

TODAY'S CHICAGO WOMAN

One-on-One Implementing Inclusion

A conversation between Exelon Corp. and Nextions on effecting top-down change

How do the concepts of diversity and inclusion truly affect the way companies do business today? To answer this question, we turned to Nicole M. Durham, director of Diversity and Inclusion at [Exelon Corporation](#), and Arin N. Reeves, Ph.D, president of [Nextions](#), a consulting firm specializing in leadership and inclusion strategies.



Ms. Reeves has been advising Exelon in several of their key diversity and inclusion efforts at Exelon Corporation for almost a year and a half, and has worked closely with Ms. Durham in her current role, as well as in her former role as executive assistant to the senior vice president and chief financial officer, Exelon Corporation. We asked Ms. Durham to identify questions that she felt are at the core of the discussions on diversity and inclusion in many large corporations today; here, Ms. Reeves answers her concerns.

Nicole M. Durham Often times, we hear diversity and inclusion defined and discussed in varying ways, even within the same company. Simply put, how should an organization define these concepts?

Dr. Arin N. Reeves Defining these terms, and understanding the difference between diversity and inclusion, is a critical step in both creating and sustaining diversity and inclusion, often referred to as D&I, in organizations.

Diversity is the demographical composition within organizations – it is the “visible who” of which you are informed by who is overrepresented, adequately represented and underrepresented based on national, local or industry demographics. Diversity is also about the “invisible who,” consisting of individual differences in work styles, perspectives and experiences.

Inclusion is what you do. It’s how people in the organization treat each other, communicate with each other and rely on each other as members of a team. You need to be inclusive in order to sustain diversity. Many organizations start with diversity (via hiring) and believe that if they “get enough diversity,” they will become inclusive automatically. This is what results in the “revolving door” of recruitment-attrition, recruitment-attrition. Our research and experience shows pretty unequivocally that you have to start with ensuring an inclusive workplace and then growing a diverse workforce.

You should define diversity broadly to include identity, ability and experiences, and you should make sure that diversity is understood as related to but separate from inclusion.

Ms. Durham We hear a lot today about “advancing the D&I strategy” or “taking D&I to the next level” at an organization. In simple terms, what does that mean for today’s organizations?

Dr. Reeves The next level definitely starts with updating the vocabulary and awareness about what D&I means today. D&I, for example, is not anti-discrimination or affirmative action. It is about creating representative demographics and perspectives, and about ensuring an inclusive culture in how leaders lead, managers manage and how everyone communicates and feels engaged.

The next level is about being, working and leading in a way that makes sense in the 21st century, and it often does start with changing the way we talk about D&I. The next level also involves integrating inclusion into all that an organization does. Every person in the organization should know how they should be contributing to an inclusive workplace and how they’ll be held accountable if the contribution doesn’t happen. In other words, inclusion should look and feel like a true organizational value like excellence, ethics or innovation. It’s not a “nice to do.” It has to be a “must do.”

Ms. Durham Many companies that have been recognized for their D&I efforts offer employee networking groups, sometimes referred to as “affinity groups,” “employee resource groups” or “business advisory groups.” What is, or should be, the main purpose of these groups? Are they as relevant today as when they began to emerge 20 to 30 years ago?

Dr. Reeves The name changes themselves – affinity group, employee network group, employee resource group, business resource group and finally business advisory group – signify the evolving structure and function of these networks. We’ve found that companies that start with identifying the objectives they want these groups to accomplish end up with groups that are effective for both the members of the groups as well as the organizations.

From a networking perspective, it does make sense to “manufacture” a network where one does not organically exist. For example, if there are not a lot of women in leadership, it makes sense to have a women’s network; the senior women would not otherwise “run into” other senior women in the hallways, and the junior women may benefit from the collective experiences of the senior women through a network.

From an employee resource or advisory group perspective, a group of people representing a certain community, race, ethnicity, language and so on may be helpful to the company in understanding purchasing habits, community needs, global perspectives, et cetera of that group. So, the groups become sources of information and insight to the organization.

Groups can also be constructed as pathways into supporting a community or as channels to improve communications with specific communities. The specific objectives need to be clearly articulated, and the formation and sustained support of these groups needs to be tied to those

objectives in order for these groups to enhance the inclusion in the organization, instead of exacerbating lines of division that may already exist.

Ms. Durham Like many companies, Exelon has come to recognize the need to ensure that all segments of our employee population feel fully included in the workplace. What are some strategies that companies can employ to ensure their D&I efforts effectively support an inclusive culture and are not perceived as excluding a majority group?

Dr. Reeves If the vocabulary around D&I is properly calibrated and communicated, majority groups (i.e. men, whites, etc.) should be actively engaged in all D&I efforts at all times. That said, since many companies still think of D&I in terms of “helping the blacks and Hispanics” or “helping women achieve work life balance” or “helping those affected by –isms,” any person who does not fit into those categories may feel excluded. On the other hand, if you think and talk about D&I as creating a culture where every single person can fully maximize their talent, you can integrate aspects of diversity such as generational diversity, religious diversity, diversity of learning/work styles, diverse needs of different family structures, et cetera. Creating an inclusive culture focuses on holding leaders accountable for leading everyone effectively, holding evaluation systems for being fair for everyone, and enforcing equal access to advancement opportunities for everyone. When D&I is communicated in that way, it doesn’t lead to the feelings of exclusion and frustration that majority groups face when D&I is discussed and implemented in outmoded ways.

Another aspect to being fully inclusive in the way D&I is articulated and communicated is to have an updated “business case” for D&I. Any effective (and inclusive) business case should focus on how diverse perspectives make a team stronger and more productive. A narrow business case that focuses on just selling more to minority consumers or female clients exacerbates the divisions instead of creating real D&I.

Pictured above: Dr. Arin N. Reeves (left) and Nicole M. Durham