



Building Diversity in STEM

Embracing a holistic approach to DEI leadership in the workplace by **Sherri L. Bassner, PhD**

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) has been a topic of increasing focus across industries for the past 30+ years. The basic business case still holds true; however, lab managers' views of DEI have evolved. This article will review how the focus of DEI efforts in STEM has changed over the years and discuss the ways that lab managers can leverage DEI initiatives to continue improving business success.

DEI initiatives are usually discussed in the context of the Diversity Iceberg (figure 1). In this illustration, there are characteristics above the water line—those that you can see, such as skin color, gender, and age—and characteristics below the water line—those that you cannot see, such as life experiences, personality profile, sexual orientation and gender identity, or learning styles.

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Key to embracing DEI is understanding that all characteristics of a person contribute to their uniqueness and their ability to bring new ideas and solutions to a business need. In those early years, however, and to

a certain extent today, focus was primarily on the visible characteristics and workforce representation of those from different “visible diversity” groups.

While we are far from a level playing field from the perspective of representation, significant progress has been made

and this has not been a wasted effort. However, there is greater recognition that the ultimate goal is to create a work environment in which everyone can bring their unique perspectives to the table. Representation of visible groups has been a proxy for that goal, but the time has come for a stronger focus on those characteristics below the water line.

How DEI can influence broader workforce trends

Today, lab managers are dealing with broader workforce trends that increase the urgency toward finding ways to fully engage every employee. There are two trends seemingly related to the COVID-19 pandemic with which managers across industries are struggling. Both are related to a tight labor market and a workforce looking for more meaning in their work. The first trend, known as the Great Resignation, began during the early stages of recovery from the pandemic. The active workforce contracted due to a range of reasons, including restricted immigration, limits on available childcare, early retirements, and concerns about contracting the disease. The second trend, Quiet Quitting, refers to workers choosing to do just what is necessary for their

job with the aim of having more energy for other parts of their lives. To retain key employees and engage them at a level that encourages extra effort, lab managers must

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take their DEI efforts to the next level. DEI is no longer just important for differentiating the business; it is now critical for sustaining the business.

The lived experiences that each employee brings into the workplace color their perspectives on every activity,

from improving workflow in the lab to solving difficult problems. The challenge for the lab manager is balancing the value of their own experience against encouraging different approaches to addressing daily challenges in the lab, all while keeping the workflow moving.

A simple example is that of a new lab employee joining the company with lab experience in a different industry. Any lab tends to have work processes passed down through training. A new employee with different experiences might suggest an improvement to a process. Often, managers reject any changes to an established process that has served the lab well. Resisting that instinct to maintain the status quo and giving those suggestions honest consideration may well result in a significant improvement—or lead to other ideas. Additionally, when employees see that their ideas are listened to and honestly evaluated, the reluctance to suggest other ideas drops.

This example is easy to understand since experiences in other lab environments directly connect to your lab. It can be more difficult to recognize the impact of other types of lived experience. The challenge for the lab manager is in remembering that there is no single pathway to success. This neurodiversity comes from people having worked in different industries, following a different educational pathway, or having been raised in a different culture that brings a different approach to solving common problems. Just as the lab manager and other members of the organization might initially resist a work process developed in another lab, any idea outside the norms and traditions of the lab will often be met with skepticism. How can the lab manager use DEI concepts to overcome this resistance and keep new ideas flowing?

What’s below the water line?

A fresh look at the Diversity Iceberg, with a focus on those characteristics below the water line, drives a different view of how a manager defines diversity. We are no longer talking about affinity groups made up of employees who share a common characteristic. The focus now needs to be on the individual and what makes each employee unique in the lab’s environment. Success begins with the lab supervisor since surveys continue to show that the single most important determinant of job satisfaction is the quality of the employee’s supervisor. A good manager will follow the lead of the fictional Ted Lasso, who urged being people curious. The more the manager understands how the employee’s experiences and perspectives differ

from their own, the better the chance that the manager will give that employee the opportunity to present new ideas. The lab manager needs to consciously challenge their own thinking and resist his urge to support only ideas that align with their instincts. This can be hard to do when the lab manager is held accountable for the effectiveness of the lab and is concerned about wasting time and money. The instinct is to follow pathways in which they feel most confident.

The Diversity Iceberg and any company goals around representation of different groups should be a motivator for the lab manager to make an individual connection with each candidate and employee. This requires the manager to go deeper than those external characteristics and resist the urge to hire and promote people who think the same way the manager thinks. Staying open to different approaches is the mark of a strong manager. The manager’s goal is to set people up for success, not force them to choose a particular pathway. The responsibility of the employee is to be open to that coaching, do the work, and learn along the way. Employees must believe in the purpose and mission if they are going to stay with the company and choose to give that extra, discretionary effort. A big part of that buy-in is knowing that their ideas will be heard and efforts recognized.

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DEI initiatives are so much more than a separate activity with which managers and employees need to comply. The guiding principles behind, and goals of, DEI should influence every activity and interaction. Ask yourself, whether you are a manager or an employee, how you can see each person you work with as a unique individual? What can you learn from them? What can you teach them? Nothing is more powerful to driving business success.

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▼Figure 1: Diversity Iceberg concept showing the waterline of visibility.

