

## **Revisiting Diversity and Inclusion: *structure and intent***

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Purpose	2
Genesis	2
Awakening	2
Assessments	3
Alternatives	4
Staffing	5
Environment	7
Environment redux	8
D&I: the self-fulfilling endeavor	8
Conclusion/Summary	9

## Purpose

This paper seeks to take a revised and critical look at the way **Diversity and Inclusion** (D&I) efforts are being structured among a large number of observed firms, with special attention being paid to the recruiting of staff within these efforts. This paper does not seek to posit scholarly research nor to authoritatively assert any patterns or practices beyond the generalized observations and discussions had with the author . . . all while patterns can certainly be discerned nonetheless and subsequent research efforts within the realm of scholarship would likely be of utmost value. Rather, this paper simply seeks to casually look in a cursory manner at the D&I landscape as an end-user might, to offer a reflection in a way a person interested in pursuing a career in the field due to the aspirational goals posited in D&I rhetoric might find such efforts in 2021. Again, observations and anecdotes are my own.

## Genesis

Being a reasonably well-educated and well-skilled individual whose career trajectory has been admittedly eclectic (one could indeed say, *diverse*), as the majority of my recent history has been spent working as a contractor with firms and organizations ranging from non-profits and government to financial services and media. Such eclecticism has allowed me to observe and indeed participate as a valued member of staff, many times offering a valued — often needed — perspective of an outsider. Between what is reflected on my resume and the fact that I am a multi-ethnic individual, one can accurately say I know the dictionary as well as visceral definition of diversity as well as its elusive conceptual application(s) intimately. Of note and perhaps quite helpful for clarification's sake in this inquiry is the attribute that I am also often perceived as being a member of dominant culture. It is from this perspective that I offer my observations and following critiques.

The impetus for this review started as I began to consider ways to synthesize my interests, aforementioned eclectic resume, and indeed my very self into a directed path toward career change goals. One of the career paths I have begun to consider is a career change which offers a greater immersion into experiences with meaningful and lasting social contribution; a career change into the field of “diversity and inclusion” is one of those realms I have grown curious about. The examples I am going to use have been anonymized and are general to what I am observing.

In beginning preliminary research into the field, I was immediately taken aback with the degree to which this field seems to be not at all what I envisioned and more worrisome as a person “of color” myself; not at all what I feel it should be. Ultimately I began asking myself; “who are *designing* these projects, for what *actual* purpose, to what end, and to whose ultimate benefit”?

Let me elaborate.

## Awakening

My first step was to investigate recruiting efforts into “D&I” and what I came across were not at all efforts in becoming more deeply informed in exploratory and immersive ways with, say, the assignment of “socio-cultural translators” within their ranks (a strategy that might eventually, organically lead to the bridging of cultures within an organization). Rather, more

often than not, what I found seemed like cynical attempts to tick boxes politique or otherwise engage in attempts at semiotic subterfuge. Most D&I staff recruiting verbiage would often grow verbose with common denominators frequently referring to desirable candidates seemingly and simplistically possessing quantifiable, analytically driven skillsets. For example:

“Establish diversity and inclusion excellence as core values throughout all aspects of our employee base and business practices. Collaborate with senior leaders to integrate diversity, equity and inclusion practices into employment, workplace and business culture and programs.” . . .

“You will independently develop comms plans and strategies for several D&I related projects. This includes driving the development of the plan and drafting any supporting messaging.”

“ . . . provide measurement, goals, impacts and updates on the success of the program and partners.”

“Develop analytical frameworks & service delivery methodologies to support DEI assessments.”

What symbolically ties these and myriad other examples together is the overarching notion that D&I is a type of switch that can be easily engaged and turned on!

To be fair and on occasion, entities would bullet-point out and address the need for qualitative research and utilizing focus groups (all of which I agree with and address in greater detail later), but what always seems to prevail in the end is the “quantitative”; the methodologies and numbers which ultimately seek to buoy the D&I project and apparently to justify interest in the D&I project in the first place.

## Assessments

In the snapshot of examples above, where emphasis on “messaging,” “analytics,” “measurements and methodology” and the like seem to be of primary concern, it is hard not to ponder the notion that diversity and inclusion (as a historically structured and limiting social force which has bred exclusion) is not at all a circumstance to be contemplated and perpetually remedied but simply a problem to be solved; a staffing and institution-wide public relations inconvenience requiring a relatively short-term investment of resources (human and financial) to eventually be dispatched back into the profit generating pool when social nirvana is achieved.

In considering such a time of arrival, I would like to know why the *inverse* has never sought to be measured; why is the effort at *quantification* one way? Where/what are the metrics that will tell us when a person, demographic, or firm/organization is **not** being exclusive; ergo not racist, sexist, homophobic?

Herein, I often caution inquisitors that it took 400+ years to animate our society into what it is and it will likely take a hefty percentage of that time to reorient ourselves toward a mythical

“Star Trek/Star Wars culture” . . . which, in hindsight, both have shown to suspect as idyllic in that both are societies still dominated by a planetary or apparently galactic minority.

D&I efforts are not easily quantifiable and are often *far* better understood through qualitative research (how about simply asking historically underrepresented groups when they feel included, en masse; without being the target of micro-aggressions, stigma or as exceptions). One can count and enumerate black/brown/female/ability-challenged heads, but those numbers will not inherently reflect *feelings* of equity or inclusion. Here, let me offer some insight from the inside . . . quantitative measurements may be quite inconsistent in accurately compiling, even born from potential qualitative feedback, as folks quite often like their jobs and will not risk losing them if not absolutely and transparently assured of the prevention of reprisal.

Women, for example, may not report (or indeed due to various socio-judicial and/or hierarchical constraints feel like they *can* report) events that could provide incident data by way of formal notice the creepy feeling a co-worker leaves them with, but the same women may frequently discuss the same work-creasing incident(s) amongst themselves — internally or externally. Again, folks “of color” relate similar experiential scenarios.

But if so inclined, contrarians wedded to strict organizational-policy accountancy (numbers over emotions) can easily dismiss such nebulous *feelings* as unverifiable and therefore unusable. They tend to dismiss the “qualitative” as anecdotes which provide little if any insight or offer any clarity by themselves outside a systematized quantitative D&I effort. Throughout US history, authority figures have long rationalized the “unverifiable” as subsequently illegitimate. We only need to look at the proliferation of mobile phone cameras as documentation of the age-old assertions vis-a-vis questionable policing tactics and exploits as but one immediate and contemporaneous example.

But should the contrarian really be a valid or logical perspective under *any* circumstance?

If the goals of such institutional social projects like D&I are to secure permanent redress of historic exclusion and to actually ensure lasting equity within the framework of inclusion, then *any* effort that reduces historically underrepresented demographic groups to datapoint entries in a spreadsheet pivot table (which simplistically seeks to sort events, incidents and such) and in the end is nothing short of dismissive — a type of lab experiment. Such reducible data analysis again goes a long way in suggesting the dubious, or at the very least questionable, nature of the purported D&I effort from its inception.

## **Alternatives**

Now having bordered on the iconoclastic, my observations would be worthless without offering any recommendations. If D&I efforts are intended to afford inclusion and equity *within* the workplace, it stands to reason that clear and enforceable understandings of socio-cultural behavioral expectations within the workplace should be the effective goal for all staff including C-suite members. These goals should also come with the understanding that the only effective environment the organization has actual enforceable dominion over

is the within the workplace (see **Environment** below). A reflective goal of workplace inclusivity through behavior is also ultimately a strong indicator of a firm's D&I commitment by way of culture . . . what is the culture one seeks? Here let us remember the word "Include" is a verb, one necessitating action.

It seems to me that any effort in D&I needs to begin with D&I at inception. When a board or managing strata decides that a D&I regimen is found to be of value, it is of little value to the effort if it becomes seen as a dictum from upon high; isolated, structured and delineated by members of dominant culture. For such an effort to have legitimacy to its primary intended audience (presumably members of historically underrepresented demographics), transparency toward and participation of desired target demographics — inclusive of corresponding authority — must be of paramount concern.

Having never participated in the formation of a D&I effort to present, perhaps such steps are usually in place:

- a D&I decision is made by an organization,
- a diversity and inclusion board is created,
- a C-suite Diversity Officer is hired,
- the formation of an effort commences

But this is where the effort seems to go awry and business objectives seem to eclipse meaningful diversity and inclusion efforts as at least I imagine them. This is the point in which I began this meditation; in the search for D&I staff.

As previously suggested, the search for D&I staff seems a search for skilled data analysts as much as anything else; as an exploration for those who might be able make "legitimate" D&I outreach through events and other measurable variables which offer satisfactory metrics as opposed to efforts which seek to accumulate, articulate, understand and *then* quantify lived experiences and abilities from those historically denied. It is from these collected and collective narratives where "aggregatable" data may arise, data which *then* lends itself to relevant and enforceable policy goals. It appears to me that the hiring process seems backwards.

At this juncture, let me assert my opinion that the notion of D&I efforts and staffing in service of that endeavor is (or certainly should be) considered a sociological process as opposed to a business venture. As such, lived experiences, diversity of resume, and potential for "engaging" contribution to any D&I undertaking gleaned through the interview process should be given ample attention and just respect, full stop. In fact I would argue noted elements should be given superseding attention to the outwardly highly credentialed but siloed analyst. But what then should a D&I staff look like?

## **Staffing**

Staffing in general should look like the country. D&I staffing should ensure that societal representation and then take it steps further. Collectively, a firm's staff (more than any other single element) will quickly and indelibly reflect the outward culture that a firm hopes to

present. Specifically, the D&I staff might be considered a type of touchstone for the firm, its soul if you will.

The soul is a fuzzy concept born of qualitative elements we might say, unlike the more tangible heart which might be more readily quantified with beats per minute and such. Here again lies the rub where seemingly too many firms seek analytics, metrics, measurements (the heart) to affirm the D&I effort. It is not that simple, or at least should not be looked at as such. Where is the *soul*?

This is not to suggest that D&I staff is amorphous, hired to simply wait until something happens and then to wave flags if/when it does. There are myriad tasks and projects that can begin to build the purported diverse and inclusive culture presumably sought. Remember, my imagining of D&I is not a short-term fix, rather a future-oriented, open-ended, progressive socio-cultural commitment.

Working with HR, D&I tasks such as attending and hosting jobs fairs; targeting relevant outreach to preparatory high schools or universities, career centers and state career centers all afford a public relations benefit by way of notification that XYZ, Inc is in the business of affording unbiased opportunity now and into the future. To a prospective, future labor pool; XYZ, Inc is a culturally desired place to be.

. . . And yes, there are still the valued times which D&I staff will be the internal group that highlights and plans events, creates social space and activities for recognitions like Juneteenth, Suffrage Day, or Pride week and those undertakings should neither be dismissed nor diminished. They should be applauded. But as some entities seem to think, measuring participation and gauging response is an elemental part of D&I and I am suggesting those predictable tasks should not be considered the “tip of the spear.” These, however, are but the tangible manifestations of what should be a greater project. As such, these manifestations essentially view D&I staff or efforts thereof as public relations or eventful window-dressing for the firm. The absolute project of *any* D&I structure should be in service of lasting diversity and inclusion. The ultimate purpose of the D&I staff should be to reflect the environment of the organization which, in turn, reflects its culture, which invariably, then, determines the success of any D&I effort: it reflects society at large.

In this paper, I have put forth a fairly stern critique of the data analyst within D&I staffing candidacy. In concluding this section (and especially in the context of goals set forth within the following Environment section) it is time to personify my ideal D&I staff candidate.

My ideal D&I candidate certainly could and perhaps even should have basic skills in data and analysis, but such a person would probably be fine if they only knew how to work spreadsheets: basic entry and pivot tables perhaps. Advanced or longitudinal analysis could be the dominion of the CDO or his/her appointed staff whom they could likely train, on the job — in fact what a great way to enhance skills within a D&I context! What a CDO likely cannot not train in, however, would be essential “people skills” that are required to foster an inclusive environment in the first place. Skills of empathy and bridge-building, the ability to be a forward thinking and experiential story-teller. In short, give me a curious and hungry social

scientist, a humanities graduate; a sociologist, psychology, communications or English major . . . perhaps even a well-educated, actor with good office automation skills.

In the end, collectively and in concert with other team members including HR, this formidable D&I staff would act as a barometer for the organization using their concentrated efforts to place checks on the organization's overall effort to inhale their cultural environment for all. Perhaps much like law firms utilize a system of "conflict checks" to ensure a firm's ability to retain a client and avoid conflicts of interest, so too could D&I staff convene in a similar review of staffing decisions, prevailing office culture, and general commercial output (**noted below in D&I: the self-fulfilling endeavor**).

## Environment

Above I introduced elements of what D&I staff might have as charge by way of explicit tasking. Here I would like to suggest what their less tangible but *far more important* presence might contribute and when aggregated, could easily become the valued, broad-scoped quantitative data seemingly so widely coveted. As such, indeed communications, messaging, analytics, measurements and methodology will have found their place; just not in the traditional manner or order that most seem to want them reported.

D&I efforts which attempt to predict, understand, modify or change staff attitudes are at best ineffective and counter-productive, and at worst of questionable social validity. Put more succinctly; if social outreach attempts like diversity or sensitivity trainings alone were as effective as they are mandated we as a society should have some of the most unbiased teachers, police and others within our national workforce . . . we all know this not to be accurate. Beyond any potential legal liability exposure for a firm, external behaviors and lifestyles should not be the point of D&I efforts as the personal ideological predilections or idiosyncrasies of individual staff is better left in the realm of a personal social worker or psychologist if issues are found to be acutely problematic and potentially adverse to the workplace.

In its most immediate and in conjunction with institutional HR policies can be where D&I efforts seek not to change behavior, rather to control it. D&I staff can offer more than mandated events or seminars, they should become the fulcrum which becomes another effective centerpiece in a firm's ultimate effort at group cohesion: *respect*. Perhaps like "soul" the ideal of respect can be vague to be sure, but such vagaries might be better understood by again considering the inverse: *disrespect*.

Events or demonstrated incident accounts of disrespect are certainly easier to identify and understand than the "gut feeling" example mentioned previously. As such and in returning to the concept of quantification and measurement of nebulous ideals, demonstrable anti-policy, anti-social incidents obviously offer more "ready-to-analyze" insight into the organization's state of affairs but as noted previously, more is needed to complete the picture. Periodic D&I led internal assessments and informal off campus "bull sessions" amongst the "minority," female, and other affinity staff will quite possibly fill in missing pieces of the mosaic. This type of "soft data" might best allow for anonymized reporting or feedback and discovery of extant accumulated issues that need attention (and that are

possibly detrimental to firm's desired environmental cohesion). This qualitative data then begins to paint an image using its own brush.

Historically underrepresented groups are not naive nor are they seeking to work in Shangri-La . . . they simply seek and demand respect in their own country, and in the 21st century that demand is most required in employment and within the workplace. It is a request that should not be viewed as difficult or unreasonable. So within the confines of the workplace, if the organization can focus its D&I goals to prioritize, by way of policy and enforcement, simple acts of respect for all its staff then that in itself is an admirable and decisive goal. Thereafter and with the internalized accumulated sensibilities born of workplace exposures, might the staff of XYZ, Inc carry to the outside world the same perspectives for universal respect.

(A tangential element of respect might also be postulated by having the D&I effort work intimately with HR in attempts to eradicate hiring bias based on familiarity or comfort levels with a candidate. If D&I is bound to the hiring process in all cases, incidents of favoritism or bias will be far more difficult to achieve.)

## **Environment redux**

The reason I so heavily emphasize environment and place the experiential over the analytical perspective within the D&I milieu is because such an orientation better foresees a perspective we quantitatively know: when the US, as “majority-minority” country, will be in the best position to speak with authority to a world that is what, roughly 82% non-European. To ignore this reality is to imperil not just US enterprise, but the US in general upon the world stage itself.

Such diversity (the nation of global migrants) is the quantitative “ace up the sleeve” the US can play in ways European powers never could, as hegemonic-seeking colonizers, now well into a post-colonial era. But we will only be able to play that card if we are smart, imbued with unbiased vision, and are brave enough to play it.

## **D&I: the self-fulfilling endeavor**

This paper has revolved around internal D&I efforts, but those efforts are myopic if kept behind insular organizational walls. Most organizations or firms seek to engage in some sort of commercial or advisory activity and many times that commerce is coupled with propagandistic overtones, by commission or omission — it certainly is within my chosen field of media.

Above I spoke of the role D&I will likely play, *will need to play*, if a future US seeks to maintain a global competitive advantage against non-Eurocentric powers within the post-colonial era. We can already see this manifest itself in the film and gaming industries where *action* has often eliminated broad and intricate character development within its narrative storytelling, and where dialogue has been simplified — all for presentation to a global audience. So too do we see the multicultural foreshadowing within the advertising industry in the increased use of interracial couples, same-sex couples, Hispanics and Asians and previously little seen others as lead pitch-people. The narrative that D&I practitioners and their firms

should be writing is that beyond the workplace, the organization's work-product needs to be immersed in a D&I ethos.

## **Conclusion/Summary**

Currently, it seems like what firms are actually seeking in D&I is more akin to tolerance and measurable data surrounding head-counts, immersive events, staff longevity, and a general lack of "incidents" or otherwise overt public criticism.

D&I efforts can likely ultimately be measured and analyzed even if at first imperfect but notably require equal parts — or more — of experiential and gut instinct from D&I staff. This is because most importantly genuine progress toward inclusion and equity can be felt, equal and opposite to the pervasive, regressive social disquiet many of us can *feel* within the current so-called culture wars and attempts to retard D&I progress.

Historically underrepresented demographics frequently articulate an innate 6th-sense about dubious situations. These groups will let us know when things are getting better and that emotional data is not easy to measure or is readily transferred to quantitative measurements; less-so to date certain that makes possible a retreat from an earnest resource commitment to progress.

As the US culture continues to mature and absorb the tsunami of prevailing cultural change, D&I efforts should become increasingly easier to implement as biases — both explicit and implicit — should become moderated over time. But as noted in the piece, it took 400+ years of US exclusion to necessitate D&I efforts in the first place so change will likely be generations in the unfolding or should I say, remaking.

The gold at the end of the transitional rainbow, however, could in fact to usher in an era of decreased need for D&I efforts . . . because of unconscious **IN**clusion . . .

. . . Again, ultimately those groups will joyfully articulate when that day has arrived as they have been telling us for generations of exclusion. Social notification in ways data analysis will not nor cannot predict.

***Now, is D&I indeed the direction in which I turn my vocational focus? I guess only time will tell.***