

Overcoming Diversity Fatigue

Key Causes and Strategies for Addressing It

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Introduction

Over the past few decades more and more companies have launched diversity initiatives and incorporated key concepts of diversity management into their organizations. These efforts were initiated with a great deal of enthusiasm and quality work was accomplished. What organizations are discovering now after years, or in some cases, decades into the work, is that there is diversity fatigue in the workplace. Their programs are not as well attended, senior leaders are not as engaged and employees are not as involved. What they are experiencing is diversity fatigue.

This guide explores key causes for diversity fatigue and it outlines steps that organizations can undertake to address the fatigue and to jump start their diversity programs with renewed energy and focus.

What is Diversity Fatigue?

Diversity fatigue is best described as a sentiment of disinterest and even dislike of diversity activities that are taking place at an organization. Diversity fatigue should not be confused with the general resistance to change that many people have. Diversity fatigue occurs after the launch of a diversity initiative at a company followed by months or years of diversity programming. Only after a concerted diversity effort has been made can there be fatigue, otherwise the challenge that your organization is dealing with may be something else altogether.

When diversity is positioned as an “add-on” for an organization, there will always be fatigue. Something that is not central to the strategic goals of an organization will often be seen as an added burden and nuisance. A failure to align diversity and inclusion work with strategic goals means that it is easy to see D&I as a “nice to have” and not a “must have” program.

Seven Causes for Diversity Fatigue

Here are the seven main causes for diversity fatigue that we have seen in our work.

1. Lack of Senior Executive Endorsement and Involvement

While it may be difficult to find a senior executive today who will say that diversity is not important, not all of them actively support internal diversity efforts. Employees know when diversity is a key priority for executives because it comes up in meetings and diversity ideas and themes are interwoven into the operations of the organization. When senior leaders are not actively involved in diversity programs and are only coaxed into including it in a brief mention at company meetings or newsletters, employees know that it is not a true priority for the organization. If asking a senior executive why diversity is important to them or your organization results in a long pause before they answer, this is a key sign that diversity is not on their radar screen.

2. Lack of a Diversity Plan

While organizations often approach other long-term initiatives with careful planning and strategic alignment to business goals, diversity and inclusion work does not always get this same rigor of thought and focus. Without a diversity plan, it is easy to hop from one program to another and for the key reasons that diversity is important to the organization to get lost in the flurry of daily work. A plan enables diversity practitioners to align their work with key business goals and to engage senior leaders in meaningful ways about how diversity and inclusion can help them to achieve those goals. If a plan is lacking or it has not been updated recently, then it is challenging for senior executives and all other employees to understand the importance diversity has to the work at hand.

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3. Diversity Activities Are Not Connected to the Business Case

Companies and organizations are running lean. There is always more work to be done than there are hours in the day. Employees make choices every day on what they are going to focus on and what will provide the greatest ROI for their efforts. If diversity activities are not aligned with a clear business case that clarifies their importance to the organization and to the work of employees, then they are often seen as “fluff” or as “we have to do this because of HR.”

4. Activities are Sporadic

Diversity initiatives are often started with great fanfare and enthusiasm. Diversity committees have ample volunteers and programs have good attendance. Done right, this initial passion builds important momentum within the organization. What is key to keeping that momentum going are consistent and continuous efforts. This does not mean one large diversity event a year and then little or nothing the rest of the year. This does not keep the momentum going. What is critical to keeping the momentum going is consistent engagement – however small – with employees. This is what keeps the topic front of mind and keeps the momentum moving forward. Doing events sporadically means it can become more of an annoyance to employees rather than a topic that truly engages them.

5. Flavor of the Day

Organizational needs change over time and so will the focus of diversity efforts. But, to employees who don't see or understand the bigger picture, sometimes the change in focus sends a message that diversity at your organization has a “flavor of the day”, and that flavor is always changing. When an organization moves from one diversity goal to another, it is crucial to communicate this transition to employees. Communication helps employees to understand the link between the diversity goal that is being focused on and how it will help drive the achievement of relevant organizational goals.

6. Lack of Communication

People don't know what you are doing if you don't tell them about it. While it may be important and in some cases obvious to a diversity professional what is being done and why, to employees and executives it is not always the case. It has been said when making a presentation that you need to repeat a message 7 times before everyone in the room will hear and understand what you are saying. The same can be said for diversity messages. When you do not regularly communicate and reinforce diversity topics and themes, employees enmeshed in the daily overload of information may not take in your message. Plus, as the focus and priorities of diversity programs and initiatives change over time, if communication is not sufficient, they will not understand the evolving goals and priorities.

7. Lack of Manager and Executive Accountability

What gets measured gets done. The same can be true for what people are held accountable for also gets done. Diversity programs and initiatives that don't have accountability built into them are less likely to succeed. Changing an organizational culture to be more respectful and inclusive won't be done overnight. It will require long-term commitment and this means that those involved will need to be held accountable. Managers should be the first priority, and then employees.

3 Steps for Moving Forward and Overcoming the Fatigue

Diversity fatigue occurs when there is confusion and disinterest in the diversity activities that are taking place at an organization. While there are many possible ways to respond to diversity fatigue, we are recommending that you begin by looking at the following three areas and assess your organization's performance in each.

1. (Re)Develop a Strong Business Case for Diversity

The days are long past when diversity programs were done because they were the “right thing” to do. Today, executives expect investments in diversity and inclusion to carry with them an alignment to company goals and strategies. This cannot be done without a rock solid business case for diversity that is updated as frequently as the organizations own goals and priorities are updated.

So, how do you develop a great business case for diversity?

- Study and understand the changing demographics of employees and customers, now and in 5,10,15 years
- What are the issues that currently keep managers up at night? Identify those issues and then show how D&I programs can help them to solve those issues.
- What are the key activities that take place every day at your organization that are affected by diversity? How can these be improved and measured to demonstrate value/cost of diversity to your organization?
- When you are in social spaces at your organization (lunch room, break room, etc.) listen closely to what employee are talking about, and complaining about – what makes you cringe or smile? Once you know these issues, explore how D&I can help to solve those issues.
- Know the purchasing power of targeted groups of customers so that you can show executives and employees that real money is on the table (*hint, depending upon what demographics you are looking at it can reach nearly a trillion dollars*).
- Explore current trends from your employee engagement surveys and see how the core diversity concepts of building respectful, inclusive workplaces can help to address business goals



A business case for diversity should focus on the real and practical implications that diversity and culture have on your business goals, operations and human capital. This involves both straightforward thinking as well as outside the box thinking. Look closely at the goals that the organization has set for the next 6 months, one year, three years and ask your self how diversity can help to achieve these or might stand in the way of any of these? A business case for diversity that will drive actual results and help combat diversity fatigue constructs an argument for the importance of diversity to an organization. If your business case for diversity does not do this it is contributing to diversity fatigue.

2. Senior Level Engagement and Support

Senior executives focus a good deal on strategy and short and long term goals. For them to actively engage and support diversity and inclusion initiatives, they need to clearly see how D&I work is helping to achieve specific goals and strategies. Having both a business case for diversity and diversity plan with both short and long term goals will help to effectively communicate the importance of diversity to senior executives. The goals contained in the plan must also demonstrate a clear connection between the diversity work being done and how this will help drive specific business goals. When executives don't understand how diversity is impacting their day to day responsibilities and don't see a clear path to addressing this impact, they will stop caring about diversity once the initial push and enthusiasm have died down.

Effectively engaging senior leaders in diversity work means you also have to make it easy for them to engage. Asking them to attend events is great, but it is even better when you provide them with talking points about your diversity work, recent success stories and key focus areas so that they can share these with employees. Making it easy for them to talk about diversity helps to spark their interest and to make them advocates for the work.

If the leaders of your company are not talking about and supporting diversity at your organization, diversity fatigue will eventually set in. Managers and employees take their cues from the higher ups and if they do not think that the higher ups care about diversity, then why should they care? Making it easy and natural for senior leaders to support and talk about diversity is the key to their engagement. When senior leaders have a clear understanding of why diversity is important to the organization and in particular to their set of responsibilities, they jump at the chance to be visible supporters of diversity. This may require creative thinking on your part, but it will make the difference between diversity work and diversity results.

3. Manager and Employee Engagement

Creating an organizational culture that is infused with respect and inclusion requires the engagement of all employees and managers. A respectful workplace is built upon the thousands of daily interactions that happen among employees. In order for the culture to shift and change employees need to both understand why D&I is important to their work and also how to modify their behaviors and interactions so that they are creating a respectful and inclusive workplace. This requires

communicating a clear business case for diversity, the goals diversity and inclusion are seeking to accomplish, and constantly educating employees on the practical steps that they can take to become part of the process. In essence, they need to know “what’s in it for me and what do I need to do?” If the diversity activities that have been planned for employees closely align with business goals that employees are contributing to or responsible for, then they will care about and be engaged with the activities.

Key: Engage and Support Managers

Another key factor is the engagement of managers. Managers are in many ways the keepers of an organization’s culture. They are the ones supervising, managing, and correcting employee behavior and they need to have very clear knowledge about their role in this change process. Too often managers are left to fend for themselves and to instinctively know what they are supposed to do and why diversity is important to their teams. Managers need to be actively involved and consistently supported with tools, training, communication and support so that they can play the critical role they need to in helping to sustain efforts in the long term. If you have not done so already, create a profile of the diversity and cultural competence skills that managers must possess in order to work effectively at your organization. Make sure that this profile is added to and reviewed by relevant parties. Then take this profile and create a professional development plan that works to educate and equip managers with those necessary skills. Incorporate the skills into reviews and hold managers accountable. This will help diversity become an integral part of their job and clearly communicate the value that diversity has to the organization.

Conclusion: Remember the Water Drops

What is key to overcoming diversity fatigue and apathy towards diversity and inclusion is being able to clearly articulate why diversity is important to the company. Organizations are compelled to act when they see a strong enough link between where they are and where they want to go. Using diversity and inclusion efforts to help achieve future goals ensures that the ongoing passion and drive to make change becomes part of the organizations culture.

Creating workplaces that are inclusive and respectful means that we all need to raise our awareness of how our interactions are perceived by others. Sometimes gaining that awareness may be an uncomfortable process. It is human nature to avoid something that we think may be uncomfortable and so it is no surprise that while some people embrace diversity and love the adventure of learning new things others hold back and resist moving forward. Like people, organizations also resist change, even if they know it is for their own good.

Moving an organization forward on a diversity journey can often feel like the process of wearing down stone by dripping water onto it. Consistent drops over time will wear down the stone but what is required is not a bucket of water once month, but rather drops of water throughout the day. Be consistent in your approach and communication about diversity, and like water on stone, you will wear away resistance and also keep the organization thirsty for more.

For more information on how to use diversity as an organizational change initiative, please read our article *Diversity 3.0: Organizational Change and Continuous Education*. This article also has a 7-step process to use when implementing long-term change processes. This article can be found on our home page at: www.CultureCoach.biz

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Kari Heistad is the founder and CEO of Culture Coach International (CCI). CCI helps organizations solve the teamwork issues that arise from diverse and multicultural teams by developing diversity strategies and experiential educational programs that engage employees, managers and senior leaders. CCI has a line of both standard and customizable educational tools designed for the workplace that help organizations to provide continuous learning on targeted topics.

