

## Inclusive leadership can inspire minority employees to achieve

By KESHA CARTER

**M**any organizations boldly advertise in their marketing material, on their websites and through recruiting methods how their total workforce is very diverse. This is really a misnomer that doesn't consider that most of the diversity exists among entry level employees or is highly concentrated within one division within the organization. An organization can be thought of as having true diversity when it includes hiring and promoting a diverse workforce at all levels of leadership including the board of directors. Recruiting and retaining employees with various backgrounds, perspectives and identities is just a starting point.

Organizations with higher gender diversity at the executive leadership level financially outperform others in their industry by 15 percent and those with higher racial and ethnic diversity do so by 35 percent (McKinsey & Company, 2015).

Business sustainability and growth are paramount for any organization. It is amazing to see how much time organizations put into building a strategic plan that maps out financial gains and human capital growth but does not identify how to increase and retain diversity at all of levels. The correlation between diversity and business growth has been researched, proven and reported for several years. Yet diversity in gender, race, age, different abilities and perspectives are often lacking at the leadership level. Many organizations don't even realize what is lacking.

When a leadership team is homogenous, employees in the organization who feel they are different do not view the idea of working toward being a member of that team as an achievable goal. The risk of losing talent is imminent if employees feel there is no opportunity for growth within an organization. Diversity at the leadership level becomes a nonverbal communication that the path to leadership is possible. In a survey by the Corporate Executive Board research firm of more than five hundred leaders, 74 percent reported that they most often hired someone who had a personality similar to theirs. That "gut feeling" or instinct many of us rely on when making decisions could be a factor in maintaining the status quo and limiting innovation. The unique contributions and alternative perspectives offered in a more diverse environment uncovers risks that may not have been considered.

Obtaining organizational objectives could be achieved more efficiently when more diversity is included in the decision-making process. The experiences, backgrounds and identities of others dictates how the information is filtered and lends a hand in the decision-making process of that individual. When these perspectives are included at the leadership level, the possibility of appropriate conflict arises. This conflict can be akin to the Tenth Man doctrine adopted following the Yom Kippur War. The minority dissent of even one decision maker gives way to the exploration of alternative ideas and solutions.

There are steps organizations can take in order to build a truly diverse environment. A first step would be to measure how diverse they really are at all levels. By de-

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veloping a diversity dashboard which looks at diversity metrics reported by employees in different positions and divisions within the organization, an accurate picture of where the gaps are is revealed. Setting clear obtainable metrics within the organization helps to continue building the diversity. The metrics should not be confused with offering opportunities to underqualified "tokens." Instead, intentional efforts should be developed to address recruitment, retention and promotion efforts.

Creating a pipeline of talent through recruiting efforts helps to build the diversity at all levels. When recruiters do what they have always done, they will continue to get the types of candidates they have always gotten. Changing the way recruiting is conducted aides in expanding the pools of potential candidates. By conducting training on interviewing practices and partner-

ing with existing programs that aim to help organizations hire more diverse workers and leaders, organizations can implement successful initiatives. Standardized interviewing practices minimizes the opportunities for unconscious biases to play a role in the hiring decisions.

Within the organization, existing leaders can serve as mentors to employees. Creating a mentoring program in which underrepresented employees are given equitable opportunities ensures integrity in the program. Much like leaders who hire for similar personalities, there is a tendency for executives to favor existing employees who are like them in outward appearance and personality. This is known as an in-group bias or affinity bias. Due to the white male leadership dominance of many organizations, those who identify differently often have a harder time forming these vital relationships.

A formula dictating the correct mix of genders, ethnicities, races, religions, abilities, sexual orientations, etc. does not exist. Each organization is unique in every industry, and the employee base, leadership and board of directors should reflect the values, as well as the customers and communities served. If an employee does not feel valued or have a sense of belonging in an organization, they will not stay. Maybe one day the need for special monikers such as "African American CEO," "female CFO" or "gay COO" will no longer be needed because they won't be so rare as to warrant the special attention.

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