

Looking Beyond Tokenism

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In part one, we talked about how sharing impactful, authentic, and inclusive storytelling about employees can foster inclusion and a sense of belonging. With the positive intent to highlight personal stories to celebrate employees, some firms in their enthusiasm may risk being accused of tokenism.

What is tokenism?

According to Merriam-Webster, tokenism is the practice of doing something (such as spotlighting a person who belongs to a minority group) only to prevent criticism and give the appearance that people are being treated fairly. For example, representation in leadership is extremely important. But regardless of a leader's minority status, they should genuinely value and encourage diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging, and recognize its benefits, resulting in real improvements.

Tokenism is isolating

Highlighting individuals only because of their "token" features can lead to imposter syndrome, stress, feelings of isolation, feeling undervalued for their authentic best self, accelerated burnout, and high turnover. It may even come across as performative. Although employee stories are an interesting way to showcase talent within the organization, try telling your DEIB story in alternative ways. For example, as someone who identifies as an Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI), I am often asked to speak by organizations during May for AAPI Heritage Month, but I can also speak as an inclusive leadership skills coach all year long, not limited to the month of May.

There are additional ways to highlight your team members that may be a better fit than heritage-specific holidays. Employee anniversaries could be a great time to highlight someone for their years of service and exceptional work, or if your team member is really good at giving presentations, they could give a few tips on how to be a better public speaker. This shows that they are more than their "token" identities and will foster a sense of pride in their work.

Create an inclusive environment

Alternative ways to tell an inclusive story can include measuring impacts in ways that leave behind quota-like approaches. Also, providing a safe space and platform for every voice and perspective to be heard is another way for employees to provide their stories without the added pressure of being seen as a representative of a group of people. Employee mentoring groups allow employees to feel heard and included. Instead of asking stories about your employees only during heritage months, highlight them year-round. Employee spotlights might showcase those having a positive impact as they demonstrate your organizational values, mission, and purpose all year. For example, a team photo with a story about how someone led a high-performing team on a special project showcases their leadership skills while also highlighting the contribution of their team members for their collective impact on the organization and the community.

Employees are multi-dimensional

Employees are more than two-dimensional. I am more than a Chinese-American woman. I am also a 10+-gallon blood donor, CPA, a mother, a friend, and a high performer. There are other ways to highlight employees in meaningful ways. For example, if you know that they are a caregiver or mentor, or enjoy community service, there are national days to increase awareness and invite them to share their story to inspire others.

Remember, tokenism is attempting to check a box and providing a false sense of improvement without true, substantial, and lasting growth. How might your organization recognize employees with an equity lens and include everyone while welcoming all intersectionalities and identities inclusively? Step back, reflect, and evaluate past stories and their impact and how you can continue improving. When we know better, we can choose to do better.