

A close-up portrait of a woman with dark hair, smiling slightly, resting her chin on her hand. She is wearing a dark top with buttons and a gold chain necklace. The background is black.

RACE, GENDER, DISABILITY, ETHNICITY, SEXUAL ORIENTATION:

**THE NEED TO
UNDERSTAND WHERE
D&I SEGMENTS
OVERLAP**

By Nadine Vogel

Inclusive Leadership means different things to different people. We typically segment diversity and inclusion by race, gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation although issues and opportunities sometimes overlap — between the disability and LGBT communities, for instance.

Earlier this year, New Jersey-based Springboard Consulting produced the first-ever Disability Connect event. This one-day conference, hosted by Genentech, brought together corporate diversity executives along with their disability and LGBT Employee Resource Group (ERG) leaders and sponsors to explore the similarities, differences and intersections between these two groups.

The conference illustrated that we have more in common than most of us realize and that acknowledging such commonalities can serve as a tremendous strategic advantage for companies and for individuals. There were multiple areas of focus, including legislation, health care, pride vs. advocacy, allies and family. Let's take a look at two of those areas: disclosure and coming out.

The decision to disclose

It can be lonely to be diverse, especially when that diversity is invisible, such as the case with someone who identifies as LGBT or someone with a nonapparent disability. Job seekers and employees with disabilities are regularly faced with the decision of whether to disclose their disability and/or sexual orientation and, if they do, when, how, to whom and for what purpose. When someone does disclose, employers are faced with deciding how to appropriately respond. Although no one is obligated to disclose, it remains a complex issue for everyone involved.

Certainly, self-identification is made easier when senior leaders speak out, serving as role models. We see this happen more often in the LGBT community than in the disability community but the issue of disclosure is more important than ever in light of new Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs rules impacting Section 503 of the Rehabilitation Act. Specifically, the rules are designed to improve job opportunities for individuals with disabilities, requiring U.S. federal contractors, in a very prescribed manner, to invite applicants and employees with disabilities to voluntary self identify.

Leaders need to create cultures of inclusion where disclosing/coming out has no stigma. Often, a company's ERG is helpful in giving employees the courage to disclose. In most cases,

though, advance work is required before the ERG can serve as that courageous shoulder to lean on, especially for individuals with disabilities. That's because disability disclosure may include a request for a reasonable accommodation, which often has a stigma associated with it.

Are your managers trained on how to appropriately respond to such requests from both a legal perspective and a general etiquette and awareness perspective? What about the process itself? Do you have a reasonable accommodations process that is fair and equitable across the footprint of the organization? And what about disclosure for service-disabled veterans who may have Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or a Traumatic Brain Injury? No one wants to be pitied or to be seen as needy or less productive. Companies that view such requests as productivity tools rather than as accommodations find their employees more willing to disclose.

Accommodations aside, the results of focus groups conducted by Springboard Consulting with employees with disabilities found that often the main reason for someone not disclosing their disability is not knowing how or what to say, when, to whom, etc. — resulting in fear that “doing it wrong” will somehow cause more harm than good. Many companies are beginning to address this fear factor by providing a disability disclosure guidance tool that serves as a guide to help these individuals make such important and personal decisions with thought, care and knowledge while helping managers, recruiters and human resource professionals respond in the same manner. Interestingly, these same companies are finding it quite helpful to utilize a similar tool for their LGBT employees as well.

Pride versus advocacy

The conference included conversations focusing on the question: when moving from pride to advocacy, at what point does one go to an extreme, alienating other workers? The consensus was that, if the goal is to engage the workforce in a discussion about these segments, such conversations must steer clear of “flag waving” but rather focus on corporate goals and objectives to ensure that advocacy is neither polarizing nor alienating. The caution is to not to ever be viewed as the angry advocate and to keep in mind that the “R” in ERG suggests a resource group, not a support group.

Most conference attendees agreed that the LGBT community does a superior job in rallying around their pride, which is often viewed as positive in a corporate environment. On the other hand, they agreed that, when individuals with disabilities rally around advocacy, it's not always seen in that same positive light, so perhaps the disability community can learn from and partner with the LGBT community. Similarly, the LGBT community does an excellent job of speaking with one unified voice whereas the disability community can sometimes appear fragmented due to the multiple dimensions of disability and their differing needs in the workplace (e.g., the needs of an employee who is deaf versus an employee who is blind).

Disability Connect was a day filled with rich conversation and exploratory thinking. It showed that, to be truly inclusive leaders, we must think across segments, not only from the perspective of multidimensionality but also from the understanding that we can learn from one another, understanding both our differences and our commonalities and, as a result, uncover new opportunities. [dIMBA](#)

Nadine Vogel is CEO of Springboard Consulting LLC and the author of DIVE IN, Springboard into the Profitability, Productivity and Potential of the Special Needs Workforce. Springboard (www.consultspringboard.com) is recognized as a global expert in working with national and global corporations to mainstream disability in the workforce, workplace and marketplace.