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COMMENTARIES

Voluntary Standards: On What Exactly?

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Where should we as diversity and inclusion (D & I) professionals place our focus with voluntary standards? This essential question must first be answered before an agenda can be formulated and implemented. From our experience working in multiple organizations, spanning 50+ years, representing a mix of both industrial organizational psychology backgrounds and D & I consulting experiences, we agree with Hays-Thomas and Bendick (2013) that there is indeed a strong need for standards in the area of D & I. However, what is included in the standards is as important as how the standards are created. Before we dive into what should be included, we would like to reset the tone of the conversation to be more inviting to our D & I partners.

Tone Matters

Consultants, practitioners, academics, advocates, and other professionals in the D & I space, including industrial organizational psychologists, have worked together and made significant strides towards improving the climate of the modern workplace. The field has transitioned from a focus on valuing differences to a focus on strategic global growth (Lahiri, 2008). Similar to the desire of human resource professionals to ''gain a seat at the table,'' both industrial organizational psychologists and D & I professionals have made advances in gaining acceptance of this work as critical to a well-functioning organization. Many executives of large organizations would now say that effective D & I efforts lead to a competitive business advantage (PwC, 2013). This perspective was not as prevalent 20 years ago. We believe that continued partnerships and alliances between psychologists and D & I professionals will advance this work even further. In order to do this effectively, we need to highlight common ground and the overlap that we believe already exists.

The D & I consulting environment has grown significantly, and there is opportunity for industrial organizational psychologists to gain greater acceptance and be seen as valued partners within the D & I community. The manner in which we promote and articulate voluntary standards will make as much of a difference as to how they are created. Setting up a ''debate'' between psychologists and D & I professionals could create an unfortunate and unnecessary divide. Healthy conversation is always encouraged, but we need to pay respect to the hard work that has already been done in getting us to our current state. Promoting D & I voluntary standards organically from within the community will be more effective in gaining momentum than setting up a potentially divisive conversation.

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With the goal of creating voluntary standards that are accepted and promoted by the D & I community, a focus needs to be placed on the WHAT as much as the HOW. Hays-Thomas and Bendick (2013) make very compelling arguments on how these standards should be created; we will focus the remainder of our response on the WHAT. What should we aim to include in these voluntary standards? We propose these areas of focus: (a) scope, (b) practices and processes, and (c) metrics.

Scope

There is currently a lack of clarity regarding what D & I professionals do (Lahiri, 2008). Similar to other areas of research and practice, the first step towards voluntary standards should be the development of a common understanding of the scope of the work. The term ''diversity'' was not widely used until the mid-1980s. In a review of the management literature, Edelman, Fuller, and Mara-Drita (2001) show the rise of diversity as a common term started in 1987 and peaked in the early 1990s. The reality is that diversity has always existed. The world is inherently diverse. An increase in globalization of work and demographic shifts in developed markets is placing a greater emphasis on diversity in the minds of business and organization leaders today (PwC, 2013), but diversity has always existed. D & I *is* a choice. We would like to shift the scope and attention of the work to promoting more inclusive people practices and processes that leverage sound metrics for sustained organization success.

Practices and Processes

Which organizational practices and processes are in scope? We believe that the following areas are most relevant to the work of D & I professionals, and we should focus on these areas in developing standards.

Talent acquisition. All activities an organization engages in to promote employee attraction, recruitment, assessment and selection, and onboarding of talent to the organization. Voluntary standards should promote an overall strategy to ensure that these processes are inclusive and target a broad representative base of talent. Over time, this work needs to evolve and help address broader concerns around overall capability that exists in the available population. Many of our current diversity metrics are based on the concept of availability. As D & I professionals, standards should place an emphasis on growing the capability among underrepresented groups to improve the available pool of qualified talent. We realize that in difficult economic times, it can be more challenging to get resources for these types of programs. Standards that promote a percentage back of revenue may be one way to advance this work.

Talent management. All activities an organization completes to manage talent internal to the organization, including, but not limited to performance management, succession planning, career pathing, high potential programs, learning and development, coaching, and mentoring. From our experience, there is an inviting opportunity to make a difference with internal talent decisions. A great deal of effort and ongoing success has already been achieved in the area of talent acquisition. However, a challenge still remains in many organizations with making more objective internal talent choices. For example, there are typically less objective protocol and guidelines in place to make promotion decisions, placement of talent into strategic roles and functions, and other internal talent moves in comparison to protocol for external hiring and placement. This variation can create barriers for talent progression. Organization data often show a change in the demographic make up of a workforce from entry level to senior ranks, such that senior ranks are less diverse than entry level. A ''bottle neck'' can occur that derails diverse talent from reaching its full potential. Often organizations face nuanced cultural issues that can prevent more objective talent choices. For example, visibility of success and failure

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increases at higher levels in an organization. Leaders may hesitate to place diverse talent in higher level roles that are strategic and business critical due to fear of failure. Sponsoring talent that ultimately fails in the role can have negative career repercussions for the advocating leader. The ability to provide voluntary standards on how to make more strategic internal choices would be a big win in better determining when and where to ''lean forward'' with talent.

Leadership training and development. Employee productivity is due, in part, to leaders' ability to engage their workforce. Making connections and engaging employees from different backgrounds and experiences is a measurable skill and observable in outcomes (Jones & Harter, 2005). Leadership programs and other training should include a D & I component that focus on the cultural competency required to engage a diverse workforce.

Metrics

Alignment in the area of metrics is common across many disciplines in human resources. D & I is no exception. In addition, because inclusion has been framed above as a goal, it is critical to leverage solid metrics to assess progress towards this goal. What metrics are most important and where can voluntary standards make the biggest impact? We believe voluntary standards in the following clusters of metrics will provide the most impact.

Talent acquisition. First and foremost, are applicant pools diverse? Then secondly, is the hiring process inclusive? Selection ratios need to be relatively equivalent across relevant demographic groups at each step in the hiring process. If not, any selection methodology that disproportionately disqualifies one group of people should be thoroughly examined.

Talent management. Internal talent decisions need to be held to the same scrutiny as external talent decisions. Are promotion and high potential talent pools diverse? Are internal talent decisions made in a consistent manner that uses objective data when available? Are there differences in voluntary attrition and regretted loss of talent? Are performance ratings, compensation, and other HR systems done in an equivalent way across all groups? We need to manage data on our internal talent as a key source of information to understand if there are areas of concern.

Engagement. Engagement surveys typically assess individuals' emotional connection and commitment to their organizations. In an inclusive environment, various demographic groups should score similarly on engagement and other survey metrics. Alignment on D & I climate survey items and metrics would be an additional win.

The above categories represent only a small subset of D & I analytics. We need to rise to the challenge of evaluating D & I at every stage of the human capital life cycle. As a final note on diversity metrics, we agree with the authors that more latitude in protecting self-critical analyses would be productive. Without the ability to objectively evaluate progress, it will be challenging to continue to advance D & I insights, knowledge and practice. As these standards promote a common practice around analytics, benchmark data can be more easily shared across practitioners, researchers, government, and other regulatory bodies to inform and refine future practice.

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