DIVERSITY & INCLUSION

THE ROLE OF INTERNAL COMMUNICATION

INTRODUCTION

2020 was a year that brought into sharp focus the racial and social inequalities that are still prevalent in today's society.

The events of the past 12 months have caused a lot of companies to reevaluate how diverse and inclusive they truly are and highlighted that there is much work to do internally for many.

This short briefing paper looks at the fundamental role that internal communication has to play in creating diverse and inclusive organisations and provides practical tips and guidance for fellow internal communicators.

THE ROLE OF INTERNAL COMMUNICATION

Many organisations claim they are diverse and inclusive and talk a lot about diversity being a priority, including it in corporate strategies and on company websites, but how many truly are diverse and inclusive?

Cultivating a diverse and inclusive environment for all employees goes much further than just hiring more individuals from underrepresented groups. It requires a cultural shift and a commitment at every level of the organisation.

Internal communication is fundamental in achieving this.

To help foster a diverse and inclusive culture, internal communication should assume two key responsibilities within all organisations:

- Informing, educating and supporting all employees to adopt inclusive attitudes and behaviours in all aspects of their working lives.

- Giving every individual a voice and sense of belonging within the organisation.

DRIVING DIVERSITY, INCLUSION & EQUITY

Here are my top five tips for how internal communication can achieve these deliverables and successfully drive diversity, inclusion and equity in your organisation.

1) Strong visible leadership support

First and foremost, diversity and inclusion must be championed from the top. If your senior leaders are not fully committed to the cultural shift that is needed, it won't happen. Asking your leaders to be visible sponsors of your diversity and inclusion activity and to lend their voice and influence to communications is one of the most effective ways to get your employees listening and to drive cultural change.

In my current organisation, we recently launched a diversity and inclusion advocacy programme for our Executive Team. As part of this, each member of the Executive Team is now a sponsor of one of our staff equality networks, which are affinity groups that aim to give diverse groups a voice within the organisation. As well as attending network meetings and listening to and actioning feedback, they act as a spokesperson for each group and provide regular updates from the networks in our monthly Executive newsletter. This has not only helped to raise the profile of these groups and any issues they are facing, but it has shown that the organisation and its leaders are fully committed to diversity and inclusion and to making a difference.

2) Define what diversity and inclusion mean to your organisation

Simply getting your leaders to talk about diversity and inclusion is not enough, they need to be able to articulate what diversity and inclusion mean to your organisation and why it's so important. Many organisations talk about diversity and inclusion being a priority, but often don't say why. In my experience, this is often down to confidence, but it's mostly due to a lack of clarity. It's imperative, therefore, to have a real discussion about why your organisation is committed to diversity and inclusion and why it's valued. Once this is fully understood, it's much easier to tell a coherent and compelling story.

A good place to start is ensuring that the business case for diversity and inclusion and how it impacts business success and performance is understood throughout the organisation. There is a plethora of research out there which shows that embracing and valuing different thoughts, ideas, experiences and identities makes for more successful and profitable organisations – the 'Delivering through diversity' report by McKinsey is one that I refer to often. Highlighting the business benefits of diversity and inclusion is one of the most effective ways of securing support and commitment across the organisation.

3) Create safe spaces for collective discussion

To help you understand the areas where your organisation needs to improve in relation to diversity and inclusion, and to ensure that colleagues feel supported, you need to create safe spaces where people can raise issues, talk about how they're feeling and share ideas without fear of repercussions. Affinity groups, such as the staff equality networks I referenced earlier, are a common way of creating these spaces. They give people a chance to meet with others who understand their experiences and share their feelings, and are a place to be heard, believed and supported.

While these groups are extremely important, I believe that internal communication should be striving to create organisation-wide safe spaces for these discussions. We should be facilitating regular opportunities for collective learning and dialogue around diversity and inclusion issues, which are aimed at everyone in the organisation, not just those directly impacted. That way, you can involve everybody in the conversation and in co-creating solutions. This provides a platform for people to share their experiences, but also creates opportunities for others to listen and to think about their role in supporting them and creating a more inclusive environment.

In my current role, we have organised several world café-style workshops on diversity and inclusion issues, which have produced insightful and productive discussions. During the workshops, employees had the opportunity to mix with people from different areas and levels of the business and from a variety of backgrounds. Colleagues were tasked with discussing various diversity and inclusion issues and collectively developing solutions which they then pitched to the rest of the room. The workshops not only inspired some great ideas, but they sent out a powerful message that diversity and inclusion is everyone's responsibility, not just the Diversity and Inclusion teams.

4) Be transparent and own your position

Transparency is a key principle in all communication, but it's even more important when you're discussing a subject like diversity and inclusion. Regardless of how you're doing as an organisation, being transparent about your current position is crucial. You should celebrate your strengths, but you also need to own your weaknesses, communicate your challenges and present a clear plan for improvement. Not only will employees appreciate your openness, but it shows that the organisation is taking responsibility and demonstrates your commitment to change.

This could be done through annually publishing the demographics of your employees or your gender and ethnic pay gap data, or simply through a communication which states: "*this is where we are right now, but this is our vision for where we want to be*". By failing to be transparent and disclose such information, it gives the perception that you are trying to hide something and shirk accountability, which suggests that you aren't taking it seriously.

5) Celebrate your organisation's diversity and inclusivity

Highlighting your organisation's diversity in your communications and campaigns, internally and externally, is incredibly important in promoting an inclusive culture. There can be a tendency in communications to roll out the same 'go-to people' but it's important to use a diverse range of colleagues and accurately represent your workforce. Whether you're producing videos, case studies, imagery or events, use employees from all levels and areas of the business, and from a mix of backgrounds. This will help to demonstrate your inclusive culture and enable employees to see others from similar backgrounds within the organisation.

I want to be clear that this isn't about tokenism; it's about making sure your communications are inclusive and are representing your current and future workforce. As mentioned above, being transparent is incredibly important and this includes not misrepresenting your workforce and using things like stock images to appear as something you're not.

Recognising religious festivals and days of significance across different communities is another way of celebrating your diversity and inclusivity. In my current organisation, we go beyond wishing people a happy Eid, Diwali or Hannukah; we take the opportunity to educate employees about the festivals and the religions and this has been well received. For awareness days/weeks/months, we work closely with our Diversity and Inclusion team to run

events which educate colleagues about different minority groups and their struggles. We did this recently for Disability History Month where employees got the opportunity to hear from several Paralympians about their experiences and struggles and how they'd overcome them.

Finally, it's vital that you don't let diversity and inclusion slip off the agenda. It should be a stalwart item across all your channels. Actively promote diversity and inclusion initiatives, recognise days of significance, clearly share support and resources, and provide regular updates on what your organisation is doing to drive your diversity and inclusion strategy and what this means for employees.

What are you doing to drive diversity and inclusion in your organisation? Get in touch and let me know!

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