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Inclusion—the Elephant in the Wellness Room

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A healthy workplace includes healthy employees and a healthy organization. You cannot have one without the other. But especially in these disquieting times, we believe there is something else to add to our workplace wellness toolkit. Why?

Because a healthy workplace needs to be healthy for *all* of its employees. Every process in the organization—from onboarding new employees to developing the current workforce to providing graceful exits from the organization—must include the concept of *inclusion*. This cannot be optional.

To my (Joel) knowledge, the Province of Manitoba's philosophy of inclusion in Canada states that..

“Inclusion is a way of thinking and acting that allows every individual to feel accepted, valued, and safe. An inclusive community/organization consciously evolves to meet the changing needs of its members. By working together, we strengthen our capacity to provide the foundation for a richer future for all.”

This philosophy offers a powerful foundation for governments and organizations around the world.

I believe an organization's strategic efforts to elevate *diversity* is only a starting point. Yes, it is important to attract diverse talent in an organization. The question is: How do you begin making inclusion the real objective of your efforts? As a wellbeing leader, experiment with these actions and champion efforts that encourage others to do the same.

- Engage people who look different from you. Talk to them, listen to them, hear them, make them part of your informal work and non-work groups/gatherings.

- Broaden your perspective by getting to know a diverse set of people. For starters, think of your friends or groups you associate with outside work. How many of them look different from you? Likely, not many. Consciously try changing that. It sounds easy on paper but can be a bit more challenging in real life.
- Start conversations about inclusion in your organization. The anticipated and unanticipated benefits of inclusion are endless. No matter how difficult or vulnerable conversations about inclusion get, the benefits far outweigh the silence and fear.
- Have a day where people bring food and music to work that reflects their culture. This provides an educational experience for all to enjoy together. Music and food are great equalizers.
- Look at inclusion from a more practical approach. You limit your employment base by excluding people. Any company that truly wants to be a great place to work must open up their hiring to a wide variety of backgrounds. Further, if your company only has people with the same experiences and perspectives, you may fall into groupthink, limiting your potential solutions, innovations and approaches.
- Ask all employees how they feel about work, including what they like and where they have challenges. Providing a safe space for this kind of talk is paramount to building an inclusive well-functioning workplace. And, it goes far in contributing to employee happiness and wellbeing, engagement, and productivity.

It's an opportunity for the workplace wellbeing community to be leaders and it's the right thing to do.

Those are my thoughts from the outside and now comments from someone on the inside.

I (Karlyn) believe it's time to make inclusion a *verb*, a way of continually evolving how our organizations operate and where the lived experience of every employee is reflected in the culture of wellbeing at work. Organizations that walk down this path of inclusion create more resilient cultures because the wellbeing of every employee is not only taken into consideration but is deeply valued. Employees then see themselves represented and included in the workplace culture, and they feel safe enough to bring their whole selves to work. This allows employees to access their inner operating system—the core beliefs, values, emotions, purpose and motivations that they can more effectively and fully contribute to do great work and impact the organization's overall health and performance.

To bring to life the idea of inclusion as part of an organization's wellness strategies, I want to share a personal story with you from my twenty-three year career in technology within the financial industry.

Sitting at my desk at a firm on Bay St. (Toronto's powerhouse financial district), I knew something had to change. Born in the Caribbean, I grew up raised by strong women who taught me that if I kept my head down and worked hard, I was bound to be successful. I worked hard, followed the rules, and I was still stuck and exhausted most of the time.

Yet, I was bullied for my accent and regularly confronted with offensive questions (including a co-worker who commented that she hadn't known we could get "normal people clothes" in the Caribbean and another who mentioned that people who advanced in her department are "well groomed".) The daily microaggressions¹ at my place of employment were a constant source of debilitating stress.

As a result, I raised my hands less in meetings and stopped sharing my creative ideas; simply existing was stressful enough. My experience was not unlike many Black women or women of color; just living our lives at work comes with an "emotional tax," an additional source of anxiety in the form of daily discrimination that impact our lives, our work, and our health. We are confronted with both purposeful and thoughtless discrimination on all fronts.

The emotional tax on me was becoming physical ailments. I realized I was living my life with functional depression. Yet, my workplace's current wellness options did not meet my needs. It was not inclusive enough because it did not reflect my lived experience. (Based on the high number of disengaged employees in this firm, I would say that it didn't include the majority of the organizations employees.)

The people I spoke to at our Employee Assistance Program didn't know or understand the concept of "emotional tax," the combination of feeling different from peers at work because of gender, race, ethnicity and the associated effects on health and wellbeing. Nor did they realize that Black, Indigenous and women of color carry this invisible burden more than others. Many don't feel included in their current workplace wellness programming. This is such a loss for organizations and the people in it.

If we consider inclusion as a verb, then the lived experience of every individual, including those who are consistently underrepresented, must be taken into consideration. Because my story is similar to what happens to other people of color and other marginalized people around the world.

Inclusion should not be a privilege for a chosen few. Each of us has an opportunity to be genuine wellbeing leaders by ensuring that inclusion is part of the experience of all employees. When we create space where employees

are able to bring their whole selves to their work, then wellbeing will be more available for all.

About the Authors:



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RESOURCES

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