

Better Call Sarah: Workplace DEI

November 21, 2024

By Sarah Goodman



Dear Sarah,

I've been reflecting on how best to promote diversity and inclusion in my workplace. With year-end reviews and the holidays around the corner, I want to make sure that our DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) initiatives are truly making a difference. There's also the looming concern of the potential rollback of education-based affirmative action policies and DEI programs under the upcoming Trump administration. With these shifts on the horizon, many in corporate America are wondering how to adapt and continue fostering inclusivity in their organizations. What strategies can I implement to ensure my team remains inclusive, diverse, and equitable in an evolving political and corporate landscape?

- Inclusive Innovator

Dear Inclusive Innovator,

Thank you for your insightful question! November is a great time for you to focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), especially as the holiday season approaches and often highlights cultural diversity. Fostering an inclusive workplace can enhance employee morale while driving innovation and productivity. Corporate DEI policies are facing increased scrutiny and legal challenges, even as the U.S. workforce becomes more diverse. As diversity continues to grow in both familiar and unexpected ways, DEI programs will be crucial for organizations looking to thrive in this evolving environment.

While DEI programs will vary based on each organization's unique goals, effective programs often share key elements:

-

Make Anti-Discrimination Central to Your DEI Policy: Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits employment discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. Challenges to DEI programs frequently arise from claims of discrimination against protected groups. To prevent misinterpretations that could create perceptions of favoritism—and thus undermine your program's effectiveness—ensure that strong non-discrimination principles are integral to your DEI policies. Legally, employers cannot favor specific races, genders, or religions in hiring and promotion. Evaluate whether your DEI initiatives truly foster an inclusive culture that values all employees and promotes an equitable playing field. A compliant DEI program can expand the talent pool for jobs and promotions by proactively engaging with diverse communities.

-

Align DEI Goals with Your Organizational Mission and Culture: Before developing a DEI program, consider your

organization's identity. Understanding your mission, audience, operational methods, and regulatory context will help frame how DEI supports broader goals rather than appearing as an afterthought.

•

Analyze Your Current and Future Workforce Composition: Root your DEI program in your current workforce. Understand individual and team dynamics to make informed decisions about future enhancements. While demographic statistics can offer insights, approach them carefully to avoid oversimplification. Instead of giving "preference" to specific groups, adopt identity-neutral DEI strategies that eliminate bias. These strategies can include structured recruitment and promotion processes with clear, transparent, merit-based criteria; removing biased language from evaluations; and applying employee benefits equitably.

•

Clearly Define "Diversity": Specify the aspects of diversity your DEI policy aims to address and why. In a compliant DEI program, a true commitment to non-discrimination in a diverse workforce should naturally lead to greater diversity within your organization.

•

Clarify "Equity" and "Inclusion" Definitions: These terms can be broad and sometimes contradictory. Equity doesn't mean identical outcomes for everyone but rather tailored support that enhances each employee's chances for success. Inclusion means ensuring that all employees can thrive, fostering teamwork that appreciates diversity. Build a DEI program that encourages a more inclusive workplace culture without directly affecting individual employment benefits.

•

Review Training Materials for Alignment with Your Organizational Values: DEI training materials vary widely in quality. Be cautious about training that could conflict with state laws, particularly in states where DEI-related legislation is being challenged.

Given the current climate surrounding DEI, some organizations may hesitate to pursue these programs. However, as society and the workforce continue to diversify, it's essential to adapt. Rather than retreat, consider this an opportunity to develop DEI programs that resonate with the needs of an evolving society.