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LEADERSHIP FOCUS

Leading Diverse Teams Post-Pandemic

By Tom Barry

Due to the pandemic, the workplace climate has changed considerably. Discussing politics and social issues at work is part of the new normal. Conversations and efforts surrounding diversity, equity and inclusion are at the forefront in many organizations, and no one can deny that issues such as police brutality, attitudes toward COVID-19 prevention and climate change directly impact individual employees' everyday lives.

Employers are also discovering it makes a difference when people are able to express themselves and feel heard at work. Employees who feel respected and engaged will invest more of themselves in their jobs because they feel comfortable contributing new ideas.

Discussions around social issues can be polarizing and challenging to navigate. That is why it is crucial for leaders to bridge opposing sides. While this is no easy feat, it is possible with the right approach. An organization's success depends upon leaders who build trust, create opportunities for open dialogue and lead by example.

Building a Foundation of Trust

When it comes to cultivating a culture of open communication and respect in the workplace, trust is paramount. Leading an organization based on trust has significant benefits. In a January-February 2017 *Harvard Business Review* article titled "The Neuroscience of Trust," Paul J. Zak cited research showing that employers with the highest levels of trust see 106 percent more energy from employees than do employers with the lowest levels of trust. High-trust organizations also experience 50 percent higher productivity, 76 percent more engagement and 40 percent less employee burnout. Those numbers translate into a thriving organization.

Oftentimes, organizations will broadcast the false trope that their employees are family while simultaneously telling individuals to leave their emotional baggage at home. When individuals feel they must turn off part of themselves at work, it can lead to trust issues. If employees cannot trust their leaders, the organization will suffer.

> **From the *HR20/20 Report* …**
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> The effective HR leader maximizes the opportunity to link the people component with effective and efficient business strategies to achieve successful, measurable outcomes.

The opposite is also true. Organizations do best when employees bring their whole selves to work and use their personal knowledge of the world and relationships to contribute valuable insights and experiences.

Creating Safe Spaces for Discourse

For leaders to become trustworthy, they must practice empathy and active listening when an employee shares an experience from their personal life or insights regarding social issues. When staff members have a safe space to discuss topics that affect their lives and impact their work, they will feel valued and empowered. This translates to a more productive, innovative and confident team.

Holding listening sessions is an effective way to take the temperature of teams within an organization. Similar to focus groups, listening sessions invite people to talk openly about their experiences and concerns while leaders listen and observe. Feedback from participants helps leaders gauge what is and what is not working so they can begin changing things for the better. When employees feel heard and changes are made based on their input, trust within the organization will solidify.

Employee resource groups (ERGs) are also effective for helping employees feel valued when they are members of a diverse team. Employee-led and with entirely voluntary participation, ERGs bring together people who have shared experiences and characteristics such as ethnicity, gender and/or interests. The groups create valuable connections and foster a community of support in the workplace. Meetings can be held in person or virtually, depending on the needs and preferences of the

organization and employees. The important thing is that ERG members stay engaged, regardless of the setting.

Ground rules are necessary for both listening sessions and ERGs to ensure everyone has the opportunity to participate and to keep meetings on track. A resource guide titled *ERGs: A Vital Resource in Times of Disruption and Crisis* recommends creating consistent protocols across the organization for ensuring everyone has the chance to speak, asking participants to introduce themselves before speaking, sticking with time limits for speakers and meetings, and establishing regular cadences for meetings.

Creating safe spaces for team members to share their insights and experiences opens the door for real dialogue. While participating in an expert panel interview of Young Entrepreneur Council members for *Forbes*, Terry Tateossian, a founding partner at Socialfix Media, said "approaching difficult conversations truthfully and directly, but also with empathy and compassion, has been the best approach" to having difficult conversations.

In the same Dec. 30, 2020, *Forbes* feature, Danielle Allen, the managing partner at Building Impact, suggested demonstrating care and connection is the best way to address bad news. When discussions are held with empathy, honesty and respect, they can bring teams together rather than further polarize team members.

Lead by Example

All of the work applied to creating an organizational culture built on trust, communication, compassion and respect can be undermined by a leader whose actions do not align with their words. When a manager shows their team they are willing to put in the work, they will be respected and appreciated, which will translate to higher productivity.

As a step toward achieving these results, the ERG resource guide mentioned earlier suggests creating a reverse mentorship

Mental fitness app Calm offers a free self-care guide for human resources professionals.

Find it at **tinyurl.com/38csaz8r**.

program in which ERG leaders consult with and coach managers. Establishing such a program is an excellent way for leaders to learn from employees and to be held accountable for their actions and commitments.

Additionally, promoting self-care in the workplace by doing things such as offering mental health days and family programs will create a community of well-rounded employees. Self-care is equally essential for leaders. An exhausted or stressed-out leader may inadvertently sow negativity among team members. Taking time to fill the tank, making sure needs are met and prioritizing healthy choices such as rest and recreation can benefit the bottom line. As the saying goes, one cannot pour from an empty cup.

While leaders face many challenges during this time, it is important to maintain the proper perspective. Creating a foundation of trust, leading with empathy and making time for self-care will be essential to successfully leading diverse teams in the post-pandemic workplace. These components are proven to boost productivity, increase engagement and cultivate a thriving and innovative organization.

As a managing partner at GHJ, Tom Barry sees himself as a combination of entrepreneur, partner, consultant, coach and business advisor. With more than 25 years of accounting experience, Barry believes in leveraging technology to create a flexible schedule that allows him to be a father and husband in addition to fully committing to his career at the firm. —N