

Diversity, equity and inclusion leaders will help us return to work

BY DEANNA SINGH, for BizTimes

WHEN THE COVID-19 social distancing policies lift, businesses will face a new challenge. They will have to figure out how to bring their teams back into a "new normal."

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) practitioners will be an incredible asset in building that path forward.

Why? Because for years, they have fostered the skills around connectivity, empathy and adaptability that will be fundamental for any organization hoping to make it through this transition.

Through the pandemic, people have shared a moment that creates some commonality. However, this crisis has also accentuated many differences. During these weeks, some people have lived in complete isolation, while others have had to care for family members or home-schooled children. To move forward, we must acknowledge these differences because these diverse experiences will color how individuals think their organizations should move forward.

After such isolated and different experiences, a reunited team must share the realities of their situations without alienating each other. Groups must acknowledge the various ways people experienced this historical moment and find common ground for the future. In other words, we need conversations that will spur growth, the kinds of discussions DEI leaders are uniquely positioned to facilitate. Experts in facilitating challenging and productive dialogue and authorities in how to celebrate differences while appreciating commonality, they know how to create the environments and develop the exchanges that will help organizations thrive after these profound changes.

For teams to return to their offices, institutions must also rebuild trust. During this time, people have learned to be suspicious and fill their days with questions. Who knows what? Who has what? What is the truth? This prolonged state of misgiving will stay with employees long after they return to their jobs. Whatever confusion they have will be exacerbated by the fact that many feel the institutions they relied upon let them down, in many cases, especially their jobs. How will people who were furloughed or labeled "non-essential" feel about returning to work? How will they redefine professional conventions like shaking hands, sharing elevators or calling meetings?



People will have differing levels of concern and comfort, and successful organizational cultures must renegotiate these practices with unprecedented empathy levels. DEI leaders are experts in this area, helping to create the compassion required to develop the bedrock of trust that institutions must rebuild. Helping teams step back and look at the pandemic through different lenses, DEI leaders will help people feel heard, understood, and appreciated. Because they have always worked to give underprivileged people a voice, they will be specially equipped to build consensus among those who've gone through this crisis.

Every company has already had to change the way they do business. In the coming months, there will be questions about which changes we pull forward and which we leave by the wayside. Will the future require companies to have more flexible working hours? Will we have to rethink telecommuting? People who are caregivers have requested more flexible scheduling, and now that we are all forced to work beyond a 9-to-5, they might want this change to continue. Over the past few weeks, business leaders have had to consider creative alternatives. How they handle these new options moving forward will be essential to whether employees feel loyal to their employers.

DEI experts can make sure that organizations answer these difficult questions in ways that meet the best interests of multiple stakeholders. As new provisions appear, these specialists will be the ones who build structures



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that foster equity, accessibility and fairness. They can help organizations forecast how new policies can benefit most people. As groups make these operational decisions, we have the opportunity to adopt fresh and more inclusive approaches.

When it is time to get back to business, the companies that have invested in DEI leaders will be glad they did. Because DEI leaders have always specialized in celebrating differences while finding common ground. Our DEI leaders are the ones we need to chart the new course. ■

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