

How leadership can foster an inclusive workplace

As European startups continue to push boundaries and challenge traditional institutions, founders have a great opportunity to champion diversity and inclusion, and set the bar for workplace standards.

Temps de lecture : minute

30 June 2023

Companies are increasingly dependent on diverse teams as growth, innovation, and retention drivers. More than 80% of CEOs have stated their diversity and inclusion strategy has improved company performance, however, the process of implementing a progressive culture hinges on inclusive leadership. The success of inclusion requires openness to change and difference and welcoming of new team members, implementing these new norms at all levels - from executive to C-suite.

With Pride Month underway, it is an important time for startup founders and management to reflect on their D&I policies. Whilst many startups in areas such as fintech have undertaken significant steps to weed out many of the problems of the sectors in which they operate - there is still plenty of room for systemic change and reform.

Firstly, it is crucial for leadership teams to recognise the vitality of the process; startups that fail to make their workplaces safe spaces for all employees, risk losing out on talent, and investment, which ultimately hinders company performance. When an organisation is known for its inclusive practices, it becomes more attractive to a diverse range of potential employees, partners, and investors. Inclusion also fosters diversity of thought, perspectives, and experiences, ultimately enhancing

the company's ability to innovate - diverse teams are more likely to come up with creative solutions, identify new market opportunities, and develop products and services that cater to a broader range of customers.

However, achieving an inclusive environment in the workplace is not a quick or easy process, nor something that can be driven by HR and D&I departments alone. Leadership must take ownership of this process and can begin to do so by implementing several key steps.

Communications regarding D&I should be company-wide, and any pledges and commitments should be announced publicly - this increases company accountability and sends a strong and obvious message about acceptable behaviours and company culture. Internally, setting specific policies regarding the language of email signatures, social media profiles and business cards is a visible sign to employees that D&I matters - it is massively important that everyone is allowed to express their pronouns and gender identity freely.

Additionally, breaking out of a siloed approach is necessary for inclusivity to be completely effective - whilst it can be often hard for company leaders to commit time to town hall meetings, allowing the time to speak about D&I policies can have a huge impact. The commitment of senior management ensures that voices from across the organisation are heard, and that they are then able to take on board the opinions and concerns of their employees. This helps to guide constructive and informed company policy, and creates a culture of openness in which even the more reserved members of the team can contribute and express themselves. It is important for employees to have confidence in their supervisors and co-workers - so it is crucial for management to listen to and encourage expression of opinions from all corners of the company.

As well as ensuring commitment to company-wide meetings, management can foster an inclusive working environment by creating a

culture of education. By aiming to better understand the experiences of other employees, as well as spreading information about important topics like mental health, gender equality, domestic abuse, accessibility, interculturality, micro-aggressions and LGBTQ+ issues, company leaders help to ensure that their working environment is a safe space. In addition to taking part in specialised courses and training to educate themselves on a personal level, leaders can take on more important actions to improve knowledge on these topics across the company. Implementing mentoring systems can often help improve integration and prevent employee isolation, setting up volunteer working groups or networks with leadership sponsors, or suggesting frequent awareness-raising events and educational sessions, can all assist in building community spirit and togetherness. However, all of this depends on a committed management team, whose engagement is essential to ensuring these principles are implemented.

Adopting this top-down approach to company communications and culture makes it far easier to implement non-discriminatory hiring procedures. By neglecting to learn about unconscious biases, managers can leave themselves susceptible to 'Beetle Syndrome' - a phenomenon where decision-makers hire staff who look or behave in a similar way to themselves. This often leads to candidates from different backgrounds being at a disadvantage. However, managers who make the effort to educate themselves about diversity and inclusion, are far more likely to understand and help develop recruitment guidelines that do not exclude candidates from marginalised groups. By ensuring that leadership is aligned and in agreement on topics such as recruitment, it helps broaden the talent pool and diversify company teams.

As well as attracting new talent, fostering an inclusive workplace also plays a key role in talent retention and growth, which is why it must be the responsibility of everyone from the founder downwards. Having a diverse and supportive workplace will help everyone feel equally included

and supported. At a time when the new generations (including Gen Z) are particularly sensitive to CSR issues, the integration of diversity and inclusion into the corporate roadmap is essential to meeting their growing expectations for working environments.

In order to satisfy the demands of a market that is becoming more competitive, founders will always need to call upon the judgement, empathy, passion, and creativity of all of their employees, as well as devoted management. Therefore, it is more important than ever for startup leaders to prioritise the creation of inclusive workplaces.

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