The short answer is yes. But a better question might be, is the organization ready to do the pre- and post-training work needed to ensure diversity and inclusion content sticks?

BY KELLYE WHITNEY

Training alone is rarely enough. Not when the subject matter is complex, controversial or comes packaged with a load of historically negative baggage, which diversity and inclusion does.

For diversity and inclusion training to stick, it needs support, reinforcement and a firm foundation in a broader talent management strategy that includes culture, leadership and learning and development. Without the right kind of culture in place — where employees embrace difference, senior leaders model inclusive behaviors and value the innovation and market accessibility that diversity can provide, and promote diverse thinking and risk-taking so people don’t have to hide their mistakes — diversity and inclusion training will not work.

Now, let’s back up a step. What exactly is diversity and inclusion training? It’s often focused on unconscious and conscious bias, advancing communication skills, building cross-cultural intelligence, relationships, emotional intelligence or self-awareness and establishing commonalities and the value of individuals holding multiple identities. That’s not multiple identities in the bad movie, personality disorder way, but in the “I am male, Latino, Catholic, born in a rural setting, but can still contribute at a high level outside that environment” type of way.

However, before learning leaders embark on this type of training initiative there’s some strategic pre-work that needs to be done. Ask these questions: Does our culture embrace diversity and inclusion? Do our leaders understand their value to the business and the workforce? Do the organization’s talent management strategies and systems support and enable diversity and inclusion? If not, training would be precipitous because the right support for this type of development is not there.

René Kizilcec, co-founder of the Lytics Lab at Stanford University, offered an analogy around how to teach students to be more effective learners to illustrate the point. Offering readings on how to take notes or make a study schedule, essentially telling someone how to do something, is not enough in this context. “There needs to be active support throughout to actually have any behavioral change. Diversity is a similar animal,” he said.

“There is telling and then there is practicing, and the practicing is about providing the structures, whether its rituals or it’s embedded in software … that support more inclusiveness.” For diversity-themed learning to stick, it must be delivered in an environment that is welcoming to a diverse group of people. Kizilcec said learning leaders should “target the individual, and target the environment.”

Or, as Giovanna Ramazzina, head of LPD — leadership and professional development — for international education-company Kaplan said, teaching diversity and inclusion requires a growth mindset rather than a quick mindset approach. “It is a complex issue, and it requires proper focus. In a way, it becomes a business
Beware the Subjective Achievement Factors in MOOCs

When MOOCs first emerged about five years ago learning leaders thought they would disrupt higher education, democratize education and bridge educational divides globally. But completion rates for massive, open, online courses have traditionally been low.

Students often aren’t motivated to complete courses they elect to take. A study by Stanford University found there were other factors prompting learners in underdeveloped countries to abandon courses, factors that did not focus on their level of skill.

René Kizilcec, co-founder of Stanford University’s Lytics Lab, an interdisciplinary research community around educational data science, led “Closing Global Achievement Gaps in MOOCs.” The study began with two courses from Stanford and Harvard University, the first in 2014 and the second in 2015.

People in more developed countries are twice as likely to complete a MOOC with a certificate than people in underdeveloped countries due to language barriers and lower levels of prior education, but there’s also a socio-psychological barrier. Those from less developed countries who enter a Western academic environment can be afraid they will be judged negatively, or that they’re at a disadvantage because the learning is unfamiliar or packaged in a U.S.-centric way. Kizilcec said this fear — social identity threat — can cause reductions in learning, performance and working memory.

Kizilcec and his team came up with brief reading and writing interventions that can be inserted at no cost at the beginning of specific MOOCs to alleviate these concerns. One activity encouraged learners to write about core values, which helped make certain threats less important for their sense of self-integrity. A second activity assured learners that their doubts about belonging in the course were normal and not unique to members of their group.

People in less-developed countries benefited from these activities, and the gap in completion rates closed. A scaled-out version is ongoing, and interventions have been applied to some 50 courses at Harvard, Stanford and MIT.

“We need to be aware of the subjective experience of people,” Kizilcec said. “We tend to focus on tangible structural factors that are very important, but we tend to forget the subjective experience which … is terribly important for people in a historically underrepresented group.”

— Kellye Whitney

culture transformation project rather than a simple, here’s a few days courses. Then you can hope that people understand diversity and inclusion and apply it in their workplace.”

Once the culture and leadership support are in place, there are many ways to go about the actual training. But successful strategies usually involve some level of assessment to establish the current state of affairs; a focus on small group, in-person sessions or workshops and teaming exercises; and goal setting to determine what are the desired behavioral changes and how to create, sustain and measure them. These learning interventions don’t have to have a diversity label, as their content is as much about collaboration and inclusion as anything.

Ramazzina said decision-making might be a worthwhile development focus. Leaders could examine decision making processes at every level, and set a goal to change the primary decision-making stratagem from directive to collaborative. “It’s looking at how does this business work, operate and make decisions, and can we change that to a more inclusive and collaborative approach?”

Kaplan teaches inclusive and collaborative decision-making techniques using a variety of strategies. Its “red teaming” exercise comes from the military and helps participants to continuously challenge assumptions and not shy away from provoking conversations around business issues. Workshops on the Delphi method examine how people vote to stop things from happening in business and ways to collaborate across functions and departments.

“You get people in a room, divide them into groups, and they spend time thinking about the past and the future; they project future scenarios. As the conversation goes through with very structured tools and approaches, you come to conclusions that you call into action straight away,” she said.

Note, any development intervention should include a diverse group of people. That group may not always reflect ethnic or religious diversity; it might reflect diverse viewpoints, departments and levels of experience. Ramazzina said it’s a mistake to create a bubble around a diverse group of people in the hopes of making them inclusive without engaging the rest of the business. Learning leaders should help the senior team identify the practices, processes and business policies that currently help or hinder talent development — whatever they look like.

Senior teams may need their own workshop to learn how to identify issues quickly and accurately. “Give them a framework that can help them look into the culture, authority and processes of the business.”

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Live case studies can offer first-hand narratives to help senior leaders understand current organizational issues. For example, women in the business might share experiences from onboarding to their C-suite promotions to create rich discussion items around culture issues, mentorship and where the glass ceiling happened for them.

“What you’re doing in training is building a foundation for people to work together, to see each other as full human beings, and to find commonalities,” said Simma Lieberman, president and CEO of Simma Lieberman Associates, a diversity and inclusion consultancy.

That training may address cohorts not just by different dimensions of
diversity like gender or ethnicity, but at different points in their career. Diversity education programs at PwC, for example, target everyone from interns to senior-leaders. This holistic approach allows the professional services network to create a work environment where everyone feels like they can confront stereotypes and acknowledge the impact the world has on our daily lives, said Mike Dillon, the company’s chief diversity and inclusion officer.

PwC’s minority internship program, named Start, recruits college students early and introduces them to the firm’s services and culture. Senior Select, for leaders with three to six years’ experience, assembles talent from across the country for networking and professional development at a crucial time in their careers — right before they take on deeper leadership roles in the firm. “Programs like that are important for recruitment, development and advancement,” said Dillon. “We know diversity brings us growth, innovation, and gives us opportunity for our people.” The company’s blind-spot training, or 4REAL, is a four-episode video series available to everyone, but it’s required for potential partners. Each video focuses on one common blind spot and is illustrated through fictitious characters and scenarios to show how blind spots can potentially impact thinking and lead to undesirable outcomes.

“Everyone has unconscious bias. Everyone can learn from it, so we highly encourage everyone to take this course,” Dillon said. “But research tells us that any kind of forced diversity training can have unintended consequences. But [starting] this year, your skill set to be promoted to the next level would require taking unconscious bias training.”

Whether diversity training is required or optional, for partners or interns, Ramazzina said creating development efforts that help build an inclusive and diverse culture is a substantial project. “It’s transformational,” she explained. “It involves change management, looking at HR processes, making time for each other. People need to be aware that these things fail because they’re not taken seriously enough.”

So, yes. Learning leaders can teach diversity and inclusion, but it’s not easy. It requires an integrated talent management mindset with firm leadership commitment to ensure behavioral change and to reap organizational value. That value comes not when a diversity or inclusion-themed course is completed, but when its participants connect what they’ve learned to talent management strategy and process on an enterprise level.

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3 Reasons Unconscious Bias Training Doesn’t Work

If a training program doesn’t work, most learning leaders will scrap it or at least redesign it so that it provides organizational value. But that’s not the case with unconscious bias training. It’s often done — poorly — just to cover compliance or legal bases or to ensure the right image. Or, it’s done without the necessary follow up to insure the content sticks, behaviors change, and related talent management processes adapt to create a more inclusive workforce.

Critics say unconscious bias training has a bad reputation because it doesn’t work. Simma Lieberman, president and CEO of Simma Lieberman Associates, a diversity and inclusion consultancy, said there are three reasons why that may be:

1. The relationship between training and work is missing. Employees don’t see how unconscious bias training affects their jobs or the organization. Therefore, its value is questionable. “They just see it as training,” Lieberman explained. “And some trainers see it as just another thing that they do, like teaching speedreading or something.” The training is disconnected from broader strategy.

2. Participants believe if they acknowledge a need for this training, they will have to change. Change is scary. Viewing unconscious bias from a process perspective would logically require substantive change to established strategies or systems, or the effort is wasted. Lieberman said leaders may not know what that new state looks like, and the amount of work needed to get there can be daunting.

3. Leaders don’t see the business case. If leaders don’t have a diversity mindset, or see the value of inclusion in the workforce, Lieberman said “unconscious bias training becomes a kind of status — we do this, we’re cool. But it doesn’t go any further; they think that’s all they need to do; they don’t need to change anything.” Like most things in business, unconscious bias training needs committed support from the top to be successful.

If leaders aren’t willing invest in a long-term diversity and inclusion strategy that includes strategic cultural and talent-related changes, unconscious bias training likely will not stick. The training becomes static, insular and disconnected from the larger talent management picture. Essentially, don’t bother.

— Kellye Whitney