

The Diversity Life Cycle

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Overview

The Diversity Life Cycle is a framework that describes the interconnectedness between twelve groupings or stages of activity that organizations undertake to normalize diversity into its practices and operations. In this framework, these groupings of activity—all aimed at embedding diversity into organizational culture and institutional habits—are placed in a suggested strategic sequence. This succession outlines the most practical and/or effective progression of stages of organizational development needed to become more inclusive and welcoming to diversity. In relation to the *Diversity Change Curve*, the description and order of activity helps to move an organization from a point of “understanding” on to a state of “institutionalization.”

The proposed framework is not meant to suggest activities done out of order will fail. In fact, in an ideal situation and where the resources exist, most of the stages of activity are being done at the same time and feed into each other. Rather, this framework provides multiple points of engagement and is meant to help larger institutions coordinate various concurrent activities, should the resources exist. For smaller organizations, wherein resources are extremely limited, the framework also provides a succession of activity that is more likely to generate the greatest positive outcomes, building upon the previous areas of activity.

This framework builds upon the notion that diversity is needed to achieve an organization’s strategic objectives, and not done for diversity’s sake. It assumes there is some degree of support for change or development, and aims to grow this support. The following describes each of the twelve areas of activity.

Research

Activity that gathers information about the workplace, clients, trends, or demographics, for example, is the ideal place to begin. This might include:

- An analysis of pay equity;
- A scan of related industry best-practices;
- The representation of various ethnocultural, minority or under-represented groups throughout an organizations or at specific levels of management;
- Workplace climate surveys;
- An assessment of managers’ intercultural communication skills or cultural literacy of key communities; or
- An analysis of cost for replacing employees due to turnover.

This information is necessary to identify both opportunities and/or risks that affect an organizations ability to achieve its strategic objectives. It is also needed to verify or challenge perception at all levels of the organization. The most basic research is often about the “communities of focus” an organization is mandated to serve or wishes to be more relevant to.

It is also important to note that research is revisited and on-going, often at the beginning of each area of activity.

Diversity Business Case

The Diversity Business Case is the building block for all other institutional activity related to diversity. It is an essential communications tool for senior management, and critical for unlocking resources and supports. The diversity business case spells out why an organization is (or should be) committed to a more diverse and inclusive workforce or clientele.

A diversity business case is like any other business case, but includes an analysis of how diversity is essential for achieving an organization’s strategic objectives. Similar to a standard business case, it should outline both the potential “pleasure enhancements” that diversity brings (such as increased revenue, employee satisfaction, innovation, and/or client satisfaction, for example), and/or potential “pain avoidance” (such as, decreased turnover, non-constructive conflict, opportunity cost, and/or cost of formal complaints, for example).

The diversity business case conveys how diversity affects the bottom line (in most cases, this means profitability) and the future economic and social sustainability of an organization.

Strategic Goal Setting

This range of activity combines the research and the diversity business case, and through some process of consultation, establishes diversity-specific goals that take into account the organizational, departmental or unit-level objectives and limitations. Ideally, the strategic goals around diversity clearly contribute towards the achievement of larger organizational strategic objectives, or are themselves the organization’s strategic objectives. Like any goals, these should be Specific, (directly or indirectly) Measureable, Attainable, Realistic and Timely (SMART).

Strategic Plan / Action Plan

Often combined with the development of strategic goals around diversity is the development of a longer-term “diversity strategic plan” or a more immediate “diversity action plan”—depending on what level in the organization the diversity activity will engage.

This area of activity requires a solid diversity business case, otherwise the actions outlined in either an organizational strategic plan or unit-level action plan will not receive adequate resources or prioritization, thereby limiting the potential for success.

Depending on the size of the organization and the overall organizational climate, this process may require extensive levels of consultation. The process of developing a strategic plan often has a dual purpose: first, to creating a suitable guiding document that provides terms of reference and outlines a framework for activity, and takes into account the strengths, weaknesses, and any key constraints on time, resources, existing competencies, barriers, and uptake internally; and secondly, through the process of consultation, builds good-will, grows awareness, understanding and fosters organizational buy-in, leading up to the release of the strategic plan.

A unit-level action plan is often an extension of a Diversity Strategic Plan, but can exist as the synthesis of a larger strategic plan and a unit’s diversity goals, outlining very specific activity a unit will undertake.

Community Partnership

The area of activity around community partnership is focused on fostering relationships with the external and/or internal community groups an organization wishes to better serve, reflect or engage, and drawing upon this relationship to test assumptions, verify cultural knowledge, and in more advanced relationships, assist in goal setting, recruitment and provide feedback on either strategic plans or action plans.

Community partnership, in the form of an *external advisory groups* or *internal subject matter expert groups* (an extension of an “affinity groups”), helps to fill gaps in cultural fluency, and extends an organization’s accountability and credibility into key communities.

Community partnership ranges in size, scale and scope as activity progresses. Often beginning with a few key persons (externally or internally) with the desired cultural knowledge, from whom a manager might seek advice. This can evolve into becoming a more formal advisory council or internal subject matter expert group of employees.

There are many examples of initiatives that fail due to a lack of information, community connection, credibility or awareness of nuanced complexity. Failure to consult an internal and/or external community members on an initiative around National Aboriginal Day or Black History Month, for example, can result in efforts appearing token or poorly executed.

This stage is positioned after the development of an action plan and before strategic hiring for the practical purpose of providing feedback on the strategic plan or action plan, before resources are used to execute these plans. Advisory groups are also needed to determine what cultural fluencies an organization or unit is attempting to hire.

Strategic Hiring

Strategic hiring involves hiring with a strategic goal in mind. Slightly different from conventional equity hiring, which aims at hiring to meet targets around under-represented groups, strategic hiring takes into account what intercultural fluency (intercultural awareness, cultural knowledge, intercultural communication skills, and/or social capital) is needed to achieve a strategic goal.

For example, if an organization has determined it must be more relevant to Vancouver's South Asian Community, it will likely need the intercultural awareness, cultural knowledge, intercultural communication skills, and social connections within communities to achieve this. It is important to note that hiring someone of Indian ancestry does not necessarily guarantee the employee will have the aptitudes, depth of knowledge of the local community or language skills, to meet the strategic goals.

Management & Staff Development (Intercultural Fluency)

This grouping of activity involves the development of "intercultural fluency" of staff, beginning with management. Intercultural fluency is composed of two areas of development. First of all, the development of "intercultural awareness", defined as the ability to appreciate various forms of diversity and "the awareness, knowledge, and skills necessary to work effectively and ethically across cultural difference" (Pope and Reynolds, 1997). Intercultural awareness is combined with the development of three kinds of interpersonal capacity: cultural literacy (or cultural knowledge), intercultural communication skills, and intercultural social capital. This can include a range of activity from formal training and workshops, to more unconventional activity, such as film and book clubs and fieldtrips.

The focus of management and staff development should match what external and/or internal community groups an organization wishes to better serve, reflect or engage.

Strategic Internal Communication

Internal communications is essential for the preceding areas of activity to convert into organizational change. In fact, communicating “why diversity is a priority”, “what the benefits are”, and “what actions will be undertaken” is integrated into the activity of all the preceding stages. This grouping of activity is focused on communicating these key messages to the broader organization, and is often referred to as “awareness building” within the organization. Internal communication will often reiterate the Diversity Business Case, the strategic goals, possibly an action plan, and may acknowledge community partnerships. Generally, this activity is triggered by the development of a strategic plan or action plan, but is often forgotten about or under-resourced.

It is most important this stage occur prior to activity related to Outreach & Visibility, so as to avoid employees learning about their organization’s commitment to diversity from external messaging. This discredits the effectiveness of the diversity activity and can hurt morale, raise employee anxiety and result in resistance to change.

Outreach and Visibility

Almost all organizations that are committed to serving the public and committed to diversity will engage in some form of outreach to key, and often, “target” communities. Ideally this builds upon existing relationships, avoiding the appearance of an organization suddenly appearing, which is often negatively interpreted as opportunism. Activity related to outreach is often designed to increase the visibility of an organization to a specific community, or possibly meant to adjust the perception of the desired group. For this reason the optics of how an organization is “doing diversity”, particularly through who is hired for this work, is especially important.

This area of activity is positioned after Strategic Hiring, Management & Staff Development and Strategic Internal Communications, as outreach-related activity often requires the strategic hiring of key outreach personnel, who may be members of, or respected by, the community being reached. This range of activity often involves the visibility of key management at public events, and possibly messaging from management to the community. As employees are an organization’s best ambassadors, the general familiarity with the organization’s commitment towards diversity, are key to being more effective.

Retention (New and Old Staff)

The implementation of diversity strategies and tactics does not necessarily mean new employees will feel welcome, neither does it mean more senior employees will be comfortable with the changes to the organizational culture. Losing seasoned staff results in a loss of knowledge transfer and mentorship. Likewise,

turnover of newly hired staff is a huge loss of investment into the employee. Improving the retention of employees bringing in diversity—by fostering a more inclusive, welcoming and interculturally fluent work environment—is often an objective of Management & Staff Development. However, the focus on “diverse employees” can negatively hurt morale raise employee anxiety and result in resistance to change if employees are not familiar with why diversity is a strategic priority for their organization.

When effective, the activity in preceding stages resolves the retention issues; however, some effort must be made to ensure tactics being employed to improve the retention of newly hired staff are effective.

Adjustment to Organizational Norms, Rules and Habits

Building on the preceding groups or stages of activity, this area involves changes to organizational rules that affect the day-to-day operations and organizational habits. This may include changes to policy, job descriptions, performance management, success measures, rewards and incentives, and organizational structure, core competencies, accessibility standards for buildings, and accessibility standards for websites. Despite good intentions, organizations are often locked into their habits by the organizational structures and “rules”, which ultimately reflect the organizational norms.

These rules are often difficult to change and require layers of approvals, but have long-lasting impact and institutional change. Adding diversity objectives to the CEO’s performance management, for example, may take years to occur, but once established will result in a cascading of objectives throughout the organization. Similarly, adding elements of intercultural fluency to the core leadership competencies or job descriptions for managers will result in different hiring practices, a different set of candidates, and require management to update their leadership skills.

Addressing these institutional rules right away would appear to be the most effective means of institutional change; however, because these are difficult to change, they often require more foundational work to be done in advance. Forcing managers to report on diversity goals does not necessarily mean they understand why or support diversity. On the other hand, leaving these changes towards the end of the Diversity Life Cycle has the potential to position the changes as more “common sense” adjustments, and may be met with less resistance. The preceding ten groupings of activity might be seen as nurturing the environment needed for these advanced levels of institutional change to occur.

Efforts to structurally foster and support diversity in a workplace often require units with specific responsibilities towards Employment Equity; Compliance, Complaints & Conflict; and Accessibility.

Employment Equity

Under the *Employment Equity Act*, all publically funded organizations in Canada are required to make efforts towards *employment equity*, the establishment of working conditions free of barriers for designated “equity seeking groups”, which women, members of visible minority groups, Aboriginal Peoples, and people with disabilities. Some organizations choose to include LGBT groups. This is often an integrated function of Human Resources, but may also require a special unit (such as an Equity & Diversity Office), that is responsible for the organization’s understanding, compliance and reporting to Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC).

Compliance, Complaints & Conflict

In addition to all the efforts to integrate diversity into the organization, there is a need for managing the accountability of the organization to its own policy and the legal compliance to the Employment Equity Act. This includes the creation and enforcement of infrastructure able to managing conflict and handle complaints of harassment and/or discrimination in the workplace, and the ability to initiate or conduct investigations in an impartial and unbiased manner.

Accessibility

Organizations must be accessible and free of barriers to service and employment of people with disabilities. This includes ensuring buildings are physically accessible to all people. This will require the establishment of accessibility standards for buildings, regular monitoring (or inventory) of an organization’s degree of accessibility and strong compliance. This may also require supports in the work environment, such as special equipment and adjustments to work and/or workstations that are specific to an employee’s physical, mental or intellectual disability.

Staff & Client Renewal

Staff & Client Renewal refers to activity that aims to engage existing staff or clients that may be perceived as the “status quo”, or not necessarily see themselves as the desired diversity. The efforts to better serve, reflect or engage specific groups can result in an unintentional devaluing of existing staff and clients. Staff can begin to feel irrelevant. Left unaddressed, this can result in employee anxiety, loss of staff and clients, and potentially produce latent resistance throughout the organization. This is remedied by ensuring existing staff and clients are valued and have opportunity for renewal. For staff, this might mean opportunities to engage in mentorship, professional development, and other activities that position them as part of the solution towards a more inclusive workplace. For existing clients, this might include creating opportunities to be involved in outreach or cross-cultural bridge building, for example.