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Ten ways to build Pride at small businesses

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Focusing on these building blocks can help build an inclusive culture

With lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and allies (LGBTQA) Pride events underway across the country, it's common to see larger companies join the celebrations. But small or medium-sized business can be part of these events and - more importantly - even the smallest businesses can build an LGBTQA-inclusive culture that thrives throughout the calendar year and helps companies recruit, develop and retain top talent. Focusing on these 10 building blocks can help build an inclusive culture:

1. Embedding diversity into your culture begins with you.

Owners and managers can ensure a company includes individuals with different backgrounds, experiences, educations and orientations by creating open workplaces where top talent will want to work. Tackle challenges that may dissuade people from applying. Think deliberately about the channels you're using to recruit. Your human resources function can help. Even if it's limited to a single person, diversity must be at the forefront of their goals.

2. Diversity is the mix that exists in your company - but inclusion is how you leverage it. It's not enough to "be" diverse. You've got to motivate people to represent inclusiveness in all that they do. Help already-inclusive employees set the tone by acknowledging and rewarding the positive ways they're contributing to the culture. And be open about the fact that the company refuses to tolerate intolerance. Research shows bringing together vastly different people generates more creative solutions - which means diversity isn't a nice-to-have, it's a business imperative.

3. Helping people connect within the organization affects how you perform as an organization.

Ernst & Young has employee resource groups specifically for lesbian and gay individuals and their allies, which sends the message that people can bring their whole selves to work. A smaller company can adapt this by asking interested employees to meet with management regularly to discuss issues. Employees who are valued for who they are contribute more to the business and demonstrate higher levels of engagement.

4. Getting the tone right at the top goes a long way.

Smaller organizations with less formal internal communications can still talk about these issues. Show executive sponsorship by weaving the issue into your quarterly meeting. Informally discuss diversity in team chats. Use the company blog to reinforce that your door is always open. Sometimes, simply using the words "gay" and "lesbian" in internal communications can send an inclusive message. The important thing is that you talk about it, and lead by example. Value people and perspectives different from your own, and others will follow suit.

5. Break down the barriers, one at a time.

Whether your company has 20, 200 or 2,000 employees, finding out what's blocking your workplace from becoming more LGBTQA inclusive is critical. Ask everyone - gay, lesbian, straight - what's working and what's not, and encourage them to share. Their responses are an ideal platform for new solutions.

6. Measurement makes it happen.

We build diversity metrics into evaluations to ensure everyone is working toward improving the firm's overall inclusiveness efforts. That's translatable to a smaller organization, too. It could mean adding an annual performance review question about how employees have worked to make the office more inclusive, or asking people to include one inclusiveness goal in their road map for the year. What gets measured gets done.

7. Putting some skin in the game counts.

Unlike mentors, who offer career coaching and advice, sponsors are hands-on advocates who fight for and create advancement opportunities for high-potential individuals. They put some skin in the game. Leaders can help people build networks, skill sets, experiences and more. This can be particularly important for a gay or lesbian individual who already feels they're from a minority or under-represented group, but has the talent and drive to propel their career forward.

8. Look outside for inspiration.

Good ideas come from all around us. Tap into your fellow business owners and ask how *they* are building LGBTQA inclusiveness into their culture. Gleaning best practices from others can be a good way to flesh out your plans, and try approaches that are working well for similarly sized businesses.

9. Consider joining forces.

Building alliances with other organizations of similar size, with shared LGBTQA inclusiveness goals, can broaden your focus. Maybe there's room to come together with a few other businesses and create a small steering committee with a representative from each group. If you feel you really need a critical mass to make a difference, then team up with like-minded business owners to build it together.

10. Taking your message to the street isn't *Beyond* your reach.

Who says parades, Pride workplace events, or other celebrations are only for large companies? Scale your own business' participation in these events to a level that's attainable, affordable and actionable. A booth at a Pride street festival, a single person representing the company at a larger networking event or a small sponsorship in the right place can all send the message to your people *and* your clients that this is a place where differences are celebrated.

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