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FIRM MANAGEMENT

Why Inclusive Workforces Matter, What They Look Like, And How to Build One

Building an inclusive workplace helps to create a more cohesive and productive team, establish and maintain high morale, and sets up the firm for long-term growth and success.

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By Michael DeAngelo.

The accounting profession is going through a period of real change. The introduction of hybrid-work, a new generation of accountants entering the workforce, the rise of

lifestyle firms, and an increasingly complex operating environment all have implications for firm leaders wanting to attract and retain the best talent.

I've dedicated my career to helping organizations, both big and small, build the right People Strategy. I've learned that the most effective team building strategies are about more than who you hire or fire. The most successful teams I've been part of have aimed to create a truly inclusive workforce, that sets up both employees and the organization for success.

There is no one-size-fits-all when it comes to People Strategies, but there are a few things you can do to help position your team to be inclusive.

What is an inclusive workforce?

Employees do their best work when they feel engaged, included and supported. As every accountant knows, the stress of busy season would be intolerable without the support and encouragement of colleagues. Building an inclusive workplace helps to create a more cohesive and productive team, establish and maintain high morale, and sets up the firm for long-term growth and success.

Diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) is an essential step in creating an inclusive workforce. But a truly inclusive workforce goes beyond implementing a DEI strategy in hiring practices, and encompasses an organization's values, culture, leadership, and a shared understanding of collegiality and collaboration within and between teams.

Tip #1: Nurture intrinsic connections

One of the most powerful ways to create inclusive work environments is to nurture the emotional connection that employees have to your firm's mission, and to each other. Emotional connection is the best driver of intrinsic motivation and it carries employees through challenges a firm may face.

Articulating a clear and inspiring mission helps reinforce for employees how their work is making an impact not only for the firm's bottom line, but also in the lives of the clients they serve. You can talk about the success stories of clients, or share positive client feedback with the whole team. You can also reward employees when they demonstrate one of your firm's values, not just when they, for example, successfully bring in a new client.

Fostering emotional connections to each other is another powerful motivator. To build a caring and supportive team, you can consider the role of Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) that provide a safe space for people to talk to each other about challenges or opportunities. At [BILL](#), we have seven ERGs focused on supporting women, veterans, Black/African American, LGBTQIA+, Latinx, Physical & Mental Abilities, and people of Asian or Pacific Islander heritage. Our ERGs are not only valuable from an inclusivity perspective – they also help nurture our BILL community.

Tip #2: Resist the generation stereotype

There's a lot of attention in the industry focused on the impact of a new generation of CPAs entering the workforce. While it may seem counterintuitive, I always encourage leaders to resist the urge to stereotype or categorize people by their generation.

There is research into different preferences of Gen Z in the workforce. But as leaders, we need to treat this research for what it is – an analysis of trends. It doesn't speak to the individualized experience of people in your team, nor can it accurately reflect the unique culture of your organization.

In my experience, there are enormous overlaps in what generations are asking for in work. Rather than relying on trends or stereotypes, there's a much simpler way to know what your employees need and how they want to be treated: just ask them.

Employee engagement surveys are a useful tool for this. They allow for employees to give feedback in an environment that is specifically seeking it. Rather than having to hear employee complaints through the grapevine, firm leaders can get the information directly. These surveys are most useful when done regularly, so you can assess how your team is tracking throughout the year. They are also only effective when the leadership team takes them seriously and acts on the results.

Even if you can't fully address feedback immediately, the surveys can help shape your People Strategy to better reflect your employees' preferences, support more engaged discussions between managers and employees, and bridge the communication divide across all levels. This is good for employees, good for managers, and ultimately great for the performance of your firm.

Tip #3: Create opportunities for growth

Supporting ongoing access to professional development helps keep employees motivated, engaged and inspired. Continued education and training keeps accountants up-to-date and well credentialed. While accountants have extensive continuing education requirements to keep up with changing rules and regulations, professional development within the firm is equally important to ensure efficient work streams.

Take the time to learn what someone's ultimate career goal is and provide projects, short-term assignments, or adjacent roles to help them get there. The best experience I had in my career was to take a role in People Operations & Technology since it gave me early experience in managing a team. I learned so much about how challenging it is to make the shift from individual contributor to a manager role. And it set me up to make a lot of mistakes, learn from them, and be a much better manager throughout my career.

This all helps firm leaders to build a more inclusive culture in the workplace. Some of the best employees I've hired have been lifelong learners. They didn't necessarily have PhDs or attend Ivy League schools – but they were intellectually curious, open to new ideas and different thinking, and focused on solving problems. There is a humility that comes with lifelong learning: a recognition you may not have all the answers, and the confidence to work collaboratively with others to find a solution. Lifelong learners make great accountants, and exceptional employees.

If your firm is known for supporting professional development, you'll be more likely to attract these lifelong learners, who in turn tend to help nurture a more inclusive, collaborative and collegial work environment for all.

Key takeaway

Creating an inclusive workplace will help employees stay engaged and motivated. Yes, you'll still have tough days, difficult clients, workplace conflicts, and differences of opinion. But when you start with a foundation of inclusivity embedded in your values, culture and leadership, your employees and your firm will be geared for growth and success.

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Prior to joining BILL, he held leadership roles at benchmark companies including Google, Pinterest, Mozilla, Pepsico, Microsoft, and Merck. Michael is a graduate of Cornell University, where he received his Master of Industrial and Labor Relations.

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