**Ask an HR Advisor: Diversity Issues at Work**

**Q: I am hearing concerns about a lack of diversity in our company, but my senior management’s focus at this time is COVID-19. I am worried we could lose good people.**

**A:**Right now, many executives are just trying to keep companies afloat. You may feel you are between a rock (disappointed employees) and a hard place (management seeing you as a gadfly). Step back and think things through:

**Is there a crisis that needs immediate attention?**

* Is there active harassment, discrimination, or a toxic work environment?

**If so: focus on the crisis first.**

* Don’t look into a new smoke alarm before putting out the fire: Active issues demand immediate investigation.
* The truth is a “fire” does draw executive attention, and it is a good entry into a larger discussion. Explain the issues and what they could gain by addressing them: “This several-week investigation has been a drain on productivity. I am proposing to conduct discrimination training, specifically for managers, so that we can reduce our time spent on these types of issues and prevent possible liability down the road.”  Hopefully, this can start a bigger discussion about the culture.
* If the executives do not take action, do not despair. Time is on your side. As more fires ignite, and you review past issues and previous recommendations with them, eventually diversity may become a priority.

**Do you have credible reason to believe your company will soon be losing talent or that talent is seriously disengaged?**

* Have you had multiple complaints about the organization’s lack of diversity?
* Have you heard that people are looking for other jobs or are they generally disengaged and disgusted?

**If so: provide specific examples confidentially and provide a solution.**

* Don’t be overly vague – Executives are engaged by stories, examples and numbers.  “Mr./Ms. President, I’d like to share something that might need to be brought to the executive team: I’ve had four complaints about a lack of diversity in our organization.  These are from white and minority employees, both males and females. I have been told they are actively looking for other work at this time due to workplace culture concerns. I may only be seeing the tip of the iceberg.”
* Describe the impact: “In addition to morale issues, I think we may lose some good knowledge, and the training time and recruiting efforts to rehire will be draining.”
* Offer a solution: “I know that diversity needs to be on the backburner until the company is able to turn things around, so I am proposing to start a diversity effort incrementally, being clear with employees on why that is so. I will need some level of commitment from your team in order to do that. Can I make a proposal within the next week?”
* If the answer is no, get a time frame: “When will this become a focus?”  Then you can share with employees, if appropriate.

**Finally, remember to stay focused.**

* Lack of diversity happened over time, not overnight, and requires ongoing attention.
* Even if you don’t have an official plan for diversity due to management’s lack of commitment, have your own plan:
  + Decide to intentionally introduce DE&I ideas to the executive team whenever possible. Many of these ideas may get traction without the executives realizing that diversity is part of the reason.
  + When the programs get kudos from employees, it will support your effort to push for an overall DE&I plan.

**Don’t disengage from employees.**

* You may hate to disappoint employees, but they would prefer to be disappointed than ignored.
* Explain that diversity is important to you personally and you have heard their concerns.
* Explain that your executive team feels that the immediate and pressing need is COVID-19 and stabilizing the business.
* Note any incremental steps that are going to be put in place.
* Note that executives do feel that when they tackle diversity, they want to be able to devote the time and effort required to make it successful.
* Offer other ways to engage with executives or each other: Do you have monthly “listening sessions,” employee surveys, or employee discussion groups? While an overall DE&I effort might not be possible right now, suggest that employees focus on some particular benefits or practices that could be introduced before a more significant effort is made.
* Follow-up and follow through. If a goal is not achieved on time, own up to it and explain how it will be rectified.

Written by a Catapult Advisor.

Reviewed for NC law only.