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Facilitating the Conversation: The CHRO's Role in Improving Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

John Doyle

EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT



Addressing COVID-19 may have been the top priority for businesses during 2020, but the year was also defined by a significant focus on diversity. During an already challenging time, this increased emphasis on inequality translated to social unrest in America and within workforces. Studies prove how critical this has become: [76% of professionals](#) say having a diverse workforce is an important factor when evaluating job offers, and 32% say they would not apply for a job at an organization that lacks diversity.

As a result, companies are once again forced to take a hard look at how these issues impact their organizations. What they're finding is that there is no fast solution. Improving diversity and inclusion takes time, and it must start with fostering a new kind of discussion with employees. CHROs play a crucial role in facilitating the conversations that will lead to true, positive change.

There Is No Quick Fix

In the past, many businesses typically avoided taking a stand on social issues, fearing backlash. However, 2020 has shown that the expectations of employees and consumers have evolved, and ignoring today's social issues puts a company's reputation at risk. Doing so can result in a loss of customers and talent, negatively impacting the bottom line, recruiting, engagement, and culture. Even with these stakes, there is an instinct for some companies to only do surface-level work, creating a Band-Aid fix for a deeper wound that can't be solved in one quarter or with one hire. Marketing, communications, or statements that go out addressing social unrest without comprehensive, enterprise-wide initiatives will likely backfire.

People issues are HR issues. CHROs are uniquely positioned to lead the way and help undo systemic inequities that were likely embedded in their companies well before they rose to the role. In the past, some HR departments may have been accused of protecting companies over employees, but today, the priority must be employee wellbeing. Diversity isn't just about increasing the numbers of diverse people in the workforce; it's a completely new way of interacting, hiring, and providing a healthy environment that spurs an inclusive culture for everyone.

Most CHROs do not have the answers to this complex issue. Therefore, they must work to uncover true solutions. That's what makes this people issue so different from other HR issues. During unprecedented times like these, CHROs cannot rely on any playbook from the past. Go-to, off-the-shelf corporate diversity training modules and cookie-cutter handouts will

not suffice and may come off as tone deaf. The way forward will require true effort and a completely new way of thinking.

Facilitating the Difficult Conversation

Since there is no easy fix, the only way to find a solution is through discussion and open dialogue. It means having honest conversations with employees for possibly the first time. Active and unbiased listening like this has rarely happened before, but it's what will lead to understanding. Even diverse HR leaders and other senior executives can't completely empathize with all their employees because different groups have different experiences.

It's a nuanced situation that requires the CHRO to facilitate open conversation in a safe and trusting environment. They're the crucial link, the conduit, between employees and the CEO and Board of Directors who are ultimately the ones leading the company forward and making the decisions that spur real change. Conversations are also important because only 19% of employees trust senior leaders when it comes to diversity, while 66% trust other employees. A company's lack of diversity and inclusion can no longer be avoided and addressing it directly with employees not only uncovers what's really happening and leads to progress, but it also builds trust in a company.

These efforts come at a time when the collective voice of employees is stronger than ever before. For example, Glassdoor recently unveiled a new tool that empowers professionals to rate their satisfaction with their current or former employers' diversity and inclusion policies on a scale from zero to five. This and other social media platforms are only accelerating access to this type of information for job seekers, as well as current employees. It's up to HR departments to be that outlet and seek to understand frustrations related to diversity or inclusion through conversation before disenfranchised employees feel the need to vent publicly.

Commitment to reaching a solution requires dedication to a long-term strategy. As markets rebound from the pandemic and life returns to a new "post-2020" normal, the efforts to address employee inequality or lack of corporate diversity cannot waver. Relaxing on this front once economic recovery is in full swing undermines the goal and will ring hollow to employees, candidates, and customers.

Every business will have to respond in its own unique way based on its workforce. As CHROs seek to better understand who employees are and how to best support them, a number of questions will be asked: What are employees experiencing? Are they proud to be part of their

organization? What changes do they want to see out of their employer? As the eyes and ears of the company, HR is well-positioned to facilitate that conversation and show that these are no longer taboo subjects to talk about.

Discovering what employees want through real discussions will help leadership translate that information into measurable, positive change that makes a tangible and sustainable difference in employees' lives. Achieving these goals not only improves the employee experience and helps them truly thrive, but it helps a business succeed as well. Change doesn't happen overnight, but CHROs are tasked with starting the process that will lead to a better, more inclusive corporate culture.

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