

EFFECTIVELY ADDRESSING THE DIVERSITY BACKLASH CONVERTING RESISTORS TO ADVOCATES

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One of the most difficult and energy-consuming pieces of the work that we do in attempting to build an inclusive work environment for the companies that employ us, is dealing with those individuals who, for a variety of reasons, not only do not support our work, but actively and vocally oppose it. The ripple effect that people like this have on our corporate cultures is especially evident for those employees who remain “on the fence” regarding their own personal stance on the efforts that we make to ensure that all employees, regardless of what makes us unique as individuals, can make their best contribution to the company, and are able to work effectively together in teams. The behaviors of the “resistors” can actively influence those folks on the fence to abandon their neutral position – often in favor of the loud voices of the detractor.

With that understanding, it becomes imperative that we are able to 1) hear the complaints of the resistors, 2) effectively address their concerns, 3) make them understand that our work is truly inclusive and does, in fact, include them, and finally 4) make them understand the active responsibility they have for driving a truly inclusive environment that supports diversity in all of its meanings. So let’s take a quick look at how to approach that process...

- 1) **Hear the complaints of the resistors.** As human beings, we all have a basic need to be listened to and to be understood, in addition to feeling supported by our employer. But one of the most basic tenets of cultural change also happens to be the most neglected: that we must not only hear the concerns of the resistors with our ears, but *listen* with our minds and do our best to understand where they are coming from. If we are able to repeat back to any employee, in our own words, their concerns and challenges with whatever effort is being attempted, we open the door for *them* to be able to hear *us*. Without that prerequisite, the filters in place will effectively filter all we attempt to say to them out of the equation.
- 2) **Effectively address their concerns.** Once we have heard the challenges that our resistors have with the cultural change in progress, it is important that we address those concerns, whether they are “real”, or imagined. As I am frequently heard to say, “*Perception is reality...but not necessarily the truth!*” If we are going to change the resistors perception, we must directly address their reality. Often in diversity and inclusion work, we find that their reality is based on distorted perceptions of facts – or no facts at all. This is where presenting our resistors with a data-driven, company goal-aligned, no-nonsense business case is critical. They *must* be able to see the direct line between our efforts, and the future success and survival of the company.
- 3) **Make them understand that our work is truly inclusive and does include them.** One of the most common misconceptions about diversity work is that the “hidden agenda” is all about displacing the current demographic majority with another. Caucasian males, in particular, have often been heard to voice feeling like they are an “endangered species” (this being said in environments where they are still 80 percent of the cultural demographic), which is, in fact, highlighting the fear of lost opportunities for promotion and growth. Once you build upon the business case by making them understand that diversity/inclusion work is about *all* employees, regardless of individual differences, much of the feeling of threat will have been alleviated.
- 4) **Make them understand the active responsibility they have for driving a truly inclusive environment that supports diversity in all of its meanings.** We all invest significant time and energy from our lives into our jobs. No one wants to see the company that they are working for go down the drain, regardless of what the drivers are. But an important punctuation to this process is

communicating and educating your (hopefully, no longer) resistors into understanding that they have an active role in driving change in this company that they have invested so much in, with specific responsibilities and associated behaviors that will bring the organization to where it needs to be.

Folks often present me with amused looks on their face in my education sessions when I tell them that I am not the one that will create an inclusive culture – it is them. When they ask what I mean, I ask everyone in class to extend their right hand out from their bodies to the side (I demonstrate this at the front of the class.) Then I instruct them to, very quickly, touch their right hand to their ear – while I am demonstrating by touching my right hand...to my nose. Most people will, at the very least, hesitate, while some folks will actually touch their nose. I ask them, "Why did you do that?" The ultimate answer is that another part of being human is that we emulate the behaviors we see, before those that we *hear* about. So, ultimately, your resistors that you have converted to advocates and engaged with a call to action, will actively and positively change much more of the culture than you ever would have been able to have done alone.

Fight the Good Fight...

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