Diversity Committees During the Era of Social Justice: Where do we go From Here?

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Abstract

The deaths of George Floyd and other African American men and women in 2020 awakened the consciousness of Americans and social justice advocates across the world. The chants of "Black Lives Matter!" echoed from the streets of Minneapolis – all the way to the shores of Cape Town, South Africa. Immense pressure from protestors and community organizers caused those in education and traditional business sectors to evaluate their commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Many organizations responded by releasing statements in support of minoritized groups, often including the hashtags #BLM or #NAACP[1]. However, despite support offered via social media, consumers and social justice advocates demanded more than just words. To that end, many institutions began to establish diversity book clubs, while others created DEI committees, and/or appointed a Chief Diversity Officer to guide DEI initiatives across the institution (Byrd et al., 2021).

Constructing and operating a diverse DEI committee presents significant challenges. In addition to the barriers associated with assembling diverse members, there are also methodological constraints as there is a dearth of empirical research within the extant literature that provides guidance in constructing and evaluating the effectiveness of DEI committees. To that end, the purpose of this article is three-fold: (1) to discuss the necessity of DEI committees in higher education and corporate settings; (2) to explain why DEI committees sometimes fail; and (3) to offer some suggestions for addressing ways to improve their overall effectiveness.

Keywords: diversity committees; diversity, equity, and inclusion in education; making diversity committees effective; the role of diversity committees; starting a diversity committee

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Introduction

Williams (2013) argued that diversity committees are essential for higher education institutions, and should be regarded as a significant element in advancing those institutions' missions, visions, and goals. Williams continued by defining diversity committees as "a group of diverse stakeholders who have formally joined forces to shape, and in some instances implement, a shared plan" in a particular organizational context (p. 409). By and large, higher education institutions have responded to the need to develop strategies to demonstrate a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion by creating DEI committees (Leon

& Williams, 2016). Those committees may present themselves as a council, task force, or commission (Leon & Williams, 2016). A diversity committee provides an important path for such institutions, as it tells unique stories, identifies strategies and objectives, and expresses how organizations plan to implement overall diversity-related goals (Leon & Williams, 2016). Diversity committees can function as an organizational think tank where diversity goals are not only operationalized but actualized through collective efforts (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Responsibilities of the DEI Committee

The Value of Diverse Committee Members

Research suggests that to be effective, DEI committees should strive to develop a team-based approach predicated on the diverse demographical characteristics of the community or organization (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Invitees should be given careful consideration for input as the diversity committee is developed; committee development must convey an intentional process that includes a diverse group of stakeholders who are representative of the environment (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). In an educational setting, members should include students, faculty, staff, leadership, and a cross-section of the collegiate body. Williams (2013) suggested 10 to 15 members as the optimal size for a diversity committee. Further, as noted by Maltbia and Power (2009), the committee's structure depends on the group's purpose, and the goals it seeks to accomplish. For example Leon and Williams (2016) posited that larger committees might be more effective for fostering inclusivity and building community in places where diversity, equity, and

inclusion concepts are novel. Conversely, smaller committees may work well in more advanced institutions that are more progressive and have greater diversity. Committees must exceed the boundaries of race and must be inclusive of all forms of diversity.

Notwithstanding the committee's size, failure to ensure an inclusive and equitable selection process may lead to a lack of collective trust in that process and may ultimately compromise future initiatives (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016). As a result, DEI committees may encounter sustainability issues and sometimes fail to achieve their desired purpose in the absence of a collective and well-crafted strategic action plan (Atcheson, 2020). Therefore, when determining committee size, serious consideration must also be given to the role, scope, purpose, and mission of the committee.

The Challenges Faced by Diversity Committees

There are several challenges inherent to the development of DEI committees; issues range from the consideration of individuals invited to serve on the committee to the structure and process in articulating the committee's purpose and goals (Maltbia & Power 2009). However, experience suggests that the two most daunting tasks germane to the development of DEI committees are establishing bylaws and positioning the committee within appropriate proximity to functional leaders and administrators. For a DEI committee to be effective, it must have the support of organizational leadership. Advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion must go beyond mere diversity statements; to be successful, its elements must permeate the institution's strategic plans, and the fruits of its labor must be evident and measurable (Figure 2).
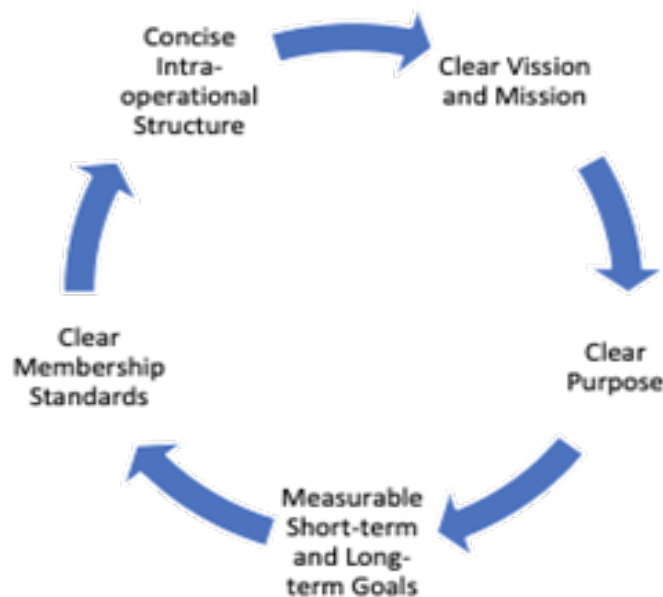

Figure 2. DEI Committee Basics

Moreover, advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion must not rest solely on the shoulders of marginalized committee members. In effective committees, every participant embraces the

challenge of advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion without regard to race, ethnicity, religion, gender, or sexual orientation. In a recent study of diversity experts, participants used the American idiom "preaching to the choir" as a metaphor to highlight shared similarities in race, gender, and partnerships made through diversity committee work (Anderson, 2020). Anderson described the different challenges related to committee work as a burden, whereby Chief Diversity Officers often reported feeling dissatisfied and even marginalized due to a lack of adequate support and institutional resources. Anderson (2020) also noted the frustration expressed by many minority committee members who reported feeling that they were tasked with teaching other non-minority committee members how to demonstrate appropriate cultural norms and how to engage with cultural humility.[2] Such complexity is not only unfair to minority committee members; these problems also pose a tangible risk to the committee's sustainability as well as its ability to execute its strategic goals.

Committee Composition Matters

Diversity committee composition matters. Similar to the effects of a clinical trial in medicine that only involves patients of a specific demographic, the inferential constraints of a minority-majority DEI committee will also be limited. Therefore, committees must be comprised of diverse members and perspectives that span all members of a community population. This diversity of thought helps us learn from one another, educate others, and make decisions that are in the best interest of our communities.

Although it may seem counterintuitive, a committee consisting of a majority of minority members has the potential to perpetuate and create further division among other members of the larger community (Leon & Williams, 2016). To that end, maintaining a minority member-only committee can create an "us vs. them" climate, which is the opposite of that committee's goals (Leon & Williams, 2016). As a result, members of the majority group may feel threatened and possibly excluded from efforts to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion (Plaut, 2014). Further, excluding majority members may be perceived as "prescribing the symptoms" by way of committee members engaging in similar behaviors as those they expressly oppose. This double message may serve to normalize the behaviors and interactions of the majority, which is antithetical to the committee's overall goals.

In addition, a committee consisting primarily of members of the minority group may increase the potential for its members to feel as if they are the center of others' attention. This minority spotlight effect, defined by Crosby et al. (2014) is what occurs when a remark or other actions cause individuals "to feel as though all eyes are upon them" as well as a sudden and unwelcome responsibility to respond on behalf of their group" (p. 1). In some cases, members may also feel that the spotlight effect draws unwanted, negative attention to themselves, possibly in the form of microaggressions which can negatively impact morale, productivity, and job satisfaction (Place, 2020). Members may also feel specific attributes are being imposed upon them and their collective group identity (positive stereotyping) (Siy & Cheryan, 2013). Others may even feel excluded from another group identity (identity denial) entirely (Cheryan & Monin, 2005). Moreover, the substance of the committee's work may suffer from an "echo chamber effect" in which the perspectives shared by members are too similar, consequently resulting in less diversity of thought and opinion **(**Smith & Roberts, 2007**)**.

Finally, DEI committees overrepresented by minority group members, risk alienating members of the majority group who may be willing to champion the committee's objectives (Smith & Roberts,

2007). To increase the effectiveness of these committees, it is imperative that the committee's goals not only reflect the interest of the minority group, but also the organization or institution as a whole. A diverse workplace with a collegial climate benefits all employees and sectors of the institution. The collaborative effort of majority and minority group membership alike has the potential to build community, cooperation, empowerment, and lasting change.

The Purpose and Scope of DEI Committees

The overall purpose of a DEI committee is multifaceted. However, its goal is to develop comprehensive strategies that cultivate cultural and ethical changes essential to advancing an institution's mission, values, and goals (Atcheson, 2020). This approach includes efforts to ensure accountability, and a focus on equitable policy and procedure enactment throughout the corporation or institution (Stroman, 2020). The overarching objective is to create a community in which all individuals feel heard, seen, acknowledged, valued, and represented at all levels of the corporation or institution. When developing a DEI committee, several factors must be taken into consideration, including:

1. Identification of key stakeholders based on unique experiences and potential contributions to the committee;

2. A comprehensive needs assessment to determine the need for change;

3. Development of a customized strategy based on the results of the needs assessment to create measurable goals and objectives;

4. Implementation of strategic action plans;

5. Evaluation and continuing audit of the action plan; and

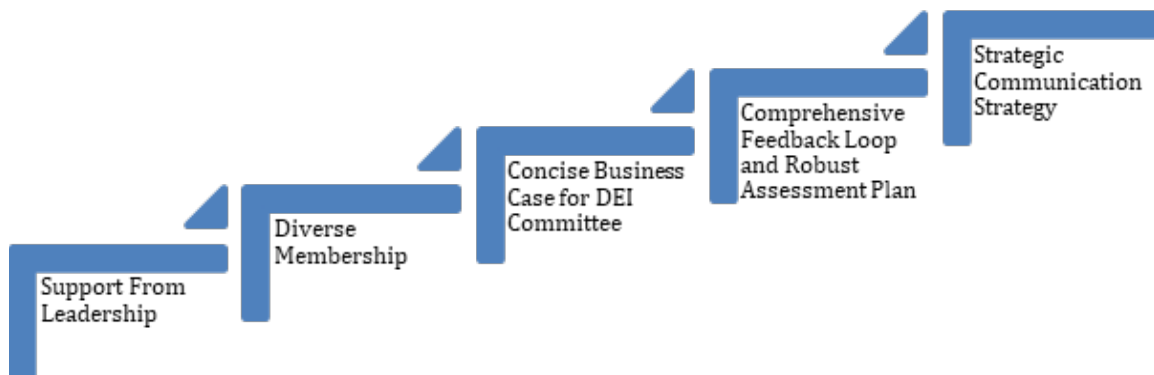6. Follow-up with key stakeholders and institution or corporate leaders.

Figure 3. Core Elements of an Effective DEI Committee

As Figure 3 illustrates, building an effective DEI committee is iteratively conceived and activated

over time. Although challenges might arise, it is very conceivable to construct a DEI committee with diverse members. In the same way that representative samples eliminate bias from populations in research studies, efforts to increase proportional representation could equally affect committee composition. Hypothetically speaking, if a minority group consisted of a significant portion of an organization or community (30% or more), it may be helpful to use a stratified sampling approach in which characteristics of committee members are proportionally allocated to be representative of those from the larger community population. For instances in which minority groups comprise a smaller portion of the community (less than 30%), a slightly larger proportion of minority members may be necessary to maximize the input from that minority.

Evaluating Diversity Committees

While DEI committees seek to ensure viable strategies to create a specific vision, mission, and goals, it is equally important to consider ongoing evaluative assessment measures. DEI efforts should be assessed and tracked as a continuous component of the evaluative process (Anwah, 2021b). Many DEI efforts focus their appraisal measures on performance and what the Diversity Committee can achieve through hiring, programming, and its overall commitment to diversity. While this method is often embraced by many organizations and institutes of higher education, scant information speaks to the developmental phases of the DEI committees. Some organizations take steps to measure and evaluate diversity efforts with the added step of publishing feedback via a scorecard (Ricci, 2021). A personalized accountability system is highly recommended, allowing for ongoing evaluation and assessment of the organization's commitment to creating diversity, equity, and inclusion measures (Anwah, 2021a; Hayton, 2021). These measures should review tasks achieved and how the committee functions within its assigned roles and responsibilities.

In conversation with Dr. Yvonne Murray Larrier, author of "Digging Deeper into DEI" (personal communication, August 2, 2021), she provided the following recommendations to aid in the assessment of effective DEI Committee work:

1. Self-assess: It is essential to encourage committee members to assess their own contributions to the committee. For example, each person should ask themselves if their efforts are bringing the committee closer to its collective stated goals.

2. Assign measurable tasks: Assign individual members tasks and hold them accountable by requiring an official (visual) update for the committee members.

3. Reflection: Provide space for individual and group reflections of committee actions. Members should be able to discuss specific insights and impacts authentically.

4. Create an assessment: Potential assessment tool categories could include:

   a. participation;

   b. responsiveness and timeliness;

   c. flexibility and adaptability;

   d. innovation/creativity;

e.   collaboration;

f.   communication skills; and

g.   social-emotional awareness skills.

The process of assessing the effectiveness of DEI committee work is just as important as evaluating committee outcomes. In determining the effectiveness of the process, one must consider the factors above.

Conclusion

It is laudable that many colleges, universities, and corporations are now interested in advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion. Although many initiatives may have launched without a clear vision and mission, DEI groups deserve merit for ways in which they have responded to justice-oriented discourse that has been the center of the mood of the global public sphere in recent years. Positive DEI actions must be considered beyond the present, and the merits of these actions must include a long-term review. We must ensure that these initiatives are proactive rather than reactive, well-thought-out, and built for scale and purpose. These actions cannot be the result of an expedient course of action. To be productive, diversity, equity, and inclusion must be embedded in the DNA of the long-term strategic visions and plans and must be reflected and modeled at all levels, from the president to the maintenance staff.

Finally, diversity committee composition matters. With a finite number of seats and members eligible to serve on the committee, establishing a concise value proposition for each member becomes critically important. Overrepresentation by a minority committee structure may result in some unintended negative consequences that could adversely impact the overall goals and sustainability of the committee. Diverse committees provide greater opportunities to foster cohesive environments, making it easier to champion diversity efforts by elevating all constituents' voices, thus forging allyships with minoritized and majority groups.

Endnotes

[1] These are the Twitter designations for Black Lives Matter and The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, respectively.

[2] The National Institutes of Health defines cultural humility as "a lifelong process of self-reflection and self-critique whereby the individual not only learns about another's culture, but one starts with an examination of her/his own beliefs and cultural identities" (Yeager & Bauer-Wu, 2013).

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