

Peer Collaboration ENHANCES Diversity and Inclusion

Use employee resource groups to drive learning.

BY RANDY EMELO

As social learning ramps up, companies would be wise to take advantage of social networks that already exist in the form of employee resource groups (ERGs) to help leverage and drive broader learning throughout their networks and the company at large. To make this happen effectively, leaders will have to focus on inclusion and on providing a bigger tent that welcomes and embraces all people.

Although the desire for a more inclusive culture might exist in many organizations, few still seem to be acting on their plans. In Bersin by Deloitte's March 2014 report, *The Diversity and Inclusion Benchmarking Report: An Analysis of the Current Landscape*, author Stacia Sherman Garr notes: "While an overwhelming majority of organizations (71 percent) aspire to have an 'inclusive' culture within three years, one in which the diverse backgrounds of individuals are leveraged to drive value and business results by creating an environment in which employees feel involved, respected, valued, and connected—only 11 percent of companies do today."

Strategic relationships

Companies are missing a huge opportunity to boost their inclusion efforts by overlooking the power of their ERGs. The nature of affinity in ERGs helps them jump-start networking within their group and with others, and the people involved in these groups typically have a high interest in collaborative learning already.

"A primary catalyst for creating an ERG around a particular affinity is to form a community so that a larger voice can be heard," says Jodi Davidson, director of diversity and inclusion initiatives at Sodexo, a global food services and facilities management company known for its award-winning diversity initiatives. "In the past, these groups were formed because of the real or perceived sense of marginalization. Today, we're seeing much more robust activities within the ERG family that have much more impact than simply reacting to marginalization." Davidson points out that affinity potentially calls for greater community within the groups, but it doesn't diminish the need for other people and allies to join the group.



Wendy Murphy, co-author with Kathy Kram of the book *Strategic Relationships at Work*, suggests that people form broad strategic relationships “whose primary purpose is learning—both task-related and personal learning—that enables career growth and advancement.” Although learning, per se, typically falls outside the purview of diversity, this goal of broader learning and forming strategic relationships can occur if diversity leaders partner with their colleagues who have other practice areas, such as learning, performance, and talent development.

The people in those other areas have problems they are trying to solve, such as getting employees trained more quickly and effectively, or helping people drive their own careers and development while also seeing improvement in their skills that affect their jobs right now. Diversity leaders are in a unique position to help them solve these and other problems by leveraging ERGs to drive that learning and skill building.

Diversity and inclusion at Sodexo

Sodexo embodies a continued commitment to fostering a culture of inclusion, and its Spirit of Mentoring program embraces a broad approach to collaboration, learning, and development, all

under the umbrella of mentoring. The program connects employees throughout the company so they can engage with one another as learners and advisors; transfer knowledge related to their experience, competencies, and needs; and collaborate with colleagues around training, career development, on-the-job productivity, learning groups, and more.

Employee business resource groups, as they are called at Sodexo, use the program to reach out to colleagues across locations, generations, and functions. Some of the groups using the Spirit of Mentoring program at Sodexo include:

- iGen—an intergenerational roundtable group that brings together peers from various generations to share with and learn from one another
- HONOR—a military network group that uses a buddy-system approach through mentoring to help transition former military personnel into civilian and corporate life
- PRIDE—a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and allies group that connects partners for professional development and reverse mentoring
- WiNG—a women’s network group that uses topical mentoring in mentoring circles to share, learn, collaborate, and grow with colleagues.



“As our Spirit of Mentoring program grows, we continue to see innovative ways to connect people and help broaden learning opportunities for all of our employees,” says Davidson. “The office of diversity and the learning and performance departments are partnering to leverage the Spirit of Mentoring program as an enabler for the general manager curriculum as we seek to hone the skill set of this key population who serves our clients and customers.”

The company continues to study the business-based impacts associated with Spirit of Mentoring that consist of tangible and intangible gains. “Beyond outcomes associated with retention and productivity, perhaps most important is the anecdotal evidence that demonstrates how mentoring has served to raise the competence and value of its participants,” says Davidson. “There is a natural tie between this and the work associated with Sodexo’s employee business resource groups because we know that employees who are members of one or more EBRGs are 61 percent more engaged in the workplace than their peers who are not members of an EBRG. When you add to that the level of engagement when a member is also a partner in a mentoring program, engagement clearly increases.”

Modeling inclusion

Isolation is one word that diversity and inclusion professionals strive hard to erase. Although it sometimes can be difficult to take your own advice, this is one instance where people need to walk the talk.

Diversity and inclusion leaders need to embody the spirit of inclusion and work diligently to eradicate isolation in their own work and projects. Partnering with other leaders who focus on learning, performance, and talent development provides a powerful opportunity to model the very behavior they wish to imbue into the organization, while also giving them a way to bring about real change and positive impacts through their coordinated efforts.

Here are three ways diversity and inclusion leaders can leverage ERGs to model inclusion and foster deeper learning opportunities in their organizations.

Provide the big tent. If you ask people what the diversity and inclusion department does, what would they say? Would they talk about the small mentoring program the diversity and inclusion folks run to help women? Would they think you focus just on minorities? Would they mistakenly think they have to be invited to join any of the programs you sponsor?

The truth is that diversity and inclusion leaders can and should make it known that they provide the big tent—the place to go where all are welcomed and appreciated. The ERGs that form out of the efforts of diversity and inclusion are an ideal starting point for bringing together people with diverse backgrounds, interests, and affinities. Use these natural networks as a place to spur greater learning and broader connections.

Murphy stresses that the greater range of perspectives provided by your network, the better. “Our research shows that if you proactively create a wider, deeper network of informal strategic relationships, that the benefits—more money, quicker promotions, and greater satisfaction—are greater than when you rely on just one mentor or advisor.”

Erase lines and boundaries. Only connecting with people who are part of the same ERG wastes an incredible learning opportunity. The rich and varied voices of colleagues from diverse backgrounds or functions can be muted if people don’t seek them out. As Murphy notes, when you have a broad and deep network, you can reap greater rewards.

Encourage your ERGs to cross boundaries and form connections with other groups. Start a learning group on a broad topic, such as providing feedback, and invite people from various ERGs to join. Then ask those who are active in the group to invite their colleagues who they think would benefit from the group. Or even better, encourage them to start their own learning group on a broad topic that they are passionate about and that can cross boundaries. This will generate cross-pollination among the members and will erase lines and divisions that would have kept them apart.

Sodexo has seen success with this approach

with its Expertise in Action collaborative learning groups that were started in response to the development needs of learners within the company's broader Spirit of Mentoring system. Participants from across the company use social learning technology to meet around topics of mutual interest and need for development, such as communication, strategic leadership, and influencing.

COMPANIES ARE MISSING A HUGE OPPORTUNITY TO BOOST THEIR INCLUSION EFFORTS BY OVERLOOKING THE POWER OF THEIR ERGs.

Survey results show that 85 percent of participants said they can use the learning they gained through the experience back on the job, proving that diversity can positively affect and help support learning and talent initiatives.

Lead by example. As the saying goes, actions speak louder than words. The ERGs may be uncertain about how to begin when it comes to using their networks for broader learning, or they may feel their group is losing its focus by branching out. Diversity and inclusion leaders can lead by example here and show the ERGs that incorporating broader learning activities can make the ERGs more indispensable to the company.

Diversity and inclusion leaders can do this by working with their colleagues in other areas, such as learning or talent or even functions like sales or IT, to help determine how diversity and inclusion can be more involved in additional points of alignment with organizational needs. Can the sales team use more training on cultural differences as the company expands into new global markets? Or can the talent function leverage insights from diversity and inclusion on who could be good managers and leaders?

By partnering with other areas, diversity and inclusion leaders can bring their expertise to vast and broad areas of the orga-

nization, just as members of ERGs can. This can help unify and strengthen the company by showcasing how issues and initiatives are “ours” as a team, not “mine” or “yours” as isolated functions.

The final word

Diversity and inclusion initiatives historically have focused on career development through sponsorship and mentoring. Yet as the needs of companies and employees rapidly change, diversity and inclusion leaders need to go beyond these targeted and limiting practices, and expand their methods to look at more peer collaboration across functions, locations, and hierarchy. This will stimulate more innovation and creativity among participants and will help people become more aware of career development issues outside of their normal circles.

“Career management is now primarily the individual's responsibility, and strategic relationships are critical for providing stability and ongoing support for your development,” says Murphy. Helping people to build a larger network of support and be more productive in the moment provides them with opportunities to build skills and apply insights immediately. Different perspectives within knowledge-sharing communities, such as groups spearheaded through ERGs, help novel ideas and approaches arise in answer to organizational problems or issues people are facing.

Diversity and inclusion leaders are well positioned to advocate and organize this type of activity in partnership with other HR leaders. They could have a deep and lasting impact on broader practices such as onboarding, performance support, career development, training, and learning. By fostering the power of inclusion and bringing its unique approach to these larger organizational initiatives, the entire company wins.

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