Diversity Equity and Inclusion Issues (DEI) in the Corporate Communications Function, an analysis and summary of findings. Prepared by Judith Cushman, Consulting and Retained Search in Communications. jcushman@jc-a.com, Bellevue, 425 392 8660.

With the cooperation of senior officers and consultants in Communications in the following organizations (see list below), I conducted candid and in-depth discussions from two perspectives: the first relates to the activities and policies as described by company representatives and the second relates to personal experiences of senior leaders from diverse backgrounds (African American, Latino and Asian professionals.)

These were confidential discussions. Several sources had established their own consulting organizations. That option was mentioned as a career path for diversity professionals thwarted by corporate barriers to their success. Names of these organizations are confidential.

Aston Martin
California Resources Corporation
Coca-Cola
eBay
Exxon
GM
Lenovo
Page Society (for Senior Leaders in Corporate Communications)
Sony
Consultants (3)

BACKGROUND

My goal in conducting this research was to talk to corporate leaders who have already expressed support for Diversity and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives and to see what efforts succeeded and at what level they were addressing solutions. Was it for their group? Was it a focus on hiring? Was it to encourage more of an emphasis on DEI retention? I also wanted to have an unvarnished picture of what corporate life was like for successful, high-level diversity professionals.

ANALYSIS

While all of the corporate representatives agreed that Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) issues were important to their organizations, the actual commitment made to support that assertion varied from tokenism, a focus only on hiring, to in-depth and pervasive activities meant to influence the culture of global organizations. There are very few success stories and even the most proactive organizations report they have only scratched the surface. No one said they had all the answers.

The reality is that while this is an important priority, a senior officer has many important priorities land on her/his desk every day. How many of these can s/he address? Perhaps the top 3 or 4? So, does D&I make the top 3 or 4 or does that officer decide to do the minimum necessary (good enough) and move on to the next crisis? Is it a matter of triage—do just enough to meet his job performance criteria?

Once the issue of Diversity and Inclusion is fully explored, the complexity and scope of the effort needed becomes clearer and more challenging. It takes awareness and support from the entire organization to effectively address the issue over the long-term. Is that where a communication leader wants to invest her/his time?

TOPICS:

Retention/Inclusion: What assistance do diversity candidates feel is most needed? How Important is a Mentor? The Mentor's role and other support. How can you measure the impact of Diversity programs? Recruitment; Two Examples of Valuable Programs; Rethinking the hiring process; The role of the Vice President, Diversity.

RETENTION/INCLUSION: WHAT ASSISTANCE DO DIVERSITY CANDIDATES FEEL IS MOST NEEDED?

HOW IMPORTANT IS A MENTOR?

It appears the efforts at inclusion that companies have been addressing by creating specific short-term programs, did not adequately meet the needs that I heard time and time again from diversity incumbents. It was also clear that these incumbents were speaking from their perspectives and were not reflecting on the challenges involved in meeting their requests for an on-going mentor and additional counseling services.

A solution was needed in advance so that hiring a diversity candidate is a "win" for the team. If not addressed, special treatment could isolate the new hire. Not belonging and not ever fitting into the group for whatever reason, were issues mentioned by diversity consultants. It accounted for feeling uncomfortable and leaving. New diverse hires said the outreach to have lunch or to socialize needed to come from members of the team and was not something they felt they could initiate. Their superiors would need organizational support to solve the issue of favoritism and "special treatment" to establish these relationships.

THE MENTOR'S ROLE and OTHER SUPPORT

Despite the major initiatives companies create, diverse professionals express a need for continuity, of having a one-to-one relationship with mentors as they advance in the company. The mentors (mostly white men) are accountable as part of their job description for the success of the diversity hire and have specific criteria to meet. Regular meetings are held and reported on.

Feedback, as an example, about how to behave in a meeting and understanding specific behaviors of attendees are examples of coaching offered. One mentor explained that a new hire should socialize after work on occasion and that was essential to being welcomed on the team. S/he was also told not to work 18 hours a day.

Cultural factors can play a role in why a new hire might need assistance. One Latino manager commented that family values and being home for children's activities may run counter to company culture. The incumbent may adjust to the culture once he realizes that s/he needs to alter his normal routine. In Asian cultures, it is expected that one works and does not speak up. That is not acceptable behavior in the US for a manager. Especially for a woman, counseling and training may be needed.

A mentor can be an advocate for a diverse candidate that is not getting visibility with company leaders. Mentors can be peers or more likely superiors.

In addition, there is also a role for a sponsor with casual responsibilities for the advancement of the new hire. The sponsor's performance review is not tied to the success of the incumbent (while the mentor's role is linked.) The sponsor may have input relating to specific actions and schedule occasional meetings. S/he may also be an advocate for the candidate at more senior levels in the company.

For issues that are inappropriate to discuss with a company representative, the incumbent should have access to a coach outside the organization.

One comment from a consultant was that with a strong mentor relationship, retention was much higher than usual (no specifics mentioned.) An issue that has arisen for companies with effective DEI programs is the loss of highly valued employees. They are lured away by extremely high compensation packages to join organizations that might be under pressure to meet diversity goals. Lucrative contracts could be tied to diversity statistics, so the extremely high offers can be justified as the cost of doing business. For some companies, it is worth offering retention bonuses to counter that potential loss.

Another highly respected consultant reported on a meeting he held with 20 diverse professionals. He learned that half had been let go by their current employers with no specific reason given and no prior feedback indicating there were any issues. The other 10 were all doing well in their corporate roles. He discovered the successful employees all had mentors advising them about the behaviors expected and unwritten cultural norms of their organizations.

I would surmise that providing negative feedback to diverse candidates (the other 10 were simply cut back) is an extremely treacherous task and easily subject to litigation. The decision was made to find a "safe" solution by not giving incumbents any specifics for their job loss.

In thinking about that story, another issue arises about the mentor relationship. If the mentor's performance is tied to the success of the new hire, the mentor needs to be prepared for that role, to offer constructive criticism and effective guidance. If the new hire is not succeeding despite that help, the mentor will need to be truthful and not be fearful of repercussions.

HOW CAN YOU MEASURE THE IMPACT OF DIVERSITY PROGRAMS?

There are layers of challenges to consider. Diversity is no longer described by simple ethnic or racial origins. We are seeing sexual orientation, attitudinal, geographic, experiential and other criteria expanding the definition. When an organization attempts to report its efficacy using statistics, what should be measured? Or should there be an entirely new way to evaluate performance?

What are the levels of the diverse candidates? Junior? Mid? Senior? Is there a record of retention? Or, should an organization be applauded for its efforts simply for trying? Here's an example: naming a VP of DEI, or by establishing new methods of recruiting (without determining results.)

There are companies that have established specific internal programs to provide advancement and visibility for diverse professionals, should that be part of the evaluation? While these issues are unresolved, contracts for communications services are being awarded. Organizations are reporting a sufficiently diverse workforce (traditionally defined by ethnic categories) that is also representative of the communities they serve. However, the criteria appear to be out of date and discourage more accurate reporting and effective performance metrics.

RECRUITMENT

There is also the problem of sourcing or finding candidates from Diverse backgrounds, particularly at the senior levels. I heard that often from corporate officers. However, when I explored that issue in more depth, it appears the sourcing efforts are the normal channels and that the hiring criteria are narrow. There was little new thinking being brought to bear on the problem.

One corporate leader when asked about his recruiting efforts indicated he relied on his HR recruiting team. I asked if he specified that the recruiter should look at new sources for Diversity hires and he said he didn't ask. I also asked if he knew if his HR recruiter was looking for qualified diversity candidates and he said he didn't know. However, he headed a global organization and rotated international comms staff to various offices around the globe for several year assignments. He brought diversity to his organization through that approach. He was aware that more could be done.

When I discussed the recruitment issue with consultants and individuals, I was told there *were* resources and it required more effort to identify candidates. One corporate officer said he insisted that when he retained search firms to fill a communications post, that the slate included a diverse candidate. He felt it was necessary to make it a requirement of the assignment otherwise he would not be interviewing any diverse candidates. Another organization was more specific saying if 3 candidates were to be interviewed as finalists, 1 of the 3 would be diverse.

The implications for a corporation to meet this DEI requirement permeate the entire recruitment and hiring effort. Once a decision is made to present a diverse slate of candidate to fill one position, that approach will set an example of how to fill others in the department—and beyond, particularly if the Human Resources department becomes an advocate for this approach.

TWO EXAMPLES OF VALUABLE DIVERSITY PROGRAMS.

The first of the programs, that was described to me, required organizational and policy support across complex global operations. In addition to the corporation's Mentor program, this program is an initiative to break down silos across the company and give visibility to talented diversity incumbents. These employees were offered an opportunity to take on a special project for 6-months. My contact was in the blended

Communications/Community Affairs area. Senior business leaders from across the organization are selected for a Leadership Council to solicit input for case studies from company sources.

A group of about 30 talented diversity employees are selected to participate. The group is divided into 4 or 5 teams and each is given different topics/problems to solve. The teams self-organize, meet regularly, attend workshops and seminars and have access to the Leadership Council.

At the end of 6-months they present their recommendations to the Council and other senior business leaders. Their solutions are evaluated leaving excellent impressions on leaders from across the organization. At the same time, participants are in contact with other colleagues worldwide.

In addition to this program, the company has initiated a number of diversity-focused training programs including ones specific to women helping them further develop the qualities/behaviors that are essential in a leader.

The second example is about a company that is approaching Diversity Equity and Inclusion initiatives from a strategic, holistic commitment starting at the CEO level. The company is a top-ranking Fortune 500. When I asked about the justification for the commitment, the head of communications answered that neither he nor his CEO need any more statistics about the importance of the work. “We are both convinced this is the right thing to do.”

He said the company has committed to a new, system-wide approach to both the hiring and retention of diversity employees at every level. He added, “We have done the easy work over the past three years and now we are assembling a combination of internal and external experts to help us.”

He said the initial (diversity) hires must have the fortitude to be lonely (as they build a more diverse workforce) in addition to having all the qualifications to do the job. From a values perspective he said, “We have to be vulnerable and humble and seek buy-in from every level of the organization (for this initiative). We will need to have the courage to have our eyes wide open and move from both directions-- top to bottom and bottom to top-- seeing the impact of this work on the hierarchy of the organization.

“This will be a challenge. I believe this work will be judged by how we perform. If we are recognized for doing this work for the right reasons, I think we will create a culture that embraces change. I think we will make our actions transparent, inclusive and eliminate unconscious bias.

“I’m not dictating a solution. I’m saying to our employees, ‘I’m going to try and I need your help’. We are making progress. However, this is not a problem that can be fixed only by hiring (diverse candidates.) We need to change.

“I know this is costing us. The communications function needs creativity and discipline. I believe you must have Diversity. I can’t give it (our initiative) a precise cost. It has taken 3-years to change how we do normal things. Now we need a broader swath of representation and we must seek a disproportionate level of diversity hires to make that happen.

“We all have unconscious biases and the combination of internal and external experts we have assembled will help us to understand that. I think it will take a minimum of 1-2 years, but it could be 4. I believe the authenticity of the work will influence change…I seek out and express the values that unite our culture and bring us together. “

RETHINKING THE INTERVIEWING PROCESS

Here are suggestions to avoid the trap of hiring for comfort and compatibility.

Use the resources of the HR department to establish objective criteria (based on the job description) for evaluating candidates in one to one interviews. Use the same approach for each candidate along with time for questions and conversation. Can HR help with issues of unconscious bias?

Evaluate the hiring processes to determine what an effective, objective hiring panel should look like and what the panel should agree to in advance in order to make a hiring decision.

Set guidelines for the candidate pool to reflect a diverse slate of candidates that meet the criteria. Be patient and persistent. Set a realistic timetable for results.

Be flexible about where the experience was gained as long as the skill set is comprehensive and at the right level (e.g. Manager vs. Director)

Evaluate this hiring process and determine if it is effective. If the process is viable, should this approach be the model as part of an ongoing effort to hire diverse talent?

Determine at what levels these processes can be implemented. Filling most senior positions will be challenging. There is competition for candidates with DEI backgrounds at mid-levels (with proven track records) and above. Salaries for these candidates may be inflated as companies strive to “make their numbers.”

Be prepared to accelerate the interviewing process (do not eliminate steps). Fast track the process.

THE ROLE OF THE VICE PRESIDENT, DIVERSITY

In companies I contacted, there is at a minimum, a Vice President of Diversity. That role varies from a one-person resource to a department of 12 (of the companies I spoke to) reporting to the head of Human Resources. My research has focused on discussions with Communications leaders and I have briefly discussed the role of the Diversity VP with them.

I have also read job descriptions that describe a high level of support for DEI Initiatives but do not discuss specific areas of responsibility or authority. I understand that the Diversity VP can be an important partner working with the Communications team.

A recent article named 10 leading VPs of DEI and only one extremely qualified VP was a white male. The rest were either African American or Latino. Are we getting into the problem of reverse discrimination?

Is the role always going to be filled with a Diversity candidate? Where is the career path for the current VP? If s/he is in the HR department, what other roles can s/he be promoted into? Can another member of the HR team be promoted into the role if s/he is not from a diverse background?

I look forward to continuing our discussions and answering any additional questions. Thank you.