

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion & Belonging

During my 25-year journey in corporate HR across diverse industries and cultures, I have learned that a **sense of belonging** is the most significant factor in determining employee retention and well-being. It serves as the cornerstone of effective diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) programs within any organisation.

I have witnessed firsthand the impact of feeling included on employee engagement and productivity. Individuals who feel part of the **inner circle** are more likely to stay and thrive, benefiting from positive reinforcement and sponsorship.

Conversely, I have observed that many managers tend to succumb to **familiarity biases**, particularly during HR discussions. It's not uncommon to see managers favour colleagues who share similarities such as working styles, social status, ethnicity, social background, or work experience.

Additionally, they often spend more time with colleagues who are "like them", naturally making them more comfortable and familiar with their work.

On the other hand, team members who are less familiar to the manager or who differ from them in some way take time to build credibility and gain necessary sponsorship.

For most managers, these dynamics are not always driven by malicious intent but rather by **unconscious biases** ingrained in our brains from childhood experiences and upbringing. The amygdala in our brain is responsible for processing emotions. It subconsciously detects threats, dangers, and fear in unfamiliar situations. This natural inclination causes us to gravitate towards individuals who are similar to us, fostering feelings of comfort, security, and familiarity.

Another critical aspect of DEI and personal well-being is acknowledging the experiences of **privileged groups**. In certain cultures, privileges are bestowed upon groups associated with high status, leading them to feel automatically welcomed and accepted. This positive bias means that individuals who resemble the majority or belong to the privileged group are more likely to receive support and acceptance than those who belong to a less privileged group.

These days, there's much discussion about DEI and employee well-being. However, to drive meaningful change in this area, there's a need for deeper reflection, both individually and collectively. Are we creating an inclusive environment where everyone feels safe and valued, especially those considered 'different'? Do we treat privileged groups differently? More importantly, if we are part of the majority/privileged group, how do we interact and judge others?

Fostering genuine inclusiveness requires deliberate effort and breaking old patterns ingrained in our childhood regarding how we perceive specific communities or groups. It also demands individual commitment to self-growth and ongoing self-reflection.

Looking back on my journey, I began as a customer service representative in a bank and gradually progressed to senior leadership positions in Fortune 100 companies. I am grateful to have had amazing mentors, sponsors, and leaders who supported and encouraged me. Their guidance helped me identify my unique strengths and fueled my determination to achieve success.

At the same time, I also encountered some unconventional remarks from certain managers and colleagues, such as 'you are different,' 'not a typical profile or cultural fit,' and comments regarding my height and petite structure.

Reflecting on these experiences, I realise they significantly contributed to my personal growth. However, I also noticed a coping mechanism that I developed over time: a tendency to downplay differences and overly seek acceptance from 'the majority,' often relying on similarities. While this approach has proven effective, it inherently triggers self-doubt, which I needed to work consciously to be comfortable in my own skin.

Reflecting on my DEI journey, I would like to share my perspective on fostering genuine inclusivity in the workplace:

1. Actively engage in diverse social circles, both personally and professionally, to gain insights from various perspectives, cultivate an appreciation for differences, and embrace individual identities, irrespective of their origins.
2. As a manager, ensure equitable distribution of time and attention among all team members, striving to understand each individual's unique background and viewpoint.

Be vigilant against bias towards any particular group or individual, as office gossip can often reveal signs of favouritism.

3. Recognise that differences can evoke fear on both sides—among minority and majority groups. Minorities may experience emotions ranging from guilt to anger, while majorities may exhibit anger or mob-like reactions. Hence, always maintain integrity and sensitivity when addressing such issues.

4. Inclusion is fundamental to diversity efforts. If you belong to the majority group, avoid succumbing to groupthink, especially when interacting with minorities, particularly in team meetings and during feedback sessions.

5. Foster open discussions on sensitive topics. Handled with compassion and empathy, these conversations can lead to constructive dialogue.

6. Be mindful of positive biases towards privileged groups, as they may inadvertently perpetuate unfair advantages and exclude marginalized individuals. Actively challenge and address these biases to promote equity and inclusivity in your interactions and decision-making processes.

Ultimately, fostering empathy, understanding, and compassion is essential. Each of us has a role to play in creating an inclusive environment where everyone feels valued and respected. This journey isn't solely about implementing policies and metrics; it requires a genuine mindset shift that begins from within. If done correctly, it will lead to better employee retention and well-being, resulting in an engaged and productive workforce.

If you're seeking to enhance your overall Diversity, Inclusion, and Employee Well-being program, consider reaching out to www.farihas.com. We offer customised individual and team coaching solutions, including personalised core energy assessments and team diversity and inclusion reports.