Embracing Differences

Organizations Lose When Employees Are 'Othered'

BY AMRI B. JOHNSON

f you're involved in DEI work, you are all too familiar with othering. For far too long, certain groups have been — however unintentionally — excluded from the dominant culture at work. When one is not part of the "in group," they miss out on opportunities — and the company misses out on their gifts and perspectives. Othering is destructive for everyone involved.

Many organizations have ramped up their efforts to stop othering and all workplace marginalization and discrimination. However, there's just one problem: Too often, they do it in a way that, ironically and unintentionally, perpetuates a sense in some that they are being othered.

All organizations should be working toward inclusion and equity. It's just that companies need to do it in a way that doesn't spend a lot of social capital making any group "wrong" — because that makes them the new "othered" group.

The trouble lies in focusing DEI work on any single identity group. To solve the problem of otherness, we must throw out the "us" versus "them" paradigm altogether.

The solution is thinking in terms of "we." Instead of focusing on what divides us, companies need to take a shared humanity approach. My book, "Reconstructing Inclusion," provides a framework for designing an Inclusion System, an accessible, actionable, sustainable approach that empowers all stakeholders in these efforts — everyone — to thrive.

Organizations have their work cut out for them as they rethink and redesign inclusion. In the meantime, there are still many ways you can reduce othering in your organization for everyone. A few tips:

FOR LEADERS:

Hire and retain talent from all backgrounds by casting a wide net. If you notice that many or most of your employees attended the same university, it's time to branch out. And, of course, make sure you are hiring across the spectrum in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, age, ability, etc.

Make the workplace feel safe. Psychological safety is crucial for engagement, productivity, innovation and inclusion — and it starts with leaders. Look at your behavior and set an excellent example for others. Are you open to being influenced by people different from you? Do you admit your mistakes? Do you know how to manage your emotional discomfort? Assess your employees — you might even survey them to get their feedback. If people feel free to share ideas, be vulnerable and open, try new things and make mistakes, keep doing what you're doing. If they feel frightened, anxious, guarded and afraid to step out of their comfort zones, it's time to look

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at what elements in your culture may be blocking people from feeling a sense of safety and belongingness.

Identify the people you rarely speak to, work with, or mentor. Reach out to those people. Leaders need to connect with everyone on their team. Think of the employees you are less likely to interact with or those who have fallen off your radar. Make an effort to engage with them frequently in one-on-one meetings, email conversations or hallway chats. Talk about the work, but also get to know them on a personal level.

One of my clients, a non-American person of color, once told me that they feel like everyone is nice and polite in their organization. They shared, "But, they don't take an interest in me. I ask them about their work and personal lives. They rarely ever reciprocate. I don't think it's intentional. I think it's discomfort — a lack of familiarity because they have never been around someone from my background."

Ask yourself, "Do I regularly dismiss the ideas of certain people or downplay their accomplishments?" Then, hold up the mirror by reflecting on whose ideas you promote most often. Conversely, do you ignore some people's contributions while praising others? If you recognize a tendency to play favorites, make a goal of focusing only on performance instead of on the person doing the work. Consistent attention to subtle acts of engagement can help you treat everyone more fairly.

Run meetings so everyone can participate. Pay attention to the dynamics when teams get together. Do some people lead or dominate the discussion? Do others rarely? Who is interrupting? Learn and then manage meetings to create equity of voice.

Be aware that bonding social capital can lead to unfair advantages perpetuating othering. Bonding is a type of social capital that occurs within groups where members are similar in demographics, attitudes and beliefs. For example, bonding ties often happen in organizations within teams, corporate affiliations or similar hobbies and personal interests. Bonding isn't objectively good or bad. But inequities are inevitable when it leads to unfair advantages for exclusive groups.

Bridging social capital brings people together. While siloed thinking and action in organizations primarily result in bonded groups maintaining power, bridging social capital — characterized by connections across identities — allows groups to share and exchange information. These connections foster ideas, innovation and familiar context where their different perspective could otherwise get in the way.

You can harness the power of bridging social capital to help unify your employees and increase productivity and innovation. First, gather data through an organizational network analysis (ONA) — which measures patterns of workplace collaboration — to learn about how to create more bridging social capital. This data will allow you to see where bridging ties exist, or perhaps where they do not exist, and how you can intentionally foster more of them.

FOR EVERYONE:

Do you have significant influence, power or privilege in your organization? If yes, then be an ally for people you see being othered. If you are in a position where your race, gender, status, etc. gives you the freedom to speak your mind with fewer negative consequences, you can advocate for anyone who feels othered, left out or ostracized. Speak up and ask to hear other perspectives during meetings — aside from the usual voices. Bring people who may feel excluded into the group. Share praise with the people who helped you on your latest successful project.

Be on the lookout for your own biases. Keep challenging them. Everyone has conscious and unconscious preferences. Although they often occur without your awareness, implicit biases can negatively impact how you relate with others. And we are all personally and organizationally responsible for doing all we can to mitigate them. So check in with yourself and engage with others. If you discover a bias or someone points one out to you, address it and create an approach to prevent it.

Branch out and meet new people. If you socialize and share

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ideas only with the people who are like you, both during work and outside of it, you are perpetuating othering. Even when we don't mean to, we can signal that our group is exclusive and those on the outside don't belong. Get to know everyone, focusing on people who are different from you. Remember that we are wired to notice differences between ourselves and other people, but that doesn't mean we should avoid them.

Check yourself for care, openness, safety and trust. These four ways of being help create the conditions for inclusion and belonging. Answer these questions to see if you need to adjust your behaviors to create a more welcoming work environment. Remember, we all can be part of the change.

How do I show that I care about my colleagues? In what ways do I indicate that I am committed to their development? Do my team members feel that we are all moving in the same direction?

Are you willing to be influenced by colleagues with whom you disagree? Do you actively share information? How well do you listen?

Do teammates feel that they can push back and challenge you? If you are in a position of greater power or influence on your team, in what ways do you make sure people know they can ask outside-the-box questions and spontaneously share ideas?

Do you intentionally seek to learn and understand the interests of your colleagues? When your colleagues are not around, do you share and represent their interests with a clear understanding when doing so?

Inclusion has to work for everyone, or it doesn't work at all. There's no room for any othering in organizations that want their employees to engage, collaborate and go all in with their work. When everyone works together to make the workplace safe for each person to do their best, everyone thrives — and everyone wins. **| AC&F |**

Amri B. Johnson is the author of "Reconstructing Inclusion: Making DEI Accessible, Actionable, and Sustainable." For more than 20 years, he has been instrumental in helping organizations and their people create extraordinary business outcomes. As CEO/founder of Inclusion Wins, Johnson and a virtual collective of partners converge organizational purpose to create global impact with a lens of inclusion. For more information, please visit inclusionwins.com.