

Building an Inclusive Organisation

What is the difference between 'inclusion' and implementing a diversity policy? Here we examine how two contrasting organisations have addressed the legal requirements.

The last three years has seen increasing recognition of the need to embrace diversity and even more importantly for organisations to declare that they are well on the way to building a more inclusive workplace. The question arises – do they confuse inclusion with the development and implementation of an extensive diversity policy?

For many organisations, having a considered and balanced diversity policy may be a valuable achievement especially when the main focus is the need to mirror the markets and the societies they serve; however does it really go far enough?

Our recent work with a passenger transport executive and a university college, although essentially different in size, services, markets, responsibilities, legal and business imperatives, indicated that they had by law to start at the same point – the development and implementation of a detailed action plan.

The plan must start with securing commitment and direct action from each organisation's management team. This is followed by a review of their current position in relation to the balance within the workforce between ethnic, racial, gender, age, belief disability and sexual orientation, taking into account the variations in the community in which they operate.

As public sector organisations, they both have to follow the guidelines and legal requirements laid down by the government and their funding bodies. Even so, both organisations have a strong commitment to go beyond the mechanics. They have carried out the full range of actions required including:

- publishing their new vision, policy and action plan;
- reviewing all HR policies, adding new ones;
- ensuring that suppliers comply with new contractual commitments;
- making sure that their staff and customers have some initial awareness of the changes
- and finally carrying out training and ongoing development through internal action teams.

However achieving diversity by just complying with legal requirements is clearly neither a satisfactory end in itself nor the end of the story. It is just the beginning. In complex global markets and among working populations that are shifting, reducing and changing rapidly, it is not enough to respond to changes as they happen. It is necessary to be more pro-active and anticipate the changes to come.

For example one of the most immediate issues is our aging population which will result in a significant decrease in the number of people in work. Latest data indicates that by 2010 there will be 15 million more 'over 40s' and 15 million fewer people under 40.

To meet this challenge, organisations may need to search for future recruits from a much more eclectic and inclusive workforce to plug the gap. It is not enough to wait until it is too late. It will be in their best interests to take action now to create an inclusive work climate in which every individual can shine.

Simon Kettleborough (2005) described inclusion as

“Optimising the potential contribution made by every employee through recognising and utilising the gifts, skills and talents they bring to the organisation regardless of their membership of a minority group”.

In other words, inclusion is the aspiration – it is what each organisation (and society as a whole) needs to work towards for its own good. Implementing diversity is a 'starter pack'.

Each of our two organisations has started on the road by:

- successfully gaining the long term support and commitment of their leadership group
- ensuring that everyone has a common understanding about their organisation and its values relating to inclusion
- defining and explaining what is acceptable behaviour and what is not
- challenging others' views when they occur
- providing clear messages on inclusion and the benefits it will bring for everyone

Both organisations recognise that there is a lot more needs to be done and that it will take time, but they are building a firm foundation for the future development of an inclusive workforce.

For further information: Julie Firth 0113 283 8611, email julie@ccdu.co.uk