

Chapter 6

Context Matters: Moving beyond “Best Practices” to Creating Sustainable Change

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SUMMARY

Enhancing diversity and inclusion are priorities for many organizations, yet leaders often lack a clear direction as to how to create the desired change. The aim of the Stanford VMWare Women’s Leadership Innovation Lab is to combine academic and real-world insights to develop strategies that will help organizations make their workplaces more diverse and inclusive. To gain this insight, we lead research

at companies from a range of industries, including technology and professional services, and meet with leaders at all levels of the organizations. Our findings demonstrate that taking local context into account when formulating a plan to increase diversity can improve the likelihood of motivating sustainable and meaningful change.

KEY FINDINGS

- Diagnosing the local context can provide the essential foundation for a change effort to create more inclusive workplaces.
- Starting with the most engaged and willing departments or teams can help build momentum that sparks additional efforts to change at the company.
- Involving organizational actors—notably managers—in the design process can increase the likelihood that the tools developed to create more diverse and inclusive work processes will be effective and sustainable over time.

Individuals who strive to improve the diversity and inclusion (D&I) at their organizations often face limited budgets, few dedicated staff (if any), and incomplete data or insights into where or why their teams and organization needs to change. Despite these hurdles, leaders often press D&I leaders for immediate impact and sweeping change. Change agents must navigate between their goal of fostering sustainable, realistic change and leaders’ push to show swift, outstanding results on many dimensions of diversity and inclusion, including culture, retention, employment, brand, etc. If D&I leaders approach change methodically, ensuring that the building blocks are in place, their performance might be criticized for lack of momentum. If they push for sweeping change, the organization may not be ready and their efforts might fail, possibly generating backlash in the process. Thus, change agents are under pressure to move quickly by seeking best practices or tried-and-true programs that can be quickly and successfully implemented at any organization with little or no customization and at low cost. In short, they want to know how to accelerate the process.

Our team at the VMware Women's Leadership Lab works with a range of organizations to diagnose barriers to change and pilot solutions. We created the Corporate Program to bridge the gap between theory and practice to help women from diverse backgrounds advance within their field and organizations. Change agents often join our program asking if we know of “best practices” they can employ; we often tell them, “It depends.” While often initially puzzled at this response, they usually come to understand that this seemingly vague answer is not intended to thwart their actions but, instead, to inform their success. By sharing research-based insights and strategies, we aim to support them in building programs that can succeed in their local context.

A “Small Wins” Model of Change

Figuring out where to start to make his company more diverse and inclusive was the exact issue the CEO of MidTech¹ faced when we met in 2014. He spoke earnestly about working to change the company's culture, which was, as one manager described it, the “wild west.” Upon hearing about our research, the CEO proposed that we apply our change model at MidTech.

We agreed to move forward.

Our first step was to make the case for our “small wins” change model to MidTech executives, many of whom were hungry to move forward with a more radical approach that would “blow up” the system. We explained that our approach is based on a focused, strategic pilot program that serves as a starting point for building sustainable momentum. A pilot would enable us to understand MidTech's context in order to co-design and test a plan that is likely to work. If done well, the pilot would ignite a process leading to sustainable change across the organization. A small wins pilot includes these steps²: 1. Diagnose; 2. Co-design; 3. Pilot; 4. Evaluate and identify key learnings; 5. Move to the next pilot. While some MidTech leaders were initially skeptical, the small wins approach ultimately aligned well with their approach to innovation.

Ann Brown stepped up as the key change agent leading the process at MidTech. After the team was in place, we completed our diagnosis³ and met with the leadership team to present our findings and identify a change target: the talent review process. In less than one year, Brown and her team created and ran a successful pilot that implemented strategies for reducing bias in their talent review process. The strategy included intentionally defining and using criteria to evaluate performance and holding one another accountable for consistently using those measures. Our team evaluated the pre- and post-intervention results and found key improvements to reducing bias that benefitted all employees. Importantly, Brown's

1 The names MidTech and Ann Brown are pseudonyms.

2 A complete description of the small wins model is available from Shelley J. Correll, “Reducing Gender Biases in Modern Workplaces: A Small Wins Approach to Organizational Change,” *Gender and Society* 31, no. 6 (December 2017): 725–750.

3 A guide to diagnosis is available at “See Bias / Block Bias: A Methodology to Diagnose Bias,” VMware Women's Leadership Innovation Lab, Stanford University, accessed January 29, 2020, <https://stanford.box.com/s/kfkad624p3xg09ytt0nyb31zuv3dlwen>.

team has continued to roll out improvements leveraging the insights from the initial pilot in important ways, carefully considering every aspect of their people processes from hiring, performance evaluations, promotions, and even assignments.

Did the small wins produce big wins at MidTech? We believe so, and the company was recently recognized by the industry as a leader in creating a great workplace for women.

Building a Model of Change

The success at MidTech may appear to provide a road map that others can simply replicate. Could this be the best practice we have been looking for? Our answer is, again, “It depends.” Rather than trying to find a one-size-fits-all solution, change agents need an honest assessment of what is going on in their organizations, one that considers the perspectives of employees across departments and levels, to truly understand the pain points for different groups of employees. For instance, consider the target of change. It is not enough to assume that programs will be equally beneficial to all men, women, or people of color in the organization. Research shows that “one-size-fits-all” diversity approaches often benefit only a subset of employees,⁴ and efforts directed at women broadly can result in advancing white women at the expense of women of color.⁵ Our research shows that taking the time to explore data illuminating the experiences of specific groups of underrepresented minorities, such as black men or Latinx women, will provide more useful information about diversity and inclusion than looking at more aggregate data.⁶

Furthermore, when designing a change effort, change agents should also consider the ways that changes are deployed in their organization, both formally and informally. Formal mechanisms might include change-management systems⁷ led by a company’s project managers. Informal mechanisms, or *unwritten rules*, might include the need to socialize ideas first in order to get employees onboard. Starting with the internal local processes is more likely to successfully integrate inclusion efforts into the business than deploying a cookie-cutter formula.

Think Locally when Identifying a Target of Change

Even a proven strategy can fail if it doesn’t consider the local context, the way in which work gets done *here*. In fact, identifying the “right place to start” depends largely on understanding the local context.

4 Evan P. Apfelbaum, Nicole M. Stephens, and Ray E. Reagans, “Beyond One-Size-Fits-All: Tailoring Diversity Approaches to the Representation of Social Groups,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 111, no. 4 (2016): 547–566.

5 Erin Carson, “Tech Industry Is Leaving Behind Women of Color, Report Shows,” CNet, August 7, 2018, <https://www.cnet.com/news/tech-leaving-behind-women-of-color/>.

6 Katie Wullert, Shannon Gilmartin, and Caroline Simard, “The Mistake Companies Make When They Use Data to Plan Diversity Efforts,” *Harvard Business Review*, April 16, 2019, <https://hbr.org/2019/04/the-mistake-companies-make-when-they-use-data-to-plan-diversity-efforts>.

7 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Change_management_\(engineering\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Change_management_(engineering)).

As an example, Harvard Business School professor Leslie Perlow worked with the Boston Consulting Group (BCG) to better understand employees' challenges with their work-life balance. She discovered that long hours and intense work were not the main issue, but rather, the lack of predictability to their schedules was. Repeatedly missing a child's sporting event or class show because something came up at work caused tension between work and family. The solution? Each consultant would schedule one day off a week, chosen in advance, thus it was predictable. What started as a small experiment later scaled broadly throughout BCG. This seemingly simple initiative⁸ of predictable time off improved employee satisfaction and likelihood of staying at the firm, and importantly, it also improved business outcomes.

Again, this might seem like Perlow and BCG have identified a "best practice" that other consulting firms can copy. But not necessarily. An insider in another consulting firm revealed to us that when her firm tried to implement an identical program, it failed. The difference? Structure. At BCG, consultants tend to work in one intact team through the completion of a project. By contrast, many consultants in her firm split their time between multiple simultaneous projects. Thus, building schedule predictability across numerous teams and projects was too complex. Instead, her firm implemented a different means of providing predictability that worked within their own structure. In other words, a winning strategy must be adapted to the unique organizational structure and context of each firm.

Identifying Where Change Is Likely to Stick

In addition to considering organizational structure, it is important to identify organizational will and passion to address diversity and inclusion.

In another project, we worked with a biotech firm with an active group of women leaders who wanted to push the organization toward culture change. As part of their change management process, these women realized that presenting published research on bias would not be effective with their fellow scientists, who primarily thought of science as a meritocracy; company-specific data would be more convincing. So we dove into their employee engagement survey⁹ data, identifying areas with a meaningful gap in the ways men and women scored their responses. We noted a few possible target areas: the distribution of work, work resources, the culture of team meetings, and recognition of achievement. To better understand the local context, we hosted focus groups. We discovered that team meetings and recognition of achievement inspired intense reactions and very specific, emotional examples from employees, suggesting these areas as possible targets of change. Respecting the company's culture of debate, we presented our findings to the leadership team, suggesting several possible target areas as a series of options instead of a single recommendation. We outlined research-based strategies that could help them address each one. In the end, the group decided to focus on the dynamics of team meetings. The leaders

8 Leslie A. Perlow and Jessica L. Porter, "Making Time Off Predictable—and Required," *Harvard Business Review* 87, no. 10 (October 2009): 102–9. <https://hbr.org/2009/10/making-time-off-predictable-and-required>.

9 Robert S. Teachout, "Viewpoint: Carefully Craft the Employee Engagement Survey," Society for Human Resource Management, (August 2017): <https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/employee-relations/pages/employee-engagement-survey.aspx>.

could see from their engagement data and focus group comments that this issue affected not only productivity and innovation but employee morale as well. Through this process, the leaders' commitment to take part in the program was in place, and the process was set in motion.

Engage Organizational Actors

A skilled change agent is essential for any project to successfully achieve change. In the MidTech case, Brown strategically engaged leaders in the process in order to achieve success across the organization. Distributing the responsibility among the leaders who will implement the intervention in their everyday work flow is a critical step. Not only does it ensure that the new process fits into managers' everyday work, but the very act of co-designing the solution distributes important skills across the organization instead of centralizing the expertise with the change agents. One of our colleagues researched what happened in two organizations after the key change agent left.¹⁰ When efforts were centralized with the change agent and her team, the initiative lost momentum after she left. By contrast, embedding the efforts in various departments led to ongoing success after the change agent left.

While the realization that there is no plug-and-play solution to implementing meaningful change at your company may be discouraging at first, customizing to the local context and engaging organizational leaders may actually lead to more effective and sustainable change—which is the ultimate goal anyway.

¹⁰ Alison Wynn, "How to Save Your Diversity Program from an Untimely Demise," *Behavioral Scientist*, August 5, 2019, <https://behavioralscientist.org/how-to-save-your-diversity-program-from-an-untimely-demise/>.

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