

What can US businesses teach SA about inclusion at work?

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We may think of workplace diversity as a problem unique to South African businesses based on our history, but it's not. We only have to look to the US, where chief diversity and inclusion officers and gender-neutral pronouns are part of business to realise that maybe we have a thing or two to learn from our counterparts up north.



We all know that South Africa is a culturally diverse country, one that struggles to make diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) a lived reality across all industries and businesses. But we're not the only country that struggles with harnessing the power of DEI to help build a powerful and purposeful workforce, economy and society. And while the US may have different challenges, ones that don't stem from an Apartheid legacy, they certainly do take DEI seriously, at a policy and business level.

Just think about it. How many chief diversity and inclusion officers have you met in SA? And how many Teams meetings do you attend where every person has their preferred personal pronouns (he/she/they/ze) next to their name? Or, put another way, how many of us would disagree with this statement from Elena Richards, chief diversity and inclusion officer at KPMG, that "successfully engaging in DEI will build a culture that attracts and grows the next generation of talent and inclusive leaders."

So, what can we learn from our US counterparts?

Here are some key lessons from America's most diverse and culturally aware companies, according to [DiversityInc's top 50 best companies for diversity in 2022](#).

Build your leaders to lead by example

How do you ensure that your leaders and management not only support DEI but incorporate it's behaviours and actions into

their leadership style and business priorities?

You could start with training. In 2021, Lilly improved its talent processes to include mandatory training for all new leaders with a special focus on behaviours that create inclusion and “psychological safety for all”.

You could also make your leaders accountable to each other. CVS Health has a Diversity Management Leadership Council (DMLC), which comprises a group of cross-functional senior leaders who are held responsible for implementing diversity management in their respective business areas, while further serving as peer coaches and internal champions.

A/G offers “Conscious Inclusion” training for managers to help them better understand biases and form an action plan for implementing inclusive behaviours.

Or you could take a leaf out of KeyBank’s playbook, who went so far as to bring diversity into their compensation strategy, tying DEI performance indicators directly into their executives compensation packages.

Start treating DEI like every other business priority

Diversity often gets treated as an HR issue or limited to the recruitment process when it should be seen as a top business priority. Accenture understands this. That’s why it has assigned goals, metrics and accountability to ensure DEI is treated and measured like any other business priority.

It also helps to allocate resources and mandates that ensure DEI gets taken seriously. Like Humana, who recently created two critical leadership roles (chief health equity officer and associate vice president: workforce and culture) to drive equity both internally and externally,

Re-evaluate your talent pipeline

We often bemoan quotas as often as we bemoan the lack of diverse talent in our businesses. So what can you do?

You could set up a task team. In 2021, ADP launched its “Diversity & Inclusion Talent Task Force” to ensure more equitable representation at all leadership levels for the talent that was under-represented in their business.

You could also re-evaluate your thinking around degrees vs skills for certain positions. Since 2021, *Humana* has started piloting the removal of degree requirements for positions where they believe knowledge and skills gained through on-the-job experience is often a better predictor of success for that role. In the same vein, Lilly has recently introduced a “Skills First” initiative which focuses on eliminating the degree requirement for certain roles.

Think more broadly around training and development

Most companies offer continuous learning and development, but what about DEI learning? For example, *AstraZeneca* has included “Racial Fluency Training” as a way to help staff develop the language and confidence they need to have open, meaningful conversations about race-related inclusion.

And what about all those mothers who may have left employment and want to be brought back into the fold? *Moody* offers a great alternative through a programme aptly named “RE-IGNITE”. This 16-week paid initiative helps relaunch the careers of mothers and other individuals who have taken a minimum two-year break from the workforce.

Perhaps we need to reach people where they are at. As an example, *Kellogg’s* not only offers DEI learning for all company levels, it has tailormade ‘Leading with Equity’ for their leadership teams.

Create a more engaged workplace culture

What do we value in our workplace cultures? What we exclude says as much as what we include.

For example, Accenture's workplace culture is centred around psychological safety and compassion, which they believe helps people bring their best and most authentic selves to work.

In the same vein, AstraZeneca spends time and money creating an environment where their people are encouraged to "Speak Up" and speak their minds, no matter what their role or responsibility in the business.

Or you could follow TD Bank's example and hold a DEI summit every year. Theirs takes place over four days and brings over 11,000 colleagues together where they share experiences and learn how to foster inclusion, enable connectedness and generate deeper conversations.

General Motors recently launched #GMVoices to give a platform to the company's diverse voices, while encouraging people to share their lived experiences and have candid conversations about topics like representation, advocacy and allyship.

There are so many opportunities but having a solid strategy in place is not one thing, it's everything. As Jimmy Etheredge, CEO of Accenture reminds us: "Inclusion is about enabling everyone to be their authentic selves and fully contribute as valued team members. When we do that, it has a powerful compounding effect. It creates a diverse and equitable environment where every person feels like they belong, every day, and it inspires our people to be their best – at work, at home and in their communities."

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