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Perspective Chapter: The Significance of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Social Work Leadership

Marian S. Harris

Abstract

There tends to be consensus among leaders that the most significant resource of any social work organization is its staff. However, many social work organizations continuously pay little or no attention to staff diversity, equity, and inclusion. Leadership plays a crucial role in creating and sustaining a climate of diversity, equity, and inclusion in organizations. Valuing diversity, equity, and inclusion entails a process but should also be the goal of all social work organizations. Recruiting, training, retaining, supervising, and managing an organization's human resources are ongoing responsibilities primarily undertaken by social work leaders. This chapter will explore the role of leaders in creating and sustaining diversity, equity, and inclusion throughout all facets of a social work organization. A description of what it means to lead a social work organization with diversity, equity, and inclusion including qualities demonstrated by a leader in this type of organization will be provided. The significance of a metric-driven approach with clear benchmarks to measure diversity, equity, and inclusion will be explored.

Keywords: diverse leaders, diversity, equity and inclusion, organizational leadership

1. Introduction

The changing contemporary reality in which social work organizations play a key role demand that leaders shift many of the paradigms that have traditionally guided their work and professional identity regarding issues of staff diversity, equity, and inclusion. Certainly, numerous political, economic, and social factors characterize the context that these organizations and their leaders must address to remain viable and relevant today. It is crucial for leaders of social work organizations and their staff to be reflective of the diverse clientele. It is imperative for social work organizations to move beyond a simple diversity statement and do the required work to demonstrate diversity, equity, and inclusion in all parts of their organizations.

The terms diversity, equity, and inclusion are used repeatedly throughout this chapter. It is important to be clear about their meaning in the present context.

Diversity is all-inclusive and means valuing, respecting, and capitalizing on differences including race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, age, marital status, political belief, religion, immigration status, and mental or physical ability. Equity refers to fairness in outcomes with a clear acknowledgment of uneven/unbalanced starting points and the crucial need to correct the unevenness/imbalance. Inclusion means that people of different backgrounds feel a true sense of belonging in an organization. Employees are valued, respected, integrated, and accepted for their differences and do not feel that they need to assimilate to feel a sense of belonging in a social work organization. Although most social work organizations say they are committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion, leaders do not seem successful in developing and sustaining a culture that is diverse, equitable, and inclusive. A discussion of the role of leaders, as well as the significant qualities required for them to develop and maintain a diverse workforce but also barriers encountered along the way to inclusion and equity in social work organizations, will be presented in this chapter. The chapter will culminate by highlighting what social work leaders must do to assure that all staff are valued and respected and included in an organization regardless of their differences.

2. Valuing diversity, equity, and inclusion

2.1 Managers versus leaders

It is important to distinguish managers from leaders. A manager is one who is focused on assuring that all systems in an organization are maintained and designed to support workers in successfully completing their assigned jobs and assure positive operational functioning [1]. Managers are typically in charge of high-level factors required to run an organization. Management skills include communication, leadership, empathy, multitasking, and the ability to be detailed-oriented, problem-solver, organizeer, planner, and coordinator.

The network for social work management provides a place for educating, training, mentoring, and coaching students, managers, and leaders about social work management. This organization developed a framework with detailed competencies for successful management and leadership in public as well as private human service organizations. The competencies are delineated below.

- Established the vision, philosophy, goals, objectives, and values of the organization.

- Possesses interpersonal skills that support the viability and positive functioning of the organization.

- Possess analytical and critical thinking skills that promote organizational growth.

- Models appropriate professional behavior and encourage other staff members to act in a professional manner.

- Manages diversity and cross-cultural understanding.

- Develops and manages both internal and external stakeholder relationships.

- Initiates and facilities innovative change processes.

- Advocates for public policy changes and social justice at national, state, and local levels.

- Demonstrates effective interpersonal and communication skills.

- Encourages active involvement of all staff and stakeholders in decision-making processes.

- Plans, promotes, and models life-long learning practices.

- Effectively manages human resources.

- Effectively manages and oversees the budget and other financial resources to support the organization's/program's mission and goals and to foster continuous program improvement and accountability.

- Establishes and maintains a system of internal controls to ensure transparency, protection, and accountability for the use of organizational resources.

- Manages all aspects of information technology.

- Identifies and applies for new and recurring funding while ensuring accountability with existing funding systems.

- Engages in proactive communication about the agency's products and services.

- Designs and develops effective programs.

- Manages risk and legal affairs.

- Ensures strategic planning and organizational continuity.

- Builds relationships with complementary agencies, institutions, and community groups to enhance the delivery of services [2].

Each competency has performance indicators that can be utilized by managers and leaders for self-assessment of their skills.

In management, there are three tiers that include top level (administrative), middle level (executory), and lower level (supervisory). All organizations have a chain of command or hierarchy. Research findings have shown that middle managers play a key role in diversity, equity, and inclusion experiences of employees and their feelings of belonging in the workplace; middle managers must be involved in diversity and inclusion activities to demonstrate their interest in employees and their professional growth [3]. Several ways that organizations can involve middle managers in diversity and inclusion are as follows: modeling behaviors desired from middle managers, i.e., attending diversity, equity, and inclusion training and mentoring

diverse employees; encouraging affinity groups to ground their work in relevant organizational issues and extend an invitation to managers to attend affinity events; encouraging middle managers to sponsor affinity groups, reward middle managers who are champions for diversity, equity, and inclusion, and include DEI as part of performance evaluation; and allocating online resources to assist middle managers in addressing issues and/or challenges related to diversity, and post scorecards with measurable behavioral outcomes [3].

A high degree of emotional intelligence is the hallmark of an effective leader, according to Goleman's research of over 200 large and global companies; components of emotional intelligence are self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skill [4]. The leader as well as the organization benefit from emotional intelligence. Leadership is "the process of facilitating collective efforts to understand and influence people to realize what is to be done and how to realize the shared objective" [5]. Research has demonstrated the importance of the relationship between leadership and knowledge sharing within effective organizations [6–9]. In successful organizations, there must be good managers and good leaders. It is imperative for social work managers and leaders to adhere to the values and mission of the social work profession.

2.2 Professional standards and federal laws

Social work leaders should adhere to the Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) and comply with several federal regulations in the workplace. The NASW Code of Ethics states that "social workers should not practice, condone, facilitate, or collaborate with any form of discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, age, marital status, political belief, religion, immigration status, or mental or physical ability" [10].

It is important for social work leaders to have knowledge of and comply with Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Employees are protected under this federal law against discrimination on the basis of protected classes, race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. Title VII is applicable to employers in public and private sectors that have 15 or more employees and is also applicable to the federal government, employment agencies, and labor organizations and prohibits them from discriminating on any term, condition, or privilege of employment. Any individual, employed by a social work organization covered by Title VII or applying to work for that organization, cannot be denied employment or treated differently regarding any organizational decision on the basis of perceived racial, religious, national, sexual, or religious characteristics [11]. This law also prohibits differential treatment of employees based on their association with anyone who has one of the protected characteristics listed above. Leaders of social work organizations must be cognizant of the fact that Title VII prohibits employment decisions based on stereotypes or assumptions related to protected characteristics and those based on disparate treatment. Disparate treatment refers to intentional discrimination by leaders in social work or other organizations and/or employment settings.

One of the most comprehensive civil rights laws passed in Congress since 1964 is the Civil Rights Act of 1991. The Civil Rights Act of 1991 was enacted to amend parts of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and "to restore and strengthen civil rights laws that ban discrimination in employment, and for other purposes" [12]. Although many other federal laws were applicable to employers with 15 or more employees, the Civil Rights

Act of 1991 applied to all employers and did not include such distinctions. Applicants or employees are protected from discriminatory practices based on disability, genetic information, age, pregnancy, sexual orientation, and gender identity.

The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) is a government agency that is responsible for enforcing federal laws against workplace discrimination, including Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, the Civil Rights Act of 1991, the Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967, the Equal Pay Act of 1963, Title I and Title V of the American with Disabilities Act of 1990, Sections 501 and 505 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and Title II of the Genetic Information Nondiscrimination Act of 2008. All of the aforementioned laws make it illegal for an employer to discriminate or harass a job applicant or employee based on the person's race, color, sex, religion, pregnancy, national origin, age (if 40 or older), genetic information, or disability. There are also provisions in these laws that prohibit discrimination against any employee who complains about illegal conduct, files a charge with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, or participates in a discrimination investigation or lawsuit. The EEOC's mission is to "prevent and remedy unlawful employment discrimination and advance equal opportunity for all in the workplace" [13].

2.3 Diverse leadership in organizations

Social work leaders play a significant role in creating and sustaining a culture of diversity, equity, and inclusion in their organizations. Most leaders know that discrimination is wrong from a moral and legal perspective. A diverse workforce results in a higher level of organizational effectiveness. Diversity, equity, and inclusion should be foremost in the mind of every leader in a social work organization and must be driven from the top down and not simply the responsibility of the Human Resources department. There must be transparency and accountability by leaders. Stevens, Plaut, and Sanchez-Burks (2008) explored three approaches to unpacking the benefits of diversity and developing positive organizational change; these approaches are colorblindness, multiculturalism, and all-inclusive multiculturalism (AIM) [14]. The foundation of the colorblind approach to diversity is based on American ideas of individualism, equality, and assimilation. Individual differences are not valued. "The irony of this practice is that diverse employees are discouraged from acting and thinking in the unique ways associated with their social categories, which does not allow them to utilize fully the ways associated with their social categories, which does not allow them to utilize fully the viewpoints of their distinctive social group membership" [14]. A multicultural approach highlights diversity in the workplace as a positive factor and views differences in employees as a strength. There is often resentment and resistance in the workplace by individuals who identify themself as white and not as Black, Indigenous, or other people of color because they feel excluded when mentoring and networking opportunities are offered to members of diverse groups. Therefore, the utilization of an all-inclusive multicultural approach that recognizes and acknowledges all employees is one that is highly recommended by Stevens and colleagues [14]. "Essentially the AIM approach addresses deficiencies in the standard multicultural ideology without reverting to colorblindness. Whereas AIM acknowledges that the demographic groups to which people belong to have important consequences for individuals, it also explicitly endorses this vision equally across members of all groups, including minorities. Given the pervasiveness of American values of equality and egalitarianism, which drive individualistic ideology, this equal emphasis on groups is less of a mismatch for nonminorities. Moreover, AIM

lifts perceived threats to unity that may form in reaction to multicultural policies [14]. AIM will require a culture shift for many social work organizations but one that clearly values diversity, equity, and inclusion. Social work leaders create and sustain a culture of belonging for all employees and are intentional in assuring the organization's core values clearly reflect diversity, equity, and inclusion.

2.4 Recruitment, retention, supervision, and management of human resources

There is a consensus that the most important resource of any social work organization is staff. The first step in the hiring process after obtaining approval from administration is to create a search committee. The search committee should be diverse and should be required to participate in training prior to starting their official work. Most training is focused on how to ensure a diverse pool of applicants, recognize implicit bias and engage in equitable and inclusive practices throughout the search process. Other facets of the search process include developing a job description based on the needs of the social work organization, advertising the position, developing interview questions, developing a rubric for ranking applicants, screening the pool of applicants, ranking applicants and deciding which ones will be interviewed, inviting selected top applicants to the organization for interviews, conducting the interviews, checking references, selecting the final/most qualified applicant, and making an offer to the final selected applicant. Written documents on the organization (mission and vision statements, descriptions of programs, annual reports, brochures, etc.) are disseminated to applicants who are invited to the organization for in-person interviews. Applicants should always be given an opportunity to ask questions during the interview process. The search committee must review all pertinent information about the applicants including resumes, screening documents, and feedback from all organization employees who interact with applicants. It is always prudent to make hiring decisions expediently because if there are delays in decision-making, there is a strong possibility that good candidates will be lost. After an offer is made and accepted by the preferred applicant, a formal letter of confirmation with relevant employment details is sent to this individual. It is also important to notify all applicants when the position has been filled and thank them for their interest in the position. Institutional racism, discrimination, oppressive practices, and microaggressions are still prevalent in the workplace but must never be tolerated; leaders have a responsibility to be aware of how these behaviors impact recruitment, retention, supervision, and management of human resources in the workplace.

Motivated staff will "seek out creative challenges, love to learn, and take great pride in a job well done" [15]. It is the responsibility of an organizational leader to be a manager and acquire knowledge and skills in planning, budgeting, organizing, and developing human resources. Leaders in social work organizations are responsible for their own performance as well as the performance of staff in the organization and must be attentive to morale, productivity, and job satisfaction of staff. They must also avoid implicit and explicit bias when conducting performance evaluations. Leaders should develop and maintain an equitable and inclusive system to retain staff including formal rewards that are visible and understandable, consistent and fair, targeted to individual staff or a staff team, and dispensed to reinforce [16, 17]. Leaders must set goals that will provide opportunity for diversity, equity, and inclusion in all facets of the organization that helps advance a level playing field for promotion opportunities, especially for underrepresented staff, and resources must be provided to yield lasting results in diversity leadership and inclusion efforts as well as staff recruitment and retention.

2.5 Barriers to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)

Leadership is the key to diversity, equity, and inclusion in social work organizations. Leaders often profess their commitment to having a diverse, equitable, and inclusive culture in their organizations; however, their words are not usually translated into action. Three barriers that have been identified to the success of diversity, equity, and inclusion are as follows: (1) undermining of DEI initiatives by leaders; (2) detrimental attitudes of leadership; and (3) failure to elevate DEI to a business initiative including expertise, funding/resources, and tracking [18]. Primus delineates three recommendations to address the barriers to DEI success: "(1) Demonstrate support for DEI initiatives and model inclusive behaviors so the rest of the organization will follow. Leaders set the tone and can drive the culture shift by example; (2) Invite and encourage different perspectives. Meritocracy is aspirational and does not necessarily represent the experiences of underrepresented talent. Understand the difference between equality and equity; and (3) treat DEI initiatives like other business initiatives" [18]. They should be the result of strategic planning and should aim to create a better plan, company culture, or workplace performance. Make sure every DEI initiative has a dedicated leader, and put success metrics in place to track progress. DEI Metrics are used to make an assessment of outcomes and progress in an organization, assign goals and develop measures of accountability. DEI metrics include but are not limited to the following: organization demographics, employee retention, and employee turnover, demographics of job applicants, employee advancement/promotion rate, equal pay, and pay equity. These metrics can also be utilized to show where additional resources are needed to facilitate accomplishment of DEI goals.

Top leaders in social work organizations must lead diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts. There should be efforts that focus on education because with education behavior can be changed. It is imperative to track, measure, and evaluate social work organizations' progress toward achieving their stated DEI goals.

2.6 Successful diversity and inclusion strategies

Achieving success in diversity and inclusion continues to present challenges to many organizations including social work organizations. However, five strategies/tools have been identified to make organizations more diverse. First, organizations must set diversity and inclusion goals, engage in data collection and not only examine organizational change but do a comparison analysis of findings with other organizations. This information should be shared with internal as well as external stakeholders, and positive outcomes, as well as issues, must be continuously identified and stakeholders should be allowed to provide feedback [19]. Second, organizations should have several systems for addressing worker complaints such as employee assistance plans, ombuds offices, alternatives to legal grievance procedures, and transformative dispute resolution systems [19]. Third, technology in organizations should be tested for bias and discrimination when used for screening, hiring, and evaluating employees to assure fairness to diverse groups of people and test new technologies to ensure that biases are not prevalent [19]. Fourth, manger and leaders need to be cognizant of biased decision-making when individuals are members of underrepresented groups such as Black, Indigenous, or Other People of Color, and women and increase representation of individuals from underrepresented groups and provide increased opportunities and visibility for these individuals [19]. Finally, it is

imperative to involve managers and leaders at the beginning phase and all subsequent phases of development for diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives in an organization to increase their buy-in and support for successful implementation [19].

2.7 Writing diversity, inclusion, respect, and equity (DIRE) policy statements

Organizations all across the world are faced with crisis situations/events that implore them to write and issue some type of diversity, inclusion, respect, and equity (DIRE) statement. Most of these statements are typically not well-written without any forethought and do not intend to yield positive, lost lasting, and meaningful organizational change. Consequently, organizations must decide if the intent is to develop and issue a policy statement or a response statement. Policy statements are developed to provide a roadmap or direction for an organization that is real and actionable. However, a response statement is crisis-oriented in nature and designed for protection of the organization. There is a dearth in the literature on DIRE statements. Gentle-Genitty, Merrit, and Kimble Hill (2021) promising eight-sentence model with four steps that organizations can utilize in a DIRE statement [20]. Not only is there a clear definition of diversity in their model but also the organization's commitment and plan for inclusion and equity both internally and externally is provided [20]. Organizations must engage in two activities prior to developing a DIRE policy statement; they must conduct an environmental scan and acknowledge the heavy burden of those underrepresented individuals in their organizations and not require these individuals to write their DIRE policy statement [20]. The four steps in this model are as follows: "(1) purpose, (2) position and methodology, (3) action and metrics, and (4) scope and reach of statement" [20]. The ultimate goal when an organization utilizes the DIRE model is creation of an inclusive climate with clear reporting standards, consequences for violations of standards, and protective measures designed to protect everyone, and in a climate of this type democratic citizenship prevails where everyone is continuously engaging in self-awareness and evaluation of behavior [21].

3. Conclusion

This chapter focused on the diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in social work organizations and the role of leaders in developing and maintaining a climate of diversity, equity, and inclusion in their organizations. Leaders in social work organizations have an ethical responsibility not to engage in or condone any form of discrimination. It is incumbent upon leaders to make a strong knowledge regarding federal laws such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Civil Rights Act of 1991 that amended several sections of Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act to strengthen and improve Federal civil rights laws and provide for the recovery of damages in Federal cases of intentional discrimination. The key to diversity, equity, and inclusion in social work organizations is leadership. Although many leaders in social work organizations say they are committed to DEI, their actions, policies, procedures, staff demographics, and practices reveal a totally different picture. A culture of diversity, equity, and inclusion starts at the leadership level and is impactful when there are intentional actions because this type of culture does not evolve organically. Organizational policy must translate into practice. Barriers will be encountered along the way; however, there are steps that can be taken to overcome barriers by changing their thought process about DEI and being proactive in the barriers they often

create, respecting, valuing, and encouraging diverse perspectives, and treating DEI initiatives to business initiatives with clear metrics to track progress and success. It is time for leaders in social work organizations to understand and realize that diversity, equity, and inclusion add much value to any organization and greatly enhance the organization's culture. Diversity, equity, and inclusion must be deeply embedded in every facet of social work organizations if they want to thrive and succeed in today's ever-changing world.

Author details

Marian S. Harris
University of Washington Tacoma, School of Social Work & Criminal Justice, Tacoma, WA, USA

*Address all correspondence to: mh24@uw.edu

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