

Patricia Pope

The Future of Diversity and Inclusion

Wouldn't it be great if diversity experts had a crystal ball to foresee what organizational strategies, if embraced, would promote the active inclusion of all talented people, regardless of their background? Based on my experiences over the last 30+ years, I believe our future opportunities lie in the following areas.

Integration is key. Diversity has been a separate silo, with the focus primarily on training, which I've called the "spray and pray" approach. Spray everyone with training. Pray that it does some good. By definition, diversity refers to all human and organizational differences. It's inherent in everything an organization does.



By Patricia Pope, CEO, Pope & Associates, Inc.

Technology is key. Organizations have to do more with less. The days of conducting two-day diversity sessions are history. We must leverage new technologies to provide the learning that previously occurred in classrooms.

Safety is key. Initially, some diversity training was perceived as too confrontational. Then the pendulum swung too far in the opposite direction. Many programs became entertaining and fun, and no one felt uncomfortable. The challenge is to create a safe environment, along with substantive content, to produce real learning and behavior change.

Culture is key. Training alone is insufficient to create culture change. No matter how good the training is, if the organization doesn't put mechanisms in place to sustain the learning, participants quickly normalize.

Globalization is key. Many corporations are international in some way, so the "U.S.-centric" approach to diversity fails to work.

Valuing differences more than conformance is key. Most organizations operate somewhere between tolerating differences and managing differences. Valuing differences requires culture change. That's far more challenging than organizing a "Black History Month" event. The paradox of diversity is that differences won't be truly valued until they are experienced as adding value. Yet, it is very difficult to add value when one doesn't feel valued.

Inclusion is key and the outcome of doing the right work, with the right people, in the right sequence. If we don't proactively seek to include, we unintentionally exclude. Representation is not necessarily indicative of success. Those who rise to senior levels often have to conform too much to get the corner office. Despite the awards companies may receive for their "good numbers," without true culture change they lose the opportunity to leverage these differences.

Our opportunity lies in our willingness to ask the diversity question on an individual, organizational and societal level. Were "differences" a factor in this situation? If not, we move on. If so, we assess how they contributed to the outcome. But we have to ask. Our tendency to avoid exploring the impact of differences is our biggest obstacle and our most significant opportunity in the years ahead.

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