CRISIS MANAGEMENT

Adapt Your D&I Efforts to the Reality of the Crisis

by Lily Zheng

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As a diversity, equity, and inclusion consultant, Covid-19 hit my business hard. First slowly and then seemingly all at once: my talks and panels were cancelled, travel plans nixed, and workshops and in-person events cleared off the calendar. As workplaces shut down and employees moved to working from home, my colleagues inside organizations shared stories about lunch & learns, speaker panels, workshops, and other DE&I programming haphazardly moved to virtual, postponed indefinitely, or simply cancelled.

Over a month later, much of it has yet to come back.

Many DE&I practitioners inside companies tell me that internal diversity initiatives have stalled. As companies everywhere brace for an oncoming recession, programs have been shuttered or postponed indefinitely. “We’re down to essential things only,” one VP explained to me, expressing an increasingly commonplace sentiment: “Diversity work is nice, but not essential.”

We are in two crises right now, an economic crisis and a people crisis, and organizations that acknowledge only one risk exacerbating the other. DE&I efforts can be a powerful solution to both challenges — but the nature of diversity work must evolve to meet that charge. We need to broaden our definition of DE&I work to capture the new challenges of working amid a pandemic and develop an approach that focuses on solving real problems, not maintaining appearances.

**Responding to Covid-19 Requires DE&I**

Too many leaders think of DE&I work narrowly, as a limited set of initiatives aimed at increasing representation through hiring, creating a sense of inclusion through event programming, and pursuing equity through incremental change to processes and policies — all of which is easily downsized during a crisis. But there’s much more under the DE&I umbrella that is essential at moments like this. Leaders need to understand that some of the immediate obstacles they face are also critical DE&I challenges. Here are a few examples.
Crisis communications. Different segments of customer and employee populations are impacted by the Covid-19 crisis in drastically different ways. Some employees are dealing with inconveniences while others are seeing their families and communities fight to stay alive. Some customers are looking for reassurance that their favorite brands are maintaining business as usual, while others are looking for a signal that businesses are adapting to the crisis. The team of leaders who are on the front lines of communication during and after this crisis need to demonstrate cultural competence in order to deliver effective, informative, and genuine messages to different groups.

Middle management. The job of being a middle manager just got a lot harder. More than ever, managers are dealing with the impacts of social inequality magnified by a pandemic, scrambling to support employees dealing with increased racial discrimination, those with mental health challenges made worse by stress and anxiety, and those who risk their lives to make a paycheck they can’t afford to miss, to name a few.

Remote work. Conflict resolution, employee engagement, and problem-solving hinge on how employees connect to their company culture and their feelings of belonging in the organization. Fostering a universal sense of belonging and connection through messaging apps, teleconferencing, and email is a challenging goal, but those that get it right will see enormous payoffs.

Companies that are unable to meet these challenges have far more to lose than they did three months ago. Companies that aren’t able to solve these people-centric challenges — and thus DE&I challenges — won’t survive.

Think Small and Strategic
In my experience, companies tend to pursue two kinds of approaches to DE&I. The first is costly and highly visible; think days-long all-expenses-paid events or ambitious efforts to offer every employee coaching and training. The second is perfunctory and performative, with one or two full-time employees running a barebones and mostly volunteer-driven events calendar.
Companies need a third model that is adaptable, cost-efficient, and focused on solving the problems employees are experiencing now. Here’s how leaders can pursue such a model:

**Prioritize knowledge-gathering.** Start by collecting information on the pain points and opportunities that are most pressing. Several companies I work with added questions related to the Covid-19 crisis to their weekly pulse surveys and disaggregated the results by demographics to gauge how different employees were coping. Be creative: if you choose to survey, consider whether you’ll use a company-wide survey or smaller surveys within units or teams, and if you want to develop the survey in-house or work with specialized third-party services.

But surveys aren’t the only way to gain information. Renaissance Learning, an educational software company, organized a remote conversation featuring members of their New York office. Hearing individual stories and experiences of people living in a coronavirus hotspot made the impact of this crisis more real to the organization’s managers and leaders, many who live in less hard-hit regions of the U.S.

At Upwork, the freelance platform, the Office of Diversity, Inclusion & Belonging worked with their employee resource group leaders to organize a discussion series on the differential impact of Covid-19 for different communities. To discuss anti-Asian racism, they recently hosted a webinar showcasing the personal experience of Asian ERG leaders and partnered with Awaken, a DE&I training company with deep expertise on historical systems of inequality, to facilitate a conversation on practical strategies to combat xenophobia.

**Match problems with specialists.** Rather than treating DE&I as a bundle of issues to address with one-size-fits-all company-wide initiatives, get granular and focus on solving specific challenges. Grav, a scientific glass company, struggled with maintaining the morale of its warehouse workers — mostly Black and brown employees — who continued commuting to work while their office workers shifted to working remotely. With the help of Mindy Gulati, a DE&I consultant, the company troubleshooted the issue and learned that warehouse workers were worried not only about equity, but also about potential
negative interactions with law enforcement during their commute. Knowing this, the company set up opportunities for warehouse workers, leaders, and WFH employees to connect, increased compensation and accommodations for warehouse employees, and ensured that all workers had the paperwork they needed if they were stopped by law enforcement. Morale significantly improved and remains high more than a month later.

Be creative about finding the right people to help you tackle the specific challenges you identify. Your company may already have people with the necessary skills or expertise but who aren’t in formal DE&I roles. Consider temporarily flexing their role to allow them to take on these challenges. If you choose to work with an external firm, try to find a group that offers flexible, context-dependent services (rather than off-the-shelf solutions) or consider bringing in a mix of smaller firms and specialists to work on problems in parallel. This will require coordination but will ensure you’re addressing the problems your company faces — not the ones other companies face.

Centralize strategy, decentralize implementation. DE&I work done through a top-down, command-and-control style rarely works. Yet, leaving the implementation to individual managers or units often leads to inconsistent results, where some parts of the organization end up with robust DE&I programs and others have very little. Instead, work both angles. Create a strong DE&I strategy at the top and empower individual managers to interpret and implement it within the context of their day-to-day work.

What makes a good DE&I strategy? The best go beyond stating company diversity goals to also detail why these goals matter to the company’s mission, how they embody and strengthen the company’s values, and with what methods they can be achieved. They are also flexible enough to allow for different ways of solving problems across teams and units.
Just as many large companies have adopted a broad Covid-19 strategy but leave its implementation to individual offices, units, or managers on the ground, the same approach will work with DE&I. When I work with companies, I take the following steps:

- Work closely with senior leadership and executives to develop the strategy itself, build buy-in, and secure resources
- Align managers on what this strategy means and what they’re expected to do (and not do) while carrying it out
- Coach individual managers to adapt and interpret the strategy to work best within the context of their own units and teams
- Partner with HR to create feedback loops and metrics that allow managers to gauge how they are meeting the strategic goals

While it’s tempting to respond to uncertainty and financial pressure by dropping DE&I programs, it won’t serve your organization in the long run. These efforts can be both scrappy and effective, strategic and sustainable. DE&I can be the means by which your company not only survives this crisis but comes out on the other side of it stronger.

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