

Know your 'why' and the 'how' will follow

March 2015

By: Arin N. Reeves, J.D., Ph.D.

Nextions

With no reason to change, change remains an empty word

Late last year, I was making a presentation at a leadership conference about the most recent research on diversity and inclusion when one of the conference attendees raised his hand and asked me to just tell him "how to get this done." In a frustrated tone, he told me that he didn't want to hear about research or case studies, he just wanted a quick summary of how he could make his organization more diverse and inclusive.

Our conversation went something like this:

Me: What will happen if your organization does not become more diverse and inclusive?

Him: It would be bad. We need to do this.

Me: What would be bad?

Him: Not being diverse and inclusive. That would be bad.

Me: OK, let me ask it another way. What will be good if you became more diverse and inclusive?

Him: We want to be more diverse and inclusive, so it would be good if we accomplished that.

Me: What exactly would be good if you accomplished that?

Him: We would be a better firm ... better for our clients.

Me: Why would you be a better firm for your clients?

Him: Because we would be more diverse and inclusive.

The back and forth lasted about a minute before he realized that he did not have a specific "why" for the change he was saying he wanted to create.



With diversity and inclusion (as with most things in life), it is difficult to actively change anything if the reasons for the change are not clearly articulated.

The “why” for the change is the catalyst for initial action, and it is the sustainer for keeping the momentum going. In the conversation above, the gentleman wanted me to tell him how to do something, but he couldn’t tell me a compelling “why” as to the need for the change.

In my experience with helping organizations become more diverse and inclusive, the “how” of change is the vehicle that drives the change, but the “why” of change is the fuel that keeps the vehicle in motion. No matter how good the how is, it won’t get anywhere without the why.

No matter how well you know how to do something, you know (and it’s been proven through countless research studies) that you will not do it unless you have a compelling reason — a why — to do it.

For example, you can give smokers all the tools they need to quit smoking, but they will not quit unless compelled by a why to quit. On the other hand, if they know why they want to quit, they won’t wait for someone else to give them the tools; they will find the tools they need to quit successfully.

The same applies to dietary changes, behavior modifications and anything else that involves change of any kind.

If you are compelled by the why, you will figure out the how. If the why doesn’t move you, nothing will change no matter the solutions made available to you.

What is your why for inclusion? Knowing the right answer to that question for yourself and for your organization is the foundation for creating any real and sustainable change.

By the way, most readily available answers to this question are the wrong answers! The right thing to do? The business case? Hiring advantage? The right thing to do and the business case and a hiring advantage all rolled into one? These are the answers we have offered up for the last decade, but the truth is that none of them are really compelling to ... anyone.

Moreover, the “business case folks” are turned off by the “right thing to do people,” and the “right thing to do people” are irritated by the need for the business case.

And economic conditions have created a buyer’s market for talent where organizations with offers for attractive employment have a solid hiring advantage these days regardless of their diversity and inclusion efforts.

So, what is your unflinching and real why for inclusion? What happens if you, individually or organizationally, are not more inclusive? What hurts if nothing changes? What critical or amazing opportunity is not accessible to you if nothing changes? If you are having trouble answering these questions, you have just hit the wall that stands between your inclusion efforts and your inclusion results.

Ask the above questions of different people in your organization and see what you can learn from the responses. Are there themes that are visible? Is the variance between the responses greater than you expected?

Use these responses to start developing a cohesive why that pushes the boundaries of the easy “right thing to do” and “business case” answers.

If people are having difficulty concretely answering the why, you have just discovered where you need to focus your efforts in 2015.

The more you know your why, the more likely it is that your how will succeed, and without a why, the how won't start, let alone go anywhere.