



# How to Avoid Disappointment, Backlash and Diversity Fatigue

by Lee Gardenswartz, Ph.D. and Anita Rowe, Ph.D.

It seems like almost every article we read these days regarding diversity and inclusion starts with the premise that the intent in most companies is very good but the results are not. What organizations seem to now be experiencing is increased resistance and disillusionment and dissatisfaction with the lack of real culture change and desired equity results. Having been in this field almost 40 years, we have examples, pro and con, of the realities we have been seeing in articles. While the disappointments are numerous, we have learned, witnessed and implemented significant strategies that can enhance the energy and commitment while boosting results and creating more inclusive organizational cultures.

It is definitely possible to create change and achieve desired results but there has to be strong leadership and a strategy that includes accountability, measurement, and systemic changes. Below are suggestions for avoiding the disappointment and backlash in your D&I implementation process.

- 1. Do not start any Diversity & Inclusion initiative without deep executive commitment.** That commitment is measured in leadership that walks the talk, looks for opportunities to reinforce messages and also holds people accountable. We have seen stunning examples over the years. One of our favorites was a leader whose company was in three states. He held monthly meetings where among other things, each business unit leader had to report on their D&I progress. They were held accountable by him and they did not dare disappoint. Another leader, when confronted about sexual orientation in the D&I plan at an all hands meeting, made the case by focusing on the data about

customers and market share and showing the business advantage to be gained. He also vigorously owned the commitment ... there was no doubt where he stood and why.

If you don't have the support from the top that sends a message with clear expectations, provides reassurance of having dollars and time to explore, learn and discuss, it won't happen. From having CEOs who stop people to talk in hallways to ask about the training sessions, to spending the resources and bringing people together for these conversations, both actions and words shout. We have seen them make a difference.

**2. Define what a successful outcome looks like (Hint: It cannot only be about demographics and how many of each gender, generation, ethnicity or race you have).**

There needs to be a significant conversation about the definition of diversity and the consequences of not investing time, energy and money to create desired changes. Focusing on what kind of culture engages and drives people to do their best work, what it feels like to be included and excluded, and what behaviors indicate that you are valued, all help expand perceptions about differences that matter. They also include everyone so that the D&I process is not seen as only for the benefit of some groups and not others. Defining what a successful D&I process is and tying the results to the bottom line will be one of the best business cases and it will be clear to everyone that it does make a difference.

**3. Do not expect training alone to accomplish the necessary results.** Training is necessary but not sufficient to change culture or create systems change. What it can do well is help people broaden knowledge, increase awareness, get to know each other better and break down barriers in very interactive sessions. However, training cannot be used as the answer to an organization's D&I efforts as it does not address systemic obstacles to inclusion. When it is used as a catalyst to help people gain awareness, knowledge and skills and share ideas and viewpoints, it can be invaluable.

**4. Have clear goals that impact systems and change organizations.** After you have the organization-wide conversations about the culture you desire, you will have some guidance in where your systems change priorities should be. Are there some groups, departments, populations that seem to get an unfair advantage? Do some groups seem over-represented and others ignored? Do some people get more opportunities to learn and grow while some are not even on that radar? Define the inclusive and equitable culture you want and then target processes and systems that need to be improved. Once you know what that is, you will be on your way to setting goals and implementing strategies.

**5. Keep an open mind and look for ways to create alternatives.**

We always tell people we work with that either/or thinking needs to be replaced by both/and. Creating more options, not fewer, is the goal. It will help you be more creative and avoid polarization. One of the best ideas we ever heard from an organization involved bettering their mentoring program. They created a process called "Mentoring Up" where every senior executive is coached and taught by an employee who is two generations younger. The vitality and energy is enormous, and so is the learning. They are expanding viewpoints and minimizing stereotypes and assumptions while simultaneously building stronger relationships. This mentor idea, thought to be outlandish at the beginning, exceeded all expectations. It wouldn't have been created with limited, either/or thinking.

D&I change is complex, slow and demanding. Consider adapting these five steps for use in your own organization to make the positive outcomes more possible. Here is to creating the change you are after!