Introduction

According to the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 75 per cent of workplace harassment victims don’t report it. Why would they choose to suffer in silence? There could be several reasons – all of which must be addressed to ensure an inclusive work environment in which all employees thrive.

Many employees fear retaliation from their employer, their harasser or other employees if they report discrimination or harassment. Or, perhaps even worse, they don’t think their concerns would be taken seriously. A toxic workplace culture makes them afraid to come forward.

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To address these issues and embrace diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) in your organization, you need to focus on changing the workplace culture.

An inclusive culture requires changes to your internal policies, employee behavior and leadership's influence. These all work together to encourage DEI and discourage abusive and unfair behavior.

When you first implement your DEI strategy, it makes sense to start by getting upper management on board. But don’t rely on inclusivity to trickle down from the top. Instead, ask each team leader or manager to promote DEI within their team.

**Ready to get started?**

Here are six steps to take when developing your company’s DEI strategy.
First, conduct an assessment of your current workplace culture. Start by determining what you want to learn from the assessment. Typical employee engagement surveys ask about motivation and work satisfaction. However, this data doesn’t give you insight into the DEI reality of your workplace culture.

An assessment survey focused on DEI should ask employees whether they:

- trust their leaders
- are comfortable talking about difficult subjects with their manager
- have experienced or witnessed harassment or bullying
- feel that the company’s workforce is diverse
- are fairly compensated for their work, compared to others in the company
- feel valued by the other members on their team

After surveying employees, analyze the data. Do women report pay inequities? Do employees of color feel safe reporting harassment to their managers?

Don’t assume that everything is fine because a vocal majority says so. Make your company welcoming and safe for everyone by addressing the concerns of each group.
Step Two: Determine Objectives for Your Program

For this step, you’ll need to compile a team made up of employees from different departments and levels. Make sure the group is racially and culturally diverse and represents all genders in your workforce.

Then, determine next steps based on the results of your culture assessment. Set goals and develop specific actionable steps to reach each objective.

For example, if your objective is to build trust as you change your workplace culture, one goal could be to help employees heal. Actionable steps to achieve this could include advertising your EAP and counselors covered by your employee healthcare plan. Another goal might be to increase transparency, with open question periods with the CEO as an actionable step.
Step Three: Determine and Communicate Your Core Values

Examine the core values your company embraces and ensure they are consistent with a culture that values diversity, equity and inclusion. If they aren’t, embark on a core values exercise with upper management to re-evaluate them. Once you’ve got the right core values identified for your company, it’s time to get the rest of the company on board.

Core values don’t do any good if they’re just words on a website or in your employee handbook. Use them to guide and inform your DEI strategy to make it fit with your company’s needs and vision.

In addition, turn your core values into core competencies required for every employee. Do you value teamwork? Independence? Creativity? Assess employee performance based on these core values and hire new employees based on them.

This practice reinforces your commitment to DEI by forcing you to evaluate employees and applicants based on their character and experience, not physical or cultural attributes.
Step Four: Provide DEI Training

To really drive home your new DEI messages, rework your anti-harassment and discrimination training modules for employees.

Don’t just focus on legal definitions and consequences of harassment and discrimination.

Teach employees how to show respect and empathy for others. Include a lesson on how they can stand up to bullies on a coworker’s behalf. **Arm employees with information on how and when to intervene**, including scripts to use when addressing abusive behavior.

In addition to the regular employee training, managers and leaders should learn how to support victims and spot warning signs of DEI issues. Teach them how to identify problematic behavior and address it before it escalates. Include support techniques and resources they can share with their employees who are victims of harassment and discrimination (e.g. EAP, support groups, etc.). Ensure your training for managers covers hiring, onboarding, pay decisions, performance evaluations and communication skills.
Step Five: Create Psychological Safety

Regardless of the specific objectives for your company’s DEI program, creating a psychologically safe work environment for all your employees should always take top priority.

Psychological safety means employees can speak up without fear when they experience or witness a DEI issue. They don’t have to worry that their concerns will go unanswered or that they’ll be retaliated against by the harasser or by their employer.

To promote psychological safety, start by treating harassment and discrimination as performance problems. An employee who is always late disrupts the work environment, and treating coworkers disrespectfully does, too.

Next, focus on perception after reports of DEI issues. Help the accused person understand how their coworkers perceive their behavior, why they feel that way and how to eliminate these negative perceptions. Teaching bullies empathy makes the workplace safer and more positive for everyone.
Step Six: Encourage Compassion

Finally, encourage employees to treat each other with kindness and altruism. Those with more privilege should use their position to amplify the voices of their colleagues who aren’t heard as often.

**Being kind** means standing up for someone when a bully makes a racist remark towards them or ensuring a person gets credit for an idea they shared in a meeting.
When developing your company’s diversity, equity and inclusion strategy, empathy is key. When all of your employees feel safe, welcome and heard, your workplace will be more positive and productive.

To read more about DEI and find other helpful HR tips, visit our resources section and watch our free webinars.