Looking back over the last 20 or so years, we can clearly see the positive impact that cultural awareness and diversity programs have had on the advancement of women and minorities in the workplace. During this time period, we have seen the face of the workforce change to reflect the communities served and have listened to corporate executives make their case as to how they shattered the "glass ceiling" by making conscious efforts to promote women and minorities.

According to The American Lawyer's 2013 Diversity Report Card, law firms in the United States have made up some lost ground in their levels of diversity too. The most recent survey, issued in May 2013, shows that last year, minority lawyers made up 13.9 percent of all lawyers at the 228 firms that participated. That's up slightly from the previous year, and it's exactly the same percentage as in 2008, before the recession took hold and the overall minority percentage began to dip. In 2000, the Diversity Report Card found that minorities constituted only 9.7 percent of all attorneys at the biggest firms.

While these organizations have every right to be proud of their diversity achievements, in today's world of shrinking borders and instantaneous communication, simply creating and talking about diversity programs isn't enough. In this global economy, organizations must foster collaboration across gender, social and cultural lines; encourage and reward diversity of thought; and embrace their employees' diverse experiences and perspectives. Most importantly, these organizations must figure out how to integrate these very elements into their core to establish a competitive advantage in the marketplace.

**Diversity vs. Inclusion**

Diversity and cultural awareness programming was an important first step in the evolution of the traditional corporate structure. The C-suite executives welcomed and endorsed the programs because they benefited from the positive financial and public relation effects of being good corporate citizens. The rank and file embraced them because it meant additional career opportunities to a population of the workforce that had been historically overlooked or outright ignored.

As is the case with most trending corporate initiatives however, the effectiveness of the once heralded diversity programs grew stagnant due to lack of evolution and eventually were pushed aside by corporate executives in favor of newer, hotter trends. The C-suite executives felt as if they did their corporate duty by endorsing the diversity programs initially. However, they didn't see the long-term value of their newly diverse workforce. They failed to see the added value of diversity and the different perspectives, additional cultural awareness and understanding, and, of course talent that can contribute to more effectiveness and success with a broader array of clients. Once again, women and minority workers found themselves trapped in the lower hierarchical layer of the corporate world unable to ascend to the next level. What executives failed to realize was that creating a diverse workforce alone is not enough to remain a competitive force in today's market - there needs to be inclusion.
The difference between diversity and inclusion is minimal, yet substantial. Diversity seems to be more superficial, calling for recognition because it paints a colorful and interesting picture. However, inclusion is the meaning behind the painting of diversity (focusing more on making each element within the painting count). A workforce that embraces the combination of diversity and inclusion challenges an organization to become more respectful and open, which in turn allows the flow of new and fresh information and smarter results (through the competition of new and old ideas). This new, diverse thinking generates innovative solutions and stimulates creativity.

**The Breakthrough**

Organizations who want to develop a sustainable competitive advantage over their competition need to alter their DNA, because that’s where inclusion starts - at the cellular level. It has to permeate all levels of an organization existing organically in all policies and procedures, development, initiatives, recruitment, compensation and incentive systems. When this is achieved, diversity (gender, cultural, thought) is not viewed as an afterthought or a special box to check off, it is embraced as critical to business success. Inclusion fosters communication, broadens perspective and stimulates innovation, giving organizations a sustainable competitive advantage.

Where to begin? There are many approaches to take, however one place to start is with an internal audit to help identify which programs and initiatives encourage inclusion and which ones need to be overhauled or outright discarded. By creating a team of auditors who are a cross-section of an organization’s diverse workforce (including each level of the hierarchy), an evaluation of an organization’s core operations/programs/initiatives can be carried out using three the E3 Inclusion Audit (see sidebar).

These questions in the audit may appear deceptively easy to answer, however for this truly to be an effective evaluation, they must be asked at all levels of the organization and across cultural, social and gender lines. They are designed to inspire more questions, to challenge traditional thinking and ultimately to lead to recognition and comprehension.

Organizations that learn how to foster collaboration across gender, social and cultural lines, inspire and reward diversity of thought, and embrace the importance of an inclusive culture will reap the rewards of sustained competitive advantage. They will be able to identify new opportunities and adjust to changing industry trends more quickly than their competitors, be more innovative and creative and will be able to engage and retain high performing employees.

Do employees want to be part of an organization that excludes their perspective, is slow to change and stifles collaboration? Or, would they rather be part of one that engages, encourages, enlives and most importantly, includes their employees’ diverse perspectives in each business decision? Now that’s an easy question to answer.

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**The E3 Inclusion Audit**

In what way does (company/firm/program):
Ensure collaboration across gender, social and cultural lines?

Encourage diversity of thought?

Engage and enliven your workforce to give their best effort every day?

Some specific examples to consider:

- How specifically does your learning and development plan for high potential employees engage and enliven your workforce?
- What elements within the performance evaluation system ensure ongoing collaboration across gender, social and cultural lines?
- Does your compensation and incentive program encourage diversity of thought or does it reward safe, traditional thinking?
- How does your recruitment strategy encourage diversity of thought?
- Are your offices set up in a way to foster or stifle collaboration and communication?

Karen Rice, V.P., Head of Construction Claims for XL Insurance & Brad J. McCormick is Shareholder and Executive Board Member of Kubicki Draper