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Anticipate, Innovate, Transform.

Advancing Workplace Equity



LEADING DEI THROUGH A GLOBAL LENS

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One of the high points in doing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work is the opportunity to mentor DEI practitioners. Now, more than ever, they need support. Their resources are dwindling, they're exhausted, they're not positioned for influence and success, and they're burning out. At the same time, their role is shifting — diversity practitioners are expected to positively impact workforce inclusion and social justice not only in the US, but globally. As demand for DEI increases outside the US, there's a need for a movement toward global DEI, rather than just exporting US models.

With the heightened demand for DEI professionals, there are many new practitioners seeking guidance. There are also a growing number of seasoned DEI leaders being asked to expand their influence globally and are struggling. They pose the following question: "What are the core competencies we need to develop to lead global DEI work?" This article contains my best answer.

Whenever we move into a new practice area, there's a temptation to replicate what has worked elsewhere. Unfortunately, replicating initiatives without a nuanced understanding of local dynamics and awareness of our own cultural lens tends to be unsuccessful.

For example, I learned the hard way that, unlike in the US, mentoring in India could not be a mentee-led initiative. In a hierarchical society, it was not practical to expect a mentee to reach out to a mentor to share their objectives. Instead, we structured the mentoring relationship so that mentors could assist mentees in understanding how the mentoring relationship worked and help them identify their goals.

For DEI change agents to effectively guide senior executives through their DEI journeys to inclusion, they must constantly be doing their own discovery work. At the core of global DEI competency is the willingness to expose oneself to experiences outside one's home country to truly understand local cultures and geopolitical contexts without judgment.

The actions and words one chooses can take on wildly different meanings in various cultures, and the impact, rather than the intent, is of greater consequence. Cultivating global competencies can serve to close the gap between our intent (desire to effect positive change) and our impact (unintended consequences). DEI change agents can minimize the intent/impact gap by cultivating a global mindset, being curious about other cultures, and acting strategically.

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CULTIVATE A GLOBAL MINDSET

The first step is to look inward, sharpening your self-awareness and cultivating a global mindset:

- **Become self-aware.** Awareness of your own journey is key to understanding how you approach DEI and how you are perceived. What are your core values? How do you communicate those? Are you direct or indirect? Do you believe in hierarchy or equality? These dynamics differ across cultures, to the point where societies address DEI issues in very different ways. For example, if you are based in the US, do you approach global work with a civil rights mindset that might not resonate in another country? If you're based in Europe, do you struggle to understand the US's focus on race? If you are Brazilian, do you see class as being the defining issue rather than color? Someone might be in an underrepresented or oppressed group in one context (e.g., a community of color in the US) but perceived as simply "American" in another, with all the hegemonic, economic, and military power associated with that. Are you aware of both your intentions and your lived experiences and how you are perceived outside your cultural context?
- **Listen and learn without judgment.** Rather than assuming you know what is good for those from other countries and cultures and prescribing solutions, empower colleagues and local change agents to share cultural and historical information so you can learn.
- **Admit what you don't know.** The only way to successfully expand one's global literacy is to be honest about what you don't know and authentic in articulating your need to enhance your knowledge. Rather than passing judgment about cultural practices, seek to understand the rationale behind them.
- **Learn from those outside your home country.** We have much to learn from each other, and some countries are far more advanced in DEI work than others. For example, in some parts of the world, government quotas have advanced inclusion of people with disabilities far beyond what goes on in the US.



- **Build authentic relationships across cultures.** Assess how trust is developed across cultures and lean into it. Do you need to lead with credentials and experience? Do you need to go through a key influencer? Does working in this culture require spending informal time together and sharing information about yourself?

BE CURIOUS ABOUT OTHER CULTURES

With an increased self-awareness and a global mindset, you are in a better position to be genuinely curious about other cultures and open to learning.¹

- **Learn about local politics, economics, laws, culture, and history.** Values and beliefs form the basis of why people behave the way they do. For example, in France, it is difficult to address race directly because there are laws limiting the collection of racial demographic data; even the word “race” is abhorrent. Some DEI practitioners operating from a civil rights mindset view this as a racist practice, but those seeking global DEI competence must educate themselves about a culture’s historical and social roots, interacting with local change agents to find relevant, effective entry points to challenge racist beliefs. Understanding the history and cultural logic of a place lets DEI practitioners find ways to advocate for change that will resonate in the region.
- **Explore linguistic nuances.** Who are the underrepresented groups, and what language is appropriate to use? For example, the term “inclusion” translates better than “diversity” in some contexts. The word “minority” is not always understood the same way as in the US. In India, discrimination is usually based on religion or on caste; in Australia, Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders are systematically underrepresented. “People of color” does not always translate outside the US and is an offensive term in some countries.
- **Understand the complexities of data gathering.** Understand why certain data is not accessible. For example, data privacy laws in Europe make it challenging to collect personal demographic data. Insider/outsider groups vary in different regions. Seeing these dynamics through just one lens (e.g., race or gender) is not adequate. Local colleagues and change agents must be part of identifying what data is relevant.
- **Ask respectful questions.** To improve your knowledge, ask questions in a respectful way. Laws around maternity leave vary immensely, for example. Asking questions about the laws, practices, and their consequences in a place will help you understand the impact on, say, the advancement of women without assumptions or judgment.
- **Analyze hierarchies.** Understanding how decisions get made and who has influence within the national culture and a specific company’s culture will help you better comprehend the power dynamics. It will also position you for strategic implementation (see below). The power brokers may not be the same as in your home country. How and where decisions are made is not always obvious. Seek to understand both formal and informal power structures.

ACT STRATEGICALLY

Strategic implementation is about integrating a global mindset and intellectual curiosity into how you implement your work globally:

- **Realize that solutions from outside won’t always resonate.** Regardless of how effective you may think an initiative is because of its success in one part of the world, it is preferable to co-create solutions with local input to promote a sense of ownership and ensure authenticity. For example, an anti-racism training session addressing Black Lives Matter and Asian hate crimes might be successful in the US but not be well received in the Asia-Pacific region without a focus on local discrimination based on ethnicity, religion, or caste.
- **Bring the right stakeholders along.** Make sure to engage all key stakeholders by asking who else needs to be involved. Often, they are individuals who are not obvious based on your paradigm. For example, in France, Germany, and some other European nations, work councils and labor unions are key stakeholders. In China, businesses must work closely with government to make progress. In India, extended families are sometimes needed to garner support for female career advancement.
- **Be patient.** Attitudes toward time and deadlines vary between cultures. Maintaining relationships is critical, so it’s usually better to slow down an initiative than to push hard to meet an arbitrary timeline.

- **Be aware of language-translation issues.** It takes longer for those whose first language is not your language to communicate their thoughts. By overlooking those who must translate their thoughts before speaking, you may lose important information and ideas. Things can also get lost in translation, so work to clarify your understanding of their contributions. Ensuring that resources and key meetings are accessible in all relevant languages will enhance the likelihood of success.
- **Provide a clear global strategy framework with flexible objectives.** Allow local teams to figure out how to get to the outcomes you seek. They know what works and does not work in their cultural context.

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CASE STUDY: FEMALE CAREER ADVANCEMENT IN INDIA

I learned an early lesson in global DEI competency when I went to India to launch DEI for Sodexo, a food services and facilities management company. I was born in India and had spent my formative years there, so I believed I had a good understanding of the culture.

I met with 20 entry- to mid-level women to talk about the success we had had in the US with mentoring and leadership development initiatives. My intent was to start similar initiatives in India to advance their careers.

I was met with blank stares. I tried a few Hindi phrases to break the ice and signal I was one of them. Still no reaction.

Having grown up in India, I thought I understood what they needed — but I assumed too much. It was only when I paused to ask the women what would be helpful that one gingerly raised her hand and said, “Ma’am, we live with our in-laws and have to take care of them and the house and our children. If we stay late at work to finish our project, our mother-in-law gets angry.” Then they were on a roll — this topic had struck a chord. One woman told me: “Even if our mother-in-law is home all day, we still have to take care of our children and cook the evening meal when we get home.”

Wow! I had completely forgotten the multigenerational joint-family dynamic in India where many couples live with the husband’s extended family and the daughter-in-law is expected to take care of all the housework.

The women suggested that we host a recognition day with awards and invite their extended families. I have to say that awards day was a highpoint in my DEI work in India. The extended families were so proud of their family members who worked at Sodexo. Did it shift the dynamic at home? I learned that it did to some extent. Many of the women could occasionally stay to finish a project without feeling conflicted, and sometimes they even came home to meals prepared by their mother-in-law.

CONCLUSION

Global DEI culture change can be incredibly gratifying, not least because it's an opportunity to build relationships with people who are different from you. They give you a window into their worldview and culture, broadening your exposure and experiences. Leaning into global DEI work requires cultivating a global mindset, being curious, thinking and acting strategically, and integrating your self-awareness and knowledge to become globally culturally competent. Those who have done the challenging work of DEI culture change in the US now have an incredible opportunity to develop their global DEI muscles.

REFERENCE

- ¹ Mitchell, Chuck, and Stephanie Creary. [“Diversity and Inclusion: Global Challenges and Opportunities.”](#) The Conference Board, January 2010.

About the author

Dr. Rohini Anand is founder and CEO of Rohini Anand LLC, providing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) advisory services to clients in the public and private sectors. She is recognized as a pioneer in the DEI field. With expertise that spans executive leadership, human capital, global corporate responsibility, wellness, and DEI, Dr. Anand brings a unique perspective on the critical alignment of the business culture and the triple bottom line to drive exceptional performance. Her global experience, cultural dexterity, extensive network, and ability to influence leaders result in a reputation for judgment, integrity, and accountability. Most recently, Dr. Anand was Senior VP of Corporate Responsibility and Global Chief Diversity Officer for Sodexo. She is author of *Leading Global Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion: A Guide for Systemic Change in Multinational Organizations*, has been featured in CNBC, *The Boston Globe*, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington*

Post, and has appeared on CNN, Bloomberg, and National Public Radio. Dr. Anand is the recipient of many accolades, including the Mosaic Woman Leadership Award, the Women's Foodservice Forum's Trailblazer Award, Webster University's Women of Influence Award, and the Who's Who in Asian American Communities Award (WWAAC), among others. She serves on the boards of several organizations, including WomenLift Health, a Gates Foundation initiative; Tent Partnership for Refugees; Pulsely; and Galt Foundation. Dr. Anand also serves on the external diversity advisory boards for Sanofi and Charter Communications and has chaired the Catalyst Board of Advisors. She is a Senior Fellow with the Conference Board and is on the National Association of Corporate Directors (NACD) Center for Inclusive Governance's Advisory Council. Dr. Anand earned a PhD from the University of Michigan. She can be reached at rohinianand1121@gmail.com.