

Take care that DEI efforts do not tokenize employees

By Kesha Carter | December 29, 2021



In recent years many organizations have been very intentional about the DEI work they have committed to. While at the same time, some organizations have mistaken intentional DEI work for marginalization, differentiation, and tokenism. This happens when organizations jump on the bandwagon of DEI with no true strategic plan, deliverables, or expected outcomes. Without a plan, organizations tend to turn to the people of color and other marginalized groups to task them with leading DEI efforts. This treatment makes employees question whether they are merely viewed as a tchotchke to be put on display or tokenized by the organization.

The result is often perpetuation of the harm and indignities many organizations have pledged to disavow. The same employees who have been marginalized, tokenized, and devalued are supposed to lead efforts in DEI which are usually outside of their skill set, all because they belong to a certain identity group. Organizations may have good intentions to increase diversity and create an equitable culture that values inclusion. However, in the absence of a clear plan, these intentions create an approach that simply checks off a laundry list of feel-good, to-do items, without addressing the roots of marginalization issues.

No one employer can address all the systemic challenges and barriers individuals who have been marginalized continue to face, but they can stop the perpetuation. Organizations must look deeper than just demographic representation into the root causes of marginalization, from discrimination to cultural bias. To start, employers can investigate the turnover of people of color and other traditionally marginalized groups within their organization. Take note of how often an employee has separated from the organization voluntarily or involuntarily due to being called a “bad fit.” In reality, this is code speak for that individual not conforming or assimilating.

Loudly broadcasting commitments to diversity then managing for assimilation does not breed a culture of inclusion, it breeds a culture of tokenism, frustration, and continued hurt. Organizations should step back and reevaluate why they’re committed to this work, look at the aspects of DEI they have the resources to change internally, and most importantly, utilize professionals to lead this work instead of putting more weight on those who are carrying enough already.

People of color and other traditionally marginalized groups are exhausted. They face pressures in society from all different spaces as well as the pressures they’re feeling within the workplace. These are the people who did not create the issues they’re facing, so they cannot and should not be expected to resolve them alone. Untrained employees are unprepared to shoulder the emotional weight of the work.

Leaders and colleagues can work to break the differentiation cycle. When someone from a traditionally marginalized group is asked to be involved in a project or deliverable, question whether the requested involvement is based on that person’s identity or on their skill. At times, there is an intersection of the marginalized identity and skill that is needed. Be clear with the participant and everyone involved and consider compensating the participant in some way for their contribution. Independent and collective education are necessary to make change.

Organizations can utilize outside consultants for education on workplace trauma and DEI. Building a complete strategy with measurable goals will be much more impactful for an organization than the performative measures of adding additional work to existing employees who are already exhausted. If a dedicated DEI position exists within an organization, examine what real decision-making power and influence that position holds. The real work to shift cultures and live into the DEI statements is an ongoing journey. Along the way, there will be pit stops and the course may change a little. Above everything else, stay committed to the journey and intentional efforts and avoid performative tactics that manifest as window dressing or checking the box.