Middle Management: Motivating Them to Care and Own Diversity and Inclusion

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It's no secret that engaging middle managers in diversity efforts continues to be a challenge on a global basis. Even though companies may realize its importance, there's a struggle to appreciate its relevance to the business. To figure out how to engage middle managers in embracing diversity and inclusion and driving it forward, one must first understand some of the critical challenges that exist, regardless of the region of the world in which they are operating.

For starters, diversity practitioners must realize that middle managers will not be engaged in diversity and inclusion in the same way as senior management. Senior and middle managers have fundamentally different charges. For the most part, those in senior management are focused on long-term issues of strategy and market-share dominance. Conversely, whether one's home base is in Asia, Europe, Latin America, Africa or the United States, the middle management cadre is focused on operationalizing that strategy on a day-to-day basis. With a priority on activities that increase sales or decrease costs, middle managers tend to embrace those actions that are more specific, relevant, and well defined. Diversity and inclusion efforts, which often focus on culture change (a vital yet abstract concept), have not been positioned well in this matter.

It's the relentless focus on the day-to-day that makes it inherently difficult for middle managers to lend their full and necessary weight to making diversity and inclusion part of an organization's modus operandi in ways that yield greater workforce diversity and organizational inclusiveness.

Accountability is difficult to embrace with the middle management cohort because they aren't always clear on the intent, the outcome, and the relevance to their work. As companies begin to move their business globally, diversity and inclusion strategies must demonstrate global relevance. Diversity still is viewed by many regions of the world as part of a U.S. agenda. The concept and its practices do not easily translate into other cultures, whether we are talking about Europe, Asia, Latin America, or Africa. The problem is exacerbated when these efforts are not viewed as being a key component of the global business strategic agenda.

To begin expanding diversity and inclusion globally, many companies and diversity practitioners may seek comfort in defining diversity and inclusion efforts based on concrete legal precepts and requirements. In the United States, South Africa, India,
Malaysia, and Canada, this may mean more of a focus on affirmative action or non-discrimination policies.

Despite this concreteness, the relevance of diversity and inclusion still misses the mark with middle management. While measurements and targets are defined within this space, these are not enough to engage middle managers in a meaningful way because they do not begin to sufficiently address their daily business challenges. Further, even those middle managers who fixate on the legal requirements and definitions don’t instinctively explore the elements of inclusiveness that make the diversity mix work.

This is especially so in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, where the homogeneity on a racial basis tends to underplay the significance that may be present in other areas like gender, sexual orientation, disability status, class, and generation. Interestingly, it is these later factors that can serve as the foundation to build diversity and inclusion and create more relevance to the business.

There are five factors that can sustain engagement of middle managers in a diversity strategy.

- Business-Relevant Strategies
- Unambiguous Measurements and Accountability Structures
- Performance Management and Reward Systems
- Inclusive Communication Mechanisms
- Senior Management Commitment

Let’s look at each one in more detail.

**Business-Relevant Strategies**

To truly engage middle managers, the diversity and inclusion strategy must be positioned within the context of business needs. This should be first and foremost in the minds of diversity strategists.

Many diversity efforts begin by focusing on the social and cultural needs of the various diversity constituencies. Activities often are based on historical events and memorable holidays that do not have an obvious connection to the business goals, even though these activities are indeed very significant. If diversity strategists can position these events to demonstrate how they build consumer demand, they will have more resonance. This holds true whether you are trying to build demand in England to reach a Caribbean consumer population or in Senegal to get more women to purchase your products. It would also hold true if you are trying to broaden the appeal of your products or services to Latinos in the United States.

When celebration events are set up this way, with a clear business connection, it significantly increases the ability to engage middle managers. Rather than having to cajole them to come, it becomes a can’t-miss event. Middle managers can embrace activities that will increase market share and penetrate consumer markets that have proven difficult to reach.
Another way to make diversity and inclusion relevant to middle management to address their practical need to bring in great talent. Diversity recruiting efforts that generate more recruits will certainly get middle-management attention if focused on the talent needs of the organization. For example, if a company in Poland or Czech Republic is seeking to increase its efforts to attract more women in its sales force, then a Women ERG focusing on recruiting will have more resonance and generate more interest from middle managers in this area. The same is true for a company in South Africa wanting to attract more black South Africans who have been educated in the United States or England to the marketing or finance department. This is an important objective for many companies there.

There are other efforts that can tap into underutilized talent. For example, in the United States, one may want to focus on developing more disability-friendly computers and equipment in the customer service area in order to enrich the pool of employees with disabilities and increase their productivity.

**Unambiguous Measurements and Accountability Structures**

The adage that what gets measured gets done is especially true for middle managers anywhere in the world. In a global economy with a global stock exchange system, the need to drive short-term and/or quarterly results is acute in every sector of the world. This economic reality drives middle-management behavior in Asia, Africa, Latin America, Europe and North America. It’s the role of the middle-management cadre to ensure business strategies are executed efficiently and effectively in every sector of the world. Those companies that have sound mechanisms for monitoring and measuring their progress will be more successful than those that don’t. At Colgate Palmolive, for example, diversity reviews are conducted by operating division to insure that accountability for results with hiring, succession planning, and development are executed deep into the organization. There are very specific metrics that drive accountability in these areas.

To the extent that a company can have some way of developing review systems for their diversity efforts they can engender more accountability. This is admittedly quite complex as one engages middle managers around the world, but this is still a lever that can be pulled. In many parts of the world, the legal frameworks play a large role in dictating what measures will be in place, or not, for certain aspects of diversity. In Europe, privacy laws prevent certain demographic information from being collected. Identification of race is, in fact, prohibited in certain countries, such as France. In most Asian countries, employee demographic data is not collected. An exception is Malaysia, where there’s a legal requirement to institute affirmative-action efforts impacting Chinese, Indian Malays, and local Malays. In most African countries, it would be very difficult to develop targets based on ethnicity. But in South Africa, the local Black Economic Empowerment Act dictates requirements in a number of employment areas dealing with race. In Brazil, which has the second largest black population in the world after Nigeria, local affirmative-action law around race is applied at the university level but not in the private sector.

But there are other legal frameworks that can be leaned on to address other dimensions of diversity. In Europe, a growing number of countries are instituting quotas around
the representation of women on boards. (See chapter on Europe.) In Brazil, one of the first quota requirements was around people with disabilities where, depending on their size, companies must have 2 percent to 4 percent of their workforce be people with disabilities. (See chapter on Brazil.)

Further, there are other compliance dimensions beyond representation that can be the focus. In China, for example, this may mean monitoring issues of pay equity between men and women. In Kenya, it may mean ensuring there is not a predominance of one tribal group in a function versus another (for example, Luo versus Kikiyu). In Argentina or Peru, it may mean ensuring there is an increase of women in the succession plan for more senior positions in a given function. And in India, it may mean getting more women and individuals of certain castes into more technical positions.

Outside of the traditional human resource measures, efforts should be made to consider business-building measures. For example, in Europe some geographic regions are dominated by immigrant groups. In England, Germany, or France, one can review distribution of products and availability of services in those districts and increase presence over time. In Brazil, the focus may be to increase retail presence in the favelas (poor neighborhoods). In the United States, those seeking to penetrate the Asian-American community may need to develop dual-language packaging and advertising to get more yields in the Chinatown districts of New York or San Francisco. These efforts tap into measures used daily by middle management.

This alignment with the regular rhythms of business, where senior management can play a role in asking the right questions during regular performance discussions, and middle managers can see how much paying attention to diversity and inclusion is a part of their accountabilities, is powerful.

Performance Management & Reward Systems

The psychological phenomena of reinforcing the desired behavior one wants to see repeated or providing a disincentive for behaviors that are undesirable is part of the dynamic of leadership in organizations.

To a large degree the formality of the performance management process can vary from one industry, company, or country to another. Certainly in the United Kingdom, Germany, Canada, the United States, and many countries in Latin America, you will see more formal measures in place. Care must be taken in any country to outline the expectations of middle managers regarding their role in diversity initiatives. To the greatest extent possible it is preferable to reward middle managers for excellent performance in these areas as opposed to penalizing them for poor performance. Rewards can come in the form of additional stock options or additional salary increases where this fits with the local country compensation system. It can come in the form of intangible types of recognition, praise, awards, and special perks. This intangible type of reward is great because it sends a message about what behavior is desirable, expected, and encouraged. Stock options and additional salary increases do not have the same impact because they are confidential and privately disbursed.
Whether the performance management systems are formal or informal, the focus should be on the key elements that count for success in the company. When expectations are outlined to middle management about the behavior that is required for advancement in the organization, one begins to see different performance. Most savvy middle managers are quite adept at understanding the signals for advancement in the organization. At 3M, the company works hard to ensure Asian scientists are not pigeonholed into a technical career path. In their performance management process, Asian scientists are provided an option of a managerial or technical career path. This way, middle managers are reinforcing the company directive of making sure all employees are afforded robust career opportunities.

In many companies, an inordinate amount of time is spent trying to understand why certain individuals receive a coveted assignment or promotion over others. In certain countries in Asia or Latin America, the rules of the game may not be formally or explicitly stated. The cultural context dictates that you discern over time what is expected through an informal system of behaviors and actions. This can also be the case in certain industries or companies in the United States that operate on more of a consensus or subtle manner. The important factor is that companies will communicate what behavior they want by their actions and decisions. Actions speak louder than words. This is the case, whether those actions are symbolic and subtle or verbal and explicit. Pepsico has a corporate directive called “Performance with a Purpose,” which insures that responsibility to sustain talent development rolls down throughout the organization. Middle management clearly understands that developing best talent is a key business driver.

It is equally important to have alignment between the formal and informal operating systems of an organization. When you notice that certain formally announced initiatives are not getting attention, it is wise to see how this is reinforced informally. Too often companies will have edicts pronounced by senior management and these efforts get subverted by middle management in the informal system. This passive resistance can take several forms. Individuals can usually tell whether they are being supported with their involvement in diversity initiatives. There is no secret to what middle managers value. Diversity strategists would do well to facilitate middle managers’ involvement by identifying the type of behaviors that demonstrate alignment with diversity initiatives. This can range from co-sponsoring efforts; attending diversity events; chairing committees; contributing resources, time, and money; and actively participating on task forces and programs that strengthen diversity and demonstrate inclusion.

The fundamental way that performance management can be used to engage middle management and provide accountability is to outline key performance indicators that support diversity and inclusion. Typically, middle managers are provided with five to eight key performance factors in which they must demonstrate excellence. If there is no indication of support for diversity and inclusion in any of the key performance factors, it should come as no surprise that there will be little focus in this direction. The expectations exchange between senior management and middle management on the requirements for action against key performance factors is vital to excellent performance in diversity and inclusion activities. At Kraft, middle managers are an integral part of the peer-coaching
program. This effort ensures the effectiveness of women and people of color in their present assignment is increased and that they are prepared for their future assignments.

The extent that performance management techniques can be used in one country or another has more to do with specific company culture than country culture. Country culture certainly plays a role in communicating what is important and what is not. In “high-context” societies, what is important is not explicitly stated. Communication is more indirect and subtle. This is often the case in many Latin American countries, China, Japan, Thailand, Greece, Italy, France, Brazil, or the Philippines. In other countries, such as Germany, the United States, the United Kingdom, or even Australia, “low-context” communication—where the context for communicating is more direct and explicit (where what you hear is what is)—is more prevalent.

Whatever the cultural context, diversity strategists operating in the global space need to work within the cultural framework to get messages across. In high-context societies, the desire to clarify the business rationale for diversity is more challenging because these societies are more homogenous. Therefore, it is important to not talk just about the diversity mix, but about how this mix works.

Diversity efforts need to be skillfully positioned to middle managers so they can see the business rationale. The concept of inclusion—making the mix work well—potentially can have more resonance globally with middle managers, because it begins to describe the specific elements that middle managers must focus on. This is where organizations should begin to enroll middle managers in the diversity strategy, as these managers should be able to tie this to their daily responsibilities and see how this can facilitate their business needs. Cummins ensures that their engineering groups in Latin America, Africa, and China are focused on innovation in their diesel engine groups. Toyota and Ford also encourage their middle managers to get involved with employee resource groups (ERGs) to improve their businesses.

**Inclusive Communication Mechanisms**

Ultimately, communication is the connecting sinew that binds organizations together to achieve their intent. Whether in high-context or low-context societies, organizations are able to communicate preferred behaviors and practices. The role of middle managers in taking responsibility for communicating diversity and inclusion is an overlooked area that can add impact if utilized differently in many countries. When middle managers communicate business issues, they take responsibility for ensuring the messages are received and acted on. This is a core aspect of their job. If a middle-manager engineer in Thailand informs his subordinates that there is a quality issue in manufacturing that needs attention, one can be sure he or she expresses ownership for this element. When a finance manager in Germany communicates that costs are overrun in the marketing materials area, one can be sure this will get attention. When a customer service manager in the United States indicates that products are consistently out of stock in a major supply region for the suburb of a large metropolitan area, one can be sure that this will be a priority.
These are business critical issues that middle managers struggle with daily. It is for this reason that communication of inclusion efforts should not be limited to diversity and HR staff. Line management must take more ownership and accountability for the what, how, and when of communication as it relates to diversity and inclusion. For example, if it is important for key personnel in a South African company to attend a conflict-management training program that seeks to improve relations in a department unit, middle managers should take responsibility for ensuring that the message and importance is communicated. Take a regional team in Mexico and the need to increase distribution of healthcare products to the Indigenous population in Guatemala, for example. The significance of this is best communicated by middle managers, who would be more capable of explaining how serving this low-income, diverse area meets the overall business needs. As another example, in the United States, if a finance institution does not have any financial counselors who understand how to counsel same-sex couples regarding joint property and financial assets, then the middle manager can best communicate why it is important to develop this capability to effectively service this cohort. In Boca Raton, Fla., if a grocery store does not have ramps, parking, and food aisles that are disability friendly, this becomes a major customer service issue that is best understood when communicated by middle management.

In essence, when middle management takes ownership for communicating an issue regarding diversity and inclusion efforts that have business significance, it comes with authority and evokes accountability. At Time Warner, middle managers encourage focus groups on the lots of the HBO and Warner studios in order to get robust feedback to make the products better. Middle managers are the translating entity of organizations. They turn senior management prerogatives into specific actions. They communicate the priority and importance of efforts to business outcomes. For example, Colgate Palmolive middle managers in Asia Pacific recognize that promoting an inclusive environment for women is critical to retention efforts. Therefore, they have strongly supported women employee resource groups from the various Asian countries to communicate and coordinate their efforts. Additionally, this is evident at Clorox, which ensures there is middle management involvement in ERGs to get diverse views on how to improve product positioning and awareness in the communities in which it operates. Their role is indispensable to diversity and inclusion strategies.

Even in command and control organizations like military units, one can see this exhibited very well. When generals of military units indicate they want a certain target secured, the lieutenants, and more so the sergeants, interpret how this will be accomplished. People in organizations also get their marching orders from middle managers, who ultimately interpret how to execute senior management desires. As translating entities, the role of interpreting senior management desires is significant and carries power.

**Senior Management Commitment**

Diversity and inclusion strategists always consider the role of senior management as the first step in executing a diversity and inclusion strategy. In fact, the role of senior management is indispensable in executing diversity and inclusiveness within
an organization. However, the connection between senior management and middle managers is often where diversity and inclusion efforts break down. In every country's cultural framework, senior managers have a way of communicating to middle managers the priorities, givens, and areas of discretion in terms of executing strategy. This is a pretty consistent phenomenon around the globe.

In high-context cultural frameworks like Japan, France, or some Latin countries, this communication may be more indirect, non-verbal, or implied. In lower-context cultural frameworks like the United States, United Kingdom, or Germany, it may be more direct and explicit. Notwithstanding the country cultural context, organizations have their own cultures that dictate how issues of importance are communicated.

Whatever the method, senior management has a role to hold middle management accountable for all results within their purview. Senior management holds middle management accountable for costs, market-share increases, revenues, quality, and customer service. Diversity and inclusion activities, if positioned correctly, can facilitate the role of middle managers in executing their goals in these areas. It requires innovation and flexibility to integrate these efforts effectively. Senior-management commitment must go beyond mere platitudes and slogans to encourage middle managers to be more proactive in the diversity and inclusion arena. At Colgate Palmolive, on a global basis, women ERGs are involved in innovation efforts, community awareness, and marketing. Even in Pakistan, where traditional norms might tend to inhibit women's involvement, women ERGs are thriving and contributing to the business.

Substantiating this involvement can come in several forms. Of course, there may be reluctance in certain countries in Europe or Asia to develop stringent measurements and reporting mechanisms. However, a statement of the values and principles that a company must adhere to is a step in the right direction. At Verizon, the CEO states that diversity is the right thing to do. This statement overrides the tendency to justify diversity and inclusion on metrics and costs alone. It is a value statement of what should be important to the business. Procter & Gamble also employs this philosophical approach and it gives impetus to middle managers to get on board and support diversity and inclusion. Many U.S.-based global companies use these value and principle statements as guides for local country behaviors, policies, and practices. A case in point is at Colgate Palmolive, where the CEO will consistently espouse the values of Continuous Improvement, Caring, and Best Place to Work. So throughout the Latin American, African, European, and Asia Pacific countries this is locally translated into specific focus areas by line managers, which will support people development and diversity efforts.

While the norm in certain countries may not be as proactive in the diversity and inclusion arena, many companies will indicate the values that guide their company framework. As authority and responsibility for executing diversity and inclusion trickles down through the organization, it is the role of middle managers to be accountable for its effective execution.
Conclusion

As discussed in this chapter, there are five key factors that diversity and inclusion strategists must consider in engaging middle managers and enhancing accountability.

To start, diversity and inclusion must be integrated with the organization’s business strategies. If this does not occur, diversity and inclusion will always be viewed as tangential to core business operations.

In addition, unambiguous measurement systems must be in place. It's essential that these systems be aligned with accountability structures that fit the needs and the cultural framework of the country and company. These elements may be different from one country to another because of the cultural context that dictates how things are done. Performance management and reward systems are essential to getting the type of behavior one desires. What gets rewarded gets repeated. The way performance is assessed and behavior is acknowledged will vary because of the cultural framework, but every culture has a way of reinforcing the behaviors and performance it desires.

Communication plays a pivotal role in every culture in getting messages across. The sender of the message is just as important as the message itself. Middle managers can be more involved with taking ownership of the messages so key stakeholders understand how important diversity and inclusion are to the business. It should not be just a staff responsibility.

Also, the role of senior management must be revisited. These professionals provide the leadership that determines the direction of the organization. Leadership of diversity and inclusion should be a shared activity. As accountability and responsibility for all business results are shared, diversity and inclusion can be integrated more effectively into the fabric of everyday corporate life.

Further, one should not underestimate the role of company-articulated values that guide behavior in a corporation. Over and beyond the country culture, these values play an indispensable role in prescribing how the company will provide excellence to its consumers, employees, the community, and shareholders. Values are a key determinate of the corporate brand, which differentiates the organization from its competitors and provides the context for distinction in all of its activities on a global basis.

Ultimately, diversity and inclusion strategists can and must do more to engage middle managers and establish accountability. They can operate in a forum of shared governance and encourage middle managers to take more ownership for diversity and inclusion results. The WIIFM (what’s in it for me) must be outlined.

Middle managers are the linchpin responsible for executing corporate strategy. As a cohort, they share this distinction globally. Whether in Chile or China, Turkey or Thailand, Asia or the Americas, the role of the middle manager is indispensable to the effective execution of business strategies. They may operate out of a different cultural context that dictates how they will share information, make decisions, and work with others. However, they understand what is important, what the priorities are, and how to work with others to accomplish results.
In partnering with middle managers, diversity and inclusion strategists must be cognizant of the crosscultural challenges when positioning diversity. They must understand that the diversity mix in China will be different from that of the United States. They must comprehend how to differentiate strategy and inclusion efforts in Venezuela versus Argentina. Great care must be taken to appreciate the historical framework, political policy framework, and demographic patterns in each local region.

Diversity and inclusion strategists can begin to engage middle managers by translating diversity and inclusion efforts to the business challenges they are struggling with daily. Critical questions can be asked to position this more effectively.

- What are your business challenges?
- How can diversity and inclusion efforts help you with these business challenges?
- What would you recommend doing differently to make my diversity efforts more relevant to your business issues?
- What would be the best way for us to work together so we ensure that diversity and inclusion are meeting your needs?
- What is the best way for you to communicate to key stakeholders that diversity and inclusion are key to meeting your business needs?
- How can I best help you with all of this as a business partner?

It is not necessary to have all the answers, but having the right questions can go a long way to increasing middle-management engagement. And without middle-management engagement, no matter where in the world, diversity does not move forward.