “it” is for inclusion in many of its forms. In particular, see Ferdman’s (Chapter 1) account of the concept and its variations and Winters’s (Chapter 7) discussion of the inclusion equation.

Recommendations for Moving Forward

Corporate diversity leaders must innovate and enhance their work to be effective and to create sustainable, results-oriented strategies and tactics. We must always be innovating if we are to create inclusive organizations that work for all employees. I conclude with ten recommendations for moving forward.

First, I reiterate: define your terms, be clear on the context you are addressing, and start with the end in mind.
Second, proactively seek specific solutions for barriers discussed in the prior section. For example, if we use clear definitions, as recommended, we will not have to worry about lack of clarity or understanding of “it.” We can work with competing issues by helping to understand that inclusion is a way of doing things, not yet another thing to do. We can help manage complexity by focusing on those things we can manage. We want to instill the idea that “I may not be able to change the world, but I can influence change in my environment.”

Third, distill complexity into simplicity. But do not be simplistic. I cannot overwhelm already busy leaders and employees with all the details, historical issues, and dynamics at play in the world. Employees and leaders do not necessarily need all the details. However, I myself must thoroughly understand these issues and their implications for the systems I am trying to influence. I look at my role as akin to that of information technology. I do not have to be a programmer to know how to use my computer effectively. The computer is my tool; someone else takes care of the details behind it. In a sense, I do something similar—I create the tools and leverage my expertise so that people and the organization have what they need to be successful with regard to diversity and inclusion.

Fourth, become true corporate partners. Speak the language of business, know the business, and know how diversity can enhance or inhibit goal achievement for your business.

Fifth, recognize that diversity and inclusion matter to all we do. It is not an HR initiative or a program. It does not and cannot stand alone—it permeates everything.

Sixth, manage dissonance. If we are asking people to do what is not natural to them, then we need to be sensitive to the discomfort that may cause. We should not judge, but rather accept where people and things are and work from there. Härtel, Appo, and Hart (Chapter 19) capture some of the dynamic of dissonance with great insights and applications, particularly in their discussion of societal fault lines.

Seventh, constantly be aware of readiness. There is almost always a disconnect between where the diversity leader wants the company or its individuals and teams to be versus where they actually are. But we must start with where people and
companies are and help them get to where they need to be. Understanding the stages and processes that individuals and organizations must go through can help the diversity leader be successful. In this regard, Bennett’s (Chapter 5) discussion of the stages of how people experience difference is particularly helpful. Note that dissonance and readiness are different, although they are closely related. Dissonance involves the psychological, sociological, political, and economical tensions that are constantly at play. Readiness is more about willingness and ability to accept change.

Eight, be a global citizen. Bennett (Chapter 5) says it perfectly: “Being ‘global souls’—seeing ourselves as members of a world community, knowing that we share the future with others—requires powerful intercultural competence. . . . Such competence embraces globalization and seeks to reconcile the competing commitments to self and others. . . . It is grounded in the certainty that we cannot neglect either side of the equation, domestic or international” (p. 155). The United States and, increasingly, other countries around the world are truly microcosms of the rest of the world; we are international and local and the world is global and local. We must see ourselves and others as an integral part of our global village.

Ninth, do not replicate dysfunction. We all have this potential if we are not careful and self-aware of our own conscious or unconscious biases. I have seen individuals as well as employee resource groups and other groups sometimes replicate the very culture of the organizations in which they are trying to overcome barriers. I have seen people and groups who want to be included be exclusive. I have seen groups frustrated with being excluded from a dominant culture when they in turn are not aware of their own exclusionary practices. The practice of inclusion must be implemented for oneself if it is to be expected of others.

Tenth, include! Leverage differences, include multiple perspectives, and engage many others. I can develop expertise and I can gain knowledge, but I can never know it all. We all need others to complement our skills and competencies, to provide important insights, and to inspire us to be more creative and innovative to accomplish the important work at hand.
References


