Inclusive Employee Resource Groups

There is no one right way to structure employee resource groups.

Every organization has to solve for these issues while taking into account its own unique culture, organizational structure, marketplace variables and the community in which it works. What might end up working for one organization, may not work in another organization.

When employee resource groups (ERGs) first started decades ago, most were defined solely by affinity: employees who share the concerns of a common race, gender, national origin, sexual orientation, or background/experience. Originally, these groups offered under-represented employee groups an opportunity to network, present concerns to management, and advocate for change as a united front.

The fact remains that people from underrepresented groups are still underrepresented in most of the corporate world, especially in more senior levels of the organization. People from underrepresented groups continue to need a way of finding people like them to avoid feeling isolated, and to have the opportunity to work together to identify barriers, voice concerns and advocate for equity.

At the same time, the boundaries separating races, ethnicities, nationalities, and gender are shifting. This situation challenges D&I champions and ERG leaders to adapt to the multidimensionality of identities and become more sensitive to the divergent needs within their constituencies.

According to one analysis, Millennials, in particular, are less likely to define their identities in stereotypical categories. They expect to be viewed as multidimensional and complex individuals, which makes determining ERG identities challenging. As a result, ERGs are becoming increasingly intersectional as more people belong to more groups and share more goals, such as an employee might identify as Black, female, lesbian and have a disability - and therefore might belong to several ERGs.

This intersectionality across diversity dimensions has created new momentum for ERGs and led to formation of a new breed of ERGs. For example, not long ago, an ERG for parents was a novel idea. Today, there are ERGs for adoptive parents, single parents, working parents, parents of special needs children, LGBTQ parents, and employees taking care of elderly parents. These may be separately formed ERGs, or one ERG that is inclusive of all different dimensions of parenthood. Increasingly, ERGs are forming around corporate social responsibility, health and wellbeing, religious affinity, environmental issues, and a wide range of other employee dimensions and shared interests.

There has also been a movement toward reframing ERGs as business resource groups (BRGs) because of the value they can add to the workforce, workplace and marketplace.
Today, ERGs/BRGs can play a role in the workplace including recruitment, retention, talent identification and advancement, and in the marketplace, including connecting with new consumer groups, developing culturally relevant products, driving supplier diversity, and solving business problems.

Expanding ERG/BRG membership beyond a particular affinity community to include a wider range of employee perspectives, knowledge and experience increases opportunities for diverse perspectives and innovative solutions to workplace and marketplace challenges.

With regard to whether your ERG should be open or closed: does it have to be an either/or, or can it be a both/and?

We argue it can be a both/and situation in which an organization can create a structure for their ERGs/BRGs that addresses the needs of underrepresented groups while at the same time leaving room to explore issues of intersectionality and providing the majority group a way to participate. The underlying goal of ERGs is to promote diversity and inclusion, not exclusion. Excluding interested employees and potential allies from ERG/BRG membership may prompt some employees to view ERGS as exclusive and receiving preferential treatment, and lead to questions why there isn’t a group for them to join.

Remember: the foundational purpose behind ERGs is to create a safe space for a group of people to promote inclusion, equity and belonging. That shouldn’t mean that other people who don’t identify the same way are unwelcome. Increasingly, organizations are requiring their ERGs/BRGs to accept any employee that wants to join in their effort, including employees from a shared affinity group, employees who serve as allies to support the work of the ERG, other employees who share a common interest. The best ERGs/BRGs offer multiple points of entry for employees who are not part of the same affinity group to get involved. Making ERGs open to all employees can be an effective way to build relationships across differences and truly create a culture of inclusion and belonging.

A few examples of companies that have open ERG membership to all employees:

Bank of America's Native American Professional Network (NAPN) is one of the company’s fastest growing employee-led networks, and also its most diverse. Although the network is organized around the interests and needs of the Native American community, NAPN is led by an African American employee and the majority of NAPN leaders and members are from non-Native American majority groups.

The framework emphasizes the importance of intersectionality as a next step in breaking down diversity siloes. Having diverse representation has allowed the group to address stigma and unconscious bias around Native American culture and brought those discussions to the forefront. NAPN successfully leverages the bench strength of its members, the majority of which are non-Native American, to implement financial awareness and literacy initiatives to improve the economic mobility of Native American communities, provide training and education to develop the next generation of Native American leaders, and deliver a robust program of community outreach and volunteerism.

At The Estée Lauder Companies, ERGs are helping to propel innovation by bringing together different perspectives, experiences and ideas from employees at all levels. Typically these groups
are formed around a common social identity such as gender, race, ethnicity or sexual orientation, or a life stage such as parenthood. However, all ERGs are inclusive and are open for any full-time employees to join.

In 2017, Comcast Xfinity successfully launched “You Don’t Have To Be To Belong,” an employee engagement campaign created to promote ERG membership among allies and supporters, as well as employees who identify with the affinity group. The reason: ERGs enhance employee development by providing a supportive environment, exposing members to broad opportunities and creating meaningful connections.

At Salesforce, employee resource groups are known as "ohana" groups, after the Hawaiian term for "chosen family." The groups orient around passion areas and identities, like BOLDForce, for black employees; Outforce, the LGBTQ group; and FaithForce, a community for all faiths. The idea is that these circles create communities within the broader Salesforce workforce, and everyone is encouraged to join one, even if you're a white woman joining BOLDForce or a straight employee going to Outforce events.

At Fidelity, ERGs aren't groups that do programming and sponsorship for and contained within the group. They do programming and sponsorship for everyone at the company who has an aligned interest or a curiosity and a desire to explore and expose themselves to differences. So every invitation to participate in an ERG is an open invitation.

Weil recognized that diversity allies were needed to promote greater inclusion for all employee resource groups. In 2015, the firm launched Upstander@Weil to inspire managers and employees to stand up for inclusion in the workplace, community and at home, and to get involved in ERG work and activities.

Senior leaders at Rockwell understood that to make sustainable change in diversity and inclusion efforts, the dominant group at the company - in this case white men - needed to be aware of the impact of their privilege, be engaged, and partner with women and underrepresented groups in a meaningful way. Inclusion Change Teams were formed to address barriers to inclusion, with white male business leaders comprising the majority of these teams. Men also formed “Allies” groups to support women and women-based ERGs, as advocates and sponsors.

To address the opportunity and extend the company’s efforts to promote inclusion, the San Francisco Fed designed an initiative focused specifically on the role of an ally and launched the new program at its annual ERG summit. The theme for the summit was “Be an Ally”, and the company asked all of its ERGs to recruit new members that would be allies to their cause.