

Introduction

On June 1, 2009, the Asia Society Corporate Diversity Council launched a day-long forum entitled: Empowered Asian Employees-Global Business Growth Through Leadership Development, at the New York Marriot Marquis in Times Square. The goal of the day was to explore and understand Asian ERGs as an emerging force for business development; a vehicle to identify and grow leadership within a corporation's Asian employee workforce; and a viable means to develop and enhance an employee's skills to promote job stability and advancement. Throughout the day, there were interactive workshops, a keynote address and high-level panel discussions. Jennifer Brown Consulting (JBC) facilitated two workshops:

- **Power in Numbers: Leveraging Internal Partnering**
- **Partnering for Success: Leveraging Your Executive Advisor**

The panel and networking discussions provided a lot of food for thought, and great ideas! Many discussions focused on creative ways to deal with the current economic turmoil and the place and purpose of diversity ERGs in business. Here are some key themes that emerged:

- Think creatively about budget restrictions. Many companies are now unable to have 1000+ employees fly to internal ERG conferences. Instead of cancelling valuable face-time opportunities with executives; senior leaders fly to each of the ERG sites, meet network members in person during "mini-events." This way, network momentum is kept up, and the buy-in from senior leadership is visible and tactile.
- See an ERG as a living classroom. Networks can really be "live toolkits" - that provide leadership and networking skills for its members. Asian ERGs are great ways to empower employees and educate them about American presentation style, methods of negotiations and relationship development. America is a unique culture, as is each Asian culture, and understanding (and grappling with) the differences provides key insights for employee career advancement. ERGs can be a window into American ways of career building, balancing work and life and personal interaction.
- Diversity...Business...Success! Typically, diversity initiatives, including Asian ERGs, have built the business case that "diversity is good for business," assuming that diversity is a must-have. By flipping the argument around, and saying "Business needs diversity to succeed," can get employees thinking about business success, and using diversity to reach the end-goal. Sometimes, it's not what you say, but it's the way you say it - and leading with business objectives can capture the hearts and minds of senior leaders who are on the fence!
- Maximize ERG Involvement: ERG success takes involvement from all levels of the organization; it also takes the right message points. It is important to strike a balance between being bottom-line focused and also being out for the well-being of individual employees. There are numerous ways to engage employees in network activities - for example, innovation competitions can speak to the competitive spirit of employees and showcase top-notch business-growth ideas of ERG talent to senior leadership!

The New Equation: East + West = A New Diversity

The norms of different cultures across societies can affect workplace dynamics. The way that students and teachers interact in the classroom in different parts of the world can, in turn, influence the way people interact with their bosses, the way they envision hierarchy, and the way they look at career advancement.

ERGs are a good way to uncover (sometimes hidden) cultural differences, and figure out how to support individual employees in the workplace. Many times, ERGs encourage employees to set their own career paths, challenge their bosses and capitalize on a networking relationship with someone they spoke with at a reception for less than 5 minutes. Yet these can be seen as US-centric constructs.

Also, times are changing and the world's most influential companies are no longer only (or so heavily skewed) in favor of US-headquartered firms. For example, Tata Motors (an Indian firm) is quickly becoming a global power, and with that will come new norms in diversity, management and career path.

A Great Story: When looking at the main issues ERGs need to tackle, language is an issue that US-based initiatives often neglect. One of the attendees spoke of the limitations she experienced having a strong Indian-English accent. The company she was working for said she could not have a client facing role. Instead, this person created a scheme to target the wealthy US Indian market for private banking. Her plan was a resounding success; by finding a way to leverage her diversity, she made a clear win and quickly rose in the organization.

Diversity and Innovation: Many non-US diversity initiatives are leading with "innovation" as a way to enhance business performance - and utilizing diversity in order to succeed. For example, HSBC has pioneered this effort with their Islamic Financing stream. And when diversity is explicitly tackled in a non-US setting, in Europe for example, it is defined in different ways, including Economic diversity, religious diversity, and diversity of thought.

JBC Session I: Power in Numbers: Leveraging Internal Partnering

Along with Lynn Alba, D&I Work Environment Project MGR at Merck, Jennifer Brown discussed innovative ways to integrate ERGs across the business. By banding together to share strategies and resources with ERGs, a company help both build the capacity and clout of an ERG and build the business. Here are some key themes that came out of the interactive group discussion:

- Metrics are vital: Building metrics is vital to success. Metrics can include: event participation, supply chain diversity, employee culture survey results. Always remember to create a baseline so the company can measure the growth of success!
- Metrics as Meaning: As one participant said, "I always struggle with metrics of attendance. Numbers can be high but do people come to an event for the food or the message?!" Some people view turnout as a great way to measure success - since this simply means there are more ears to hear the message, and more people to potentially influence.
- Culture surveys sometimes need help: Get ERGs involved in culture surveys; have the groups review diversity-related questions, since language around minority-group identification and inclusion can be quite nuanced.
- Top down and bottom up...and across: Coordinating senior suite efforts with grass root initiatives are challenging, but a must-have. Also, ERG councils are working with success at some companies, bring leaders together across the business. Councils also build on each other's strengths in terms of strategy, content, turnout and execution.
- Coordinating Different Groups: One pharmaceutical company, for example, has 14 ERGs (across function, diversity-focused volunteer groups) and 14 Task Forces (business unit led core-work initiatives) that are

related in purpose, but divergent in daily practice. It is a struggle to coordinate their efforts, and companies are looking for ways to create synergies!

JBC Session - Partnering for Success: Leveraging Your Executive Advisor

Summarize JBC Session

Along with Wesley Hom, a consultant for LEAP and a former IBM VP of the Server Division, Jennifer Brown talked about ways to effectively tap into the resources of an executive sponsor as a way of increasing ERG visibility, aligning with business objectives, and advancing individual career paths. Key themes that came out of group discussion include:

- **Follow the money:** Where funding comes from can change the accountability mechanism behind that money; and that accountability is company (i.e. company-culture) dependent and the internal reputation of the diversity/hr department. For example, some companies have immensely powerful, world-class diversity initiatives, and if employees are called out for training sessions, direct managers will rarely push back.
- **Keep formal and informal leaders:** Executive sponsors usually hold a formal role in an organization for ERGs. Codify and develop relationships with informal advisors as well; they can be other senior leaders, emeritus leaders, and other interested parties.
- **Middle Manager buy-in:** In order to get the recognition you need for your ERG work, here is an idea: have an ERG executive sponsor send a letter to your manager so they know their direct report's time is being used in an effective way. This can help increase the internal credibility of the network. Also, in many companies middle managers are evaluated with diversity metrics - so by providing feedback on 360 reviews on a managers support of an ERG work, managers can get something out of it too!

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