# **Diversity and Inclusion in the Workplace**

Many hear the buzz words “diversity” and “inclusion” in today's workplace. What do these words mean, and how do they apply to me?

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The words are important to understand, but it is more important to act on the meaning of the words. It takes every employee under the guidance and support of their employer to implement diversity and inclusion plans.

## ***What is diversity?***

Diversity is a catch-all word that represents the differences that exist between individuals. A diverse workplace is one where the staff comprises a wide range of people of varying ages, genders, sexual orientations, abilities, ethnicities, education, and backgrounds. Workplace diversity can be accomplished by hiring and engaging employees and respecting the unique talents and perspectives present across these differences. Examples of diversity in the workplace are varied and can take on many different characteristics. One example may be having a mix of older and younger workers on a team capable of inter-mixing new ideas with previous business practices.

## ***What is inclusion?***

Inclusion is having a sense of belonging, and that experience is driven by a person’s identity. If an employee feels excluded in a work situation, the chances are that the employee will struggle to identify and become a part of the team. This can potentially stifle a worker's creativity and productivity. Inclusion in the workplace needs to be driven by top management in an organization that encourages every employee and leader to make groups of culturally, socially, and physically different people feel comfortable, accepted, and equally treated.

Inclusion examples can be any number of actions an employer takes to make this happen. An inclusion initiative allows employees to provide input regularly without being shut out of mainstream discussions during meetings. It can make sure mentoring opportunities for advancement and personal skill development are available to those who have traditionally lacked access to such opportunities or recognize skill sets that come from different types of backgrounds, such as veterans or older workers.

## ***What is the difference between diversity and inclusion?***

The terms *are not* interchangeable. Diversity in the workplace may focus on unique individuals such as veterans, women, or a cultural minority group such as Hispanic, Latino, Black or Asian. Inclusion refers to organizational actions to empower diverse individuals to ensure they feel comfortable, valued, and heard. Ultimately, through an inclusion mindset, an organization strives to help every member of its diverse workforce feel as if they identify and belong with their teams.

## ***Why is diversity and inclusion in the workplace important?***

HR leaders, Directors, Administrators, and Supervisors should consider implementing a robust diversity and inclusion program. Some cities and counties currently use key performance indicators such as meeting production goals, customer satisfaction, and innovation that can often be improved with an investment in diversity and inclusion with their workforce. Let’s look at some of the critical advantages of a diverse and inclusive workforce.

### ***It creates a positive environment.***

Diversity is the catalyst for inspiring new ways of thinking. Inclusion is the foundation of feeling welcomed, encouraged, and safe to share their ideas. Together, diversity and inclusion can promote a positive work environment. Embracing diversity through hiring practices and inclusion can replace prejudice and friction with admiration, support, and empathy, fostering a healthier, more positive work environment.

### ***It increases innovation with new perspectives.***

People from different backgrounds have different ways they look at the same process. Taking your team’s ideas can help create new ways of accomplishing work. New ideas and a fresh way of looking at problems can help you move beyond the “we have always done it this way” mentality and embrace ideas that eliminate roadblocks your team may be facing.

### ***It improves performance.***

There are many dimensions to diversity and inclusion, but practicing both is a strong way to show employees that they belong and are valued. Performance is likely to improve when employees feel recognized, appreciated, and a part of the team. Employees can feel comfortable and safe expressing their different ways of doing business. Diversity can increase the potential for friction, but disagreement can improve a team's performance when handled correctly and respectfully. When differences of opinion are supported with respect and healthy debate, team members are challenged to develop more thoroughly explored options that can lead to better decision-making.

### ***It increases employee engagement.***

According to industry statistics, over 67% of the workforce is actively disengaged at work. Diversity can bring new perspectives to your organization, but those perspectives stay locked inside individuals unless employees engage with others and share their ideas. When staff members feel comfortable offering suggestions, safe from discrimination or harassment, they will likely feel more comfortable taking risks by sharing an unusual idea. In doing so, employees may feel more connected to the team and move towards a “performing” mode of team engagement.

### ***It reduces turnover.***

Let’s face it; employee turnover is a real problem today. Employee turnover can be reduced by improving the work environment by practicing diversity and inclusion. How? By developing an atmosphere of teamwork, productivity, and engagement, inclusion can significantly reduce some primary reasons that drive employees to quit and move on to other opportunities.

### ***It improves your organization’s reputation.***

Increasingly, the citizens of your city or county want to engage with you in a way that aligns with their needs and values. Recruiting and encouraging people with different backgrounds to join your organization can help establish a positive reputation. Community connections are essential to the success of your operations. Actively practicing diversity will enhance your organization’s reputation. With new people from diverse groups being employed with your organization and rising to leadership positions, they serve as role models to their respective communities, perhaps encouraging others to do the same.