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RISING TO THE OCCASION



The Coca-Cola Company's law firm diversity policy was one of the trending topics earlier this year when it mandated US law firms to make diversity and inclusion a "business imperative" when serving it. The policy urged US law firms to take concrete steps towards promoting diversity, submit self-identified diversity data and ensure that all Coca-Cola matters have at least 30 per cent of billed partner and associate time from diverse attorneys. This policy was celebrated by inclusion advocates around the world as it would have ripple effects globally. Last month, The Coca-Cola Company's general counsel, Bradley Gayton, who orchestrated the ambitious diversity policy resigned. The company is now reviewing the plan following backlash and threat of legal action from a group of its shareholders and conservative opponents of affirmative action policies.

Whether you are a giant corporation or a small boutique law firm, creating an inclusive workplace is an ongoing journey. News like the above makes us take a step back and ask – what makes an inclusive organization? Is it a diverse talent pipeline or does it need to look beyond that? Does being aware of various diversity verticals – gender, sexual identity and orientation, disability, age, religion, socio-economic and cultural differences – automatically make an organization inclusive? Or is it about breaking stereotypes and removing any stigma attached to it?

The answers to these questions are rarely straightforward. The objective of this article is to provide key pointers for professional services firms that are considering their strategy to promote inclusive workplaces. A professional services firm has to believe that having a diverse leadership and workforce is essential for its market reputation / goodwill. Professional services firms thrive on providing great professional services. Having a diverse set of skilled professionals means

having diversity of thought, which is the bedrock of innovation. Clients appreciate innovative and commercially savvy solutions and having a diverse team delivers just that. Additional visible benefits of having a diverse and inclusive workforce include, attracting and retaining top / critical talent, higher engagement and happiness, better wellbeing and better client relationships. Once leaders are convinced about the need for diversity, they can rise to the occasion and build a robust diversity and inclusion mechanism most relevant to the social context in which they operate.

In the Indian context, components of diversity are different from those in the Western world. While race and Black Lives Matter are burning issues in the West, religion, caste and socio-economic background related discrimination are pertinent issues in India. Corporate India did not openly discuss diversity and inclusion till a few years ago. Today, in an increasingly globalized world emphasizing universal corporate ethos and values, it has very much become an important issue for India Inc and its NextGen leaders.

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Each organization charts its own trajectory when it comes to inclusion and the purpose of this article is to put forth

some key considerations. This article does not delve into making a business case for diversity and inclusion as it would require a longer report with data and case studies. There are many excellent resources already available in case a reader would like to gain insights on the topic.

1. Diversity and Inclusion has to start at the top: For professional service firms, diversity and inclusion efforts cannot be meaningful without buy-in from the owners / partners. Owners not only need to have a shared understanding of the internal and business objective of diversity and inclusion but also need to demonstrate inclusive behavior. If they walk the talk and convince others that being inclusive and focusing on



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- inclusion is the right thing to do, only then can the organization really move the needle.
2. Keep investing in a diverse pipeline: While recruitment teams at professional service firms may always keep an eye on diversity for entry level recruits, the pipeline dries up somewhere in the middle. There is no alternative but to keep investing in a diverse pipeline, continue mentoring diverse members of the organization, have role models for people to look up to and nurture platforms to enable talented professionals of diverse backgrounds to assume leadership roles and be diversity champions.
 3. Treat Diversity and Inclusion as an investment: It is important for organizations to not dilute their diversity and inclusion agenda just to cut costs. Although the COVID-19 pandemic may not have severely impacted professional service firms, firms may still not be willing to invest in diversity and inclusion efforts. Adding costs to an organization's operations is an uphill task but without budget allocation, diversity and inclusion will remain a short-term initiative rather than a long-term strategic investment. Lack of diversity and inclusion leads to disengagement, which eventually results in higher levels of attrition impacting an organization's human capital and financial health. One of the key factors of a successful organization, is when its members are driven to go above and beyond what is expected of them, feel included and give their 100%, as a team.
 4. Create accountability: Target setting is a good way to ensure that an organization is delivering on diversity. Being diverse, however, does not automatically translate into an inclusive work environment. To ramp up accountability, organizations need to define measurable diversity metrics and declare results to their members on a regular basis. Organizations also need to run regular training sessions on topics such as fairness, transparency, conscious and unconscious biases, macroaggressions and discrimination.
 5. Actively create opportunities: Inclusion is often misunderstood as a quota system. Organizations need to Recognize the fact that diverse talent does not want to be given preferential treatment but rather an opportunity to showcase itself. External collaborations can go a long way in catapulting an organization's inclusion efforts. If an organization can find external partners who have a shared vision and objective, it can leverage such platforms to up the ante and involve more people internally. Such external collaborations allow diverse members to participate, network and develop their brand externally.
 6. Form resource groups: Once the organization has started building general awareness about diversity and inclusion amongst its ranks, the next logical step would be to form targeted resource groups. Experience sharing, storytelling and creating a sense of community

within these smaller groups would go a long way in creating a lasting bond among members. The COVID-19 pandemic and work-from-home has increased the need to step up engagement across levels. Such resource groups would provide the diverse members of organizations a shared space to connect and learn from each other.

7. Reviewing processes and policies: For inclusion to be an integral part of an organization's culture and DNA, it has to be a natural part of our everyday actions. This also means constantly reviewing and analyzing policies and processes in the organization from a diversity and inclusion lens. This helps identify if policies and processes tend to favor some groups over another. A diversity and inclusion audit can be useful to bring this out more objectively, collect data points and assess what steps can be taken towards fostering a more inclusive environment.

8. Internal collaboration: Different parts of an organization need to join hands to keep pushing the inclusion mandate. From heads of human resources to communication to business strategy teams, all are key drivers who have to commit to inclusion. These teams need to look closely at business practices and identify steps that can be taken to make the organization and leadership more inclusive.

Embedding diversity and inclusion in the culture of any organization takes time – it is a continuous pursuit. We applaud that Indian organizations have initiated the dialogue on diversity and inclusion and are putting affirmative practices in place. This applause is also tempered by the sobering realization that our workplaces need to adapt to the future of work. But we have no doubt that all of us are up to the challenge.

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