



Inclusive Leadership: A necessity for the 21st century leader

9th December 2020

Our latest webinar took place on 9th December, with Amri Johnson, executive advisor and organisational consultant at Inclusion Wins, leading a discussion on why inclusion is critical to 21st century leadership competency.

The group of attendees from around the world brought experience and expertise in making inclusion a vital part of 21st century business. This is a brief summary of the key points discussed.

Improving diversity in the workplace isn't just about being broad-minded or being seen to do the right thing. It has an impact on the bottom line. Companies that have greater diversity achieve higher levels of revenue, profitability and value creation.

The challenges in diversity and inclusivity programmes

Many companies run diversity and inclusivity programmes, but unfortunately not all of these have the desired effect. For example, mandatory diversity training can put people on the defensive (especially when they don't believe they need it) tests for job applicants may not be applied consistently, and grievance systems can result in retaliations and divide teams. Better approaches look at both individuals and the organisation gain advantage, the so-called 'win-win' solution'.

Alternatives include mentoring, diversity task forces that put in place tailored programmes based around social accountability, and college recruitment programmes that target women, minorities and people from different backgrounds.

What is diversity?

Diversity isn't just about ethnicity, gender, sexuality or religion – it is also about a diversity of upbringing, training, experience, approach and thought. Diversity has two different aspects – inherent and acquired. Inherent diversity is what people are born with – such as their skin colour. Acquired diversity, which includes skills and experience, such as education, or living and working in different cultures.

“Diversity is any mixture—characterized by differences, similarities, related tensions, and complexities... It is about ensuring that the diverse mixture works in support of your organization’s mission, vision, and strategy.” R. Roosevelt Thomas, Jr.

The benefits of diversity

Everyone has their own ‘frames’ and biases, depending on where and how they were brought up, where they have studied, and where they have worked. Companies may focus on recruiting from specific prestigious organisations, but this means they are selecting people with similar backgrounds from a small and not very diverse pool.

“People are moulded by organisations and by schools. This affects their diversity as it produces the same kind of people, whatever their colour, race or religion. A lack of diversity of this kind reduces innovation.”

Age can also be an issue with organisations. Some older employees are side-lined or moved on, or not recruited if they choose to change job. Some younger candidates are considered not to have enough experience, or are recruited preferentially because of their younger outlook. These groups of people bring different experiences and styles of leadership. Older employees have decades of experience they can bring, and younger employees may be closer to the technology or research, or simply have a different perspective. Mentoring of younger employees by those more experienced and vice-versa brings diversity of thought.

How to build diversity into an organisation

Diversity and inclusion offers benefits to organisations by bringing together people with a variety of perspectives and experience. This is about recruiting the right people in the first place, and by getting the most out of the people already there. Inclusivity fosters connections within an organisation, which supports collaboration.

There are three key points required to create a diverse and inclusive organisation: cultural intelligence, social capital and inclusive design of the environment. Companies need to develop cultural intelligence – the capability to relate and work effectively across cultures – and understand how their employees’ cultural backgrounds affect how they work. Social capital looks at how people interact through relationships and networks, and how they form a shared sense of identity and trust.

Informal networking with an organisation allows people to learn who does what and where expertise lies. By supporting and enabling these relationships and networks, companies can improve innovation by allowing people to work together more effectively. Programmes that encourage contact between groups within the same organisation can bring diversity of thought into projects. Ensuring that the environment is designed with inclusion of the full range of diversity, whether inherent or acquired, mitigates bias and makes accessibility as broad as possible.

People tend to go to the individuals that they know already, and the serendipity of meeting new people can be harder in a bigger company, or with virtual working. Leaders need to create structures that will foster connectivity, such as setting up formal mentoring programmes, or creating groups and communities within the organisation. Knowledge sharing tools within a company, such as an internal LinkedIn-style database, can help with making connections. These can even include skills picked up outside work, which could bring in unexpected ideas.

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Growing a company can change its dynamics. Leaders need to remember to keep diversity and inclusivity in mind as they recruit, to ensure that the organisation remains aligned. Recruitment can be the opportunity to make changes and improve diversity. This may include recruiting managers from outside of the organisation’s core focus, which can bring in new ideas and new inspiration. Looking outside for candidates can also shed new light on aspects of the role.

“We need to be curious and look outside our own environment.”

The impact of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in millions of people working from home, some of whom have been recruited and trained during the pandemic. If home working continues this could promote diversity by making the workplace more accessible for

disable people, or opening up recruitment to people living a distance away from the company's location, whether this is within the country or overseas. This will depend on whether the leadership is open to continuing homeworking beyond the end of the pandemic.

Inclusion for a better future

People can just switch off when the word 'diversity' is mentioned. However, it's an important issue. By focusing on inclusion and on putting in place the right environment, companies can do the right thing for their employees, boost recruitment and improve their bottom line.

"Companies that make diversity and inclusivity what they are will see long term benefits."



Key Speaker: Amri Johnson

For more than 20 years, Amri Johnson has been instrumental in helping organizations and their people create extraordinary business outcomes. He is a social capitalist, epidemiologist, entrepreneur, and inclusion strategist. Amri's dialogic approach to engaging all people as leaders and change agents (most recently at the research division of Novartis, as Global Head of Cultural Intelligence and Inclusion) has fostered the opening of minds and deepening of skillsets with organizational leaders and citizens enabling them to thrive and optimally contribute to one another and their respective organizations.

As CEO/founder of Inclusion Wins, Amri, and a virtual collective of partners converge organizational purpose to create a global impact with a lens of inclusion. Amri is currently working on a manuscript answering the question; How can we make inclusiveness more accessible (for all stakeholders); actionable (clear, universal contributions); and sustainable (purposeful and perpetually impactful)?