

Using DEI to cultivate workplace wellness and addiction awareness

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By **Cheryl Brown Merriwether** | September 01, 2021 at 10:28 AM



Diversity places a spotlight on the unique characteristics, strengths and traits embodied within the broad spectrum of individuals who work for the company. (Photo: Shutterstock)

For three decades, I have participated in, led, and taught workplace diversity initiatives. The evolution from diversity to diversity & inclusion (D&I) to diversity, equity & inclusion (DEI) has been fascinating to witness.

Tremendous strides have been made as DEI continues to open doors and create a healthier, happier and higher-performing workforce.

The evolution of diversity

Diversity in the workplace first became a hot topic during the 1940s when women entered the workforce in unprecedented numbers because of World War II. The 1960s brought dramatic social and cultural changes throughout the country because of the Civil Rights Movement and legislation such as Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

As a biracial child growing up in the South during this time, I have countless real life experiences related to race, religion, national origin, color, and sex. These memories have deeply impacted my life and perspectives both positively and negatively.

[Related: 'A more human workplace:' How companies can improve their inclusion efforts](#)

My experiential diversity training continued when I first entered the workplace in the '80s. This was a time when workplace diversity training was largely mandatory and intended to ensure compliance with federal and state laws, while protecting the company from discrimination lawsuits. During this time and into the 90s, compliance training was expanded to make the business case for diversity.

Companies that attract, retain, and engage a diverse workforce, reflective of their communities and customers are more successful and better positioned to compete at a global level. As a corporate trainer, college professor and HR professional, I led training sessions promoting the value of a diverse workforce based on this proven principle.

Diversity places a spotlight on the unique characteristics, strengths and traits embodied within the broad spectrum of individuals who work for the company. On the other hand, inclusion emphasizes the importance of creating organizational cultures where everyone feels valued, can be wholly authentic and contribute for the mutual benefit of themselves and the enterprise. Inclusion initiatives have had mixed results, in part because many employees suffer from presenteeism. Rather than being fully engaged, some employees are covered and simply hiding in plain sight.

Equity is the final piece of the DEI equation. It is defined as the fair treatment, access, opportunity, and advancement for all people, while at the same time striving to identify and eliminate barriers that have prevented the full participation of some groups. Equity in the workforce ensures processes and programs are impartial, fair and provide equal possible outcomes for every individual within an organization regardless of their ethnic background, country of origin, age, gender, religion and physical ability/disability.

Hiding in plain sight

The phrase hiding in plain sight can be traced back to the 1600s when soldiers fighting in military campaigns were sometimes positioned on battlefields in open spaces. This could be accomplished successfully if the soldiers were hidden by camouflage or otherwise not in a direct line of sight of the enemy.

Similarly, today's workforce is like a group of soldiers fighting on the battlefield of a competitive marketplace, which is necessary to ensure their own survival and the company's. Talented employees are pressured to engage wholeheartedly and perform at consistently high levels to maintain their position on the team, with a benefit of remaining gainfully employed. Because

the struggle to survive is real, many feel they have no choice but to conform to the company's acceptable professional, social, and cultural norms.

Alcohol: A slippery slope

Case in point: Some employers encourage the consumption of alcoholic beverages as a regular part of company-sponsored networking, teambuilding, celebratory or other significant events. Many believe this type of workplace culture is appealing and will help attract, retain, and motivate employees.

However, the truth is that many employees are mindful of their use of alcohol and may seek to limit or abstain for a variety of reasons including health, religious, pregnancy, recovery, or other personal reasons.

Some employees who choose to limit or abstain from drinking report they have been questioned or pressured by coworkers regarding their decision. Others say they have felt isolated and excluded in ways that could negatively affect their careers.

Because of these experiences, it's no wonder some individuals choose to hide in plain sight their personal beliefs or choices regarding the consumption of alcohol.

Covering, another name for hiding in plain sight:

Covering is another name for hiding in plain sight. The term was first used in 1963 by Erving Goffman. Goffman referred to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt as an individual who would take deliberate action to divert attention away from the parts of his identity that were subject to stigmatization, most notably, his confinement to a wheelchair.

In 2019, Deloitte published a report titled “Uncovering talent: A new model of inclusion.” The study was based the results of a survey of over 3,100 respondents from across diverse industries, backgrounds, ages, races, ethnicities, genders, and orientations.

The survey concluded that “covering occurred with greater frequency within groups that have been historically underrepresented.” ... and as is the norm with DEI studies, the survey did not include data from individuals who have an affiliation with substance misuse or other addictive behaviors. Nor did this survey seek to identify individuals in the workplace who are covering because of substance misuse and addiction.

So one might ask the question, Why should such people be included as part of an Inclusion survey?... But, in daring to challenge conventional thinking about such things, one could also ask the question, Why should people who are covering and hiding in plain sight in the workplace because of issues related to alcohol or other substances, be excluded from what is clearly labeled as an inclusion survey?

According to a [2019 report issued by the US Government’s Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration](#) (SAMHSA), there are an estimated 165.4 million people in the United States who use substances such as tobacco, alcohol, or illicit drugs. 70% of illicit drug users are employed either full or parttime. There are also more than 24 million individuals in recovery in the U.S. Not only are they our employees, but they are also the spouse, partner, parent, grandparent, child, grandchild, sibling, friend, family member and/or loved one of these millions of employees.

Sadly, for many years I, and many other qualified, competent, and capable individuals, remained covered and hidden in plain sight because of fear,

stigma, limited access to resources or misinformation about substance misuse and the disease of addiction. Talented and valuable employees, from the front-line to the C-Suite, many of whom have recently been classified as essential workers, are covering while hiding in plain sight. They suffer from the [sickness of silence](#), not knowing how to ask, or where to turn for help in the workplace.

And regrettably, because substance misuse and addiction are chronic medical conditions per the AMA, if they fail to receive the help or treatment that they need, many will die from substance-related health complications, accidents, or overdose. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recorded more than 93,000 overdose deaths in 2020 alone.

EAP: The traditional reactive workplace solution

Specific to the workplace, where do these people turn to for help, information, or support? HR practitioners traditionally encourage employees to access Employee Assistance Program (EAP) services when they request or require assistance. These requests are most often reactive and only initiated in response to an accident or critical incident that occurs either on or off the job.

According to the International Employee Assistance Association (EAPA) in the United States, over 97% of large companies (those with more than 5,000 employees) have EAP programs. 75% of smaller companies (251 – 1,000 employees) have EAP programs for their employees. Unfortunately, while employers may provide their employees with access to EAP services, employees may not always utilize those services. Utilization rates typically average below 10%. However, a 2021 Future of Benefits study published by The Hartford shows a steady and significant increase in EAP utilization since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

DEI initiatives: An innovative proactive workforce solution

Diversity initiatives have changed greatly since their inception in the 1960s. Companies now recognize, value and strive to create inclusive workplaces where all employees can be safe to uncover and contribute fully for the mutual benefit of the employee and the company. To accomplish this goal, high-performing organizations regularly encourage and support the creation and expansion of Business and Employee Resource, Affinity and Equity groups. Case in point, Salesforce.com's affinity group, Sober Force. In 2016 Salesforce banned office drinking and a year later CEO Mark Benioff's wrote in an internal memo that "alcohol is a drug and it is unfair for nondrinkers to see alcohol at work." ([Listen to this podcast](#) from Marin Nelson, founder and current president of SOBERForce.)

Companies seeking innovative solutions to meet the needs of a hurting post-pandemic workforce, should consider expanding DEI initiatives to identify, include and engage the sober-curious, or recovery-minded individuals who are already a part of their workforce, but covered and hiding in plain sight. These individuals are a valuable resource to help other individuals who have been hiding in plain sight to uncover and find their way to a more authentic path. DEI initiatives can give a voice to the voiceless and to all who are included in this underrepresented identity group.

DEI groups are ideally suited to collaborate with individuals and organizations, external to the enterprise, that can provide health, wellness and addiction awareness training programs or related non-clinical services into the workplace. These workforce solution providers do not take the place of EAPs and other employee health and benefit programs; rather they complement and supplement those service providers, thereby enabling the company to

expand the services they make available to their employees. They provide information and resources that reflect a level of empathy and care for employees currently not provided.

The International Center for Addiction and Recovery Education (ICARE) trains Certified Addiction Awareness Facilitators (CFAAs) and Certified Professional Recovery Coaches (CPRCs). These professionals are qualified to deliver education programs that support the psychologically safe workplace cultures that must be established to break the silence and encourage the safe conversations around taboo topics such as workplace addiction. Employers who create this kind of environment, enable struggling employees to find the help they need to bring their best selves to work and achieve peak performance. It's a win/win.

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