CHANGE COACHES

Building a Culture of Belonging in a High Growth Tech Startup

Obtaining executive engagement in building real cultures of belonging is a challenge that has to be approached differently with each organization and each individual leader. Many companies funnel tens of thousands of dollars into DEIB programs, but because leadership teams aren't invested on a personal level, employees don't see the lasting transformation they've come to expect. One of our flagship solutions for cultivating DEIB values in company leadership is our Culture Academies: this one is specifically focused on creating a culture of belonging.

The Challenge: InsuranceTech

Change Coaches was hired on by an insurance tech company ("InsuranceTech") that had an organizational goal of creating a culture of belonging—but it became apparent that the executive team had a different understanding of their existing culture than some of their employees. A few team members weren't convinced that they had to change on a personal level, but after just a couple of executive coaching exercises, they not only started seeing things from a different perspective, but they also started to see their unique role in the organization's overall culture efforts.

Data from a study by Harvard and SHRM has confirmed that commitment to DEIB values from company leadership is critical for real DEIB culture shifts, and this is one of the reasons why hiring a Chief Diversity Officer often doesn't result in noticeable change. This is also why Change Coaches developed Culture Academies as a strong solution: pairing executive coaching with team coaching and workshops has become a go-to strategy for us.

The Solution: Culture of Belonging Culture Academy

Change Coaches' Culture Academies challenge CEOs and their executive teams to identify what they can do within their individual leadership roles to foster a culture of belonging and start to see DEIB principles as leadership best practices. These engagements are fully customizable to meet your organization where you are and access what's happening below the surface in your existing culture to create movement in a specific area. We also typically hold a few workshops on topics like equity, power, and privilege; having difficult DEIB conversations with stakeholders and team members; creating cultures of belonging by leading below the surface; or communicating with DiSC behavioral styles. The outcome are structures and systems developed by each individual team member.

The Approach: Focused Leadership Coaching and Habit Exploration

When left unchecked, a leader's biases can create pervasive organizational issues like costly lawsuits, damaged company branding, and in the worst cases, sometimes your company can be the subject of viral social media content (and not in a good way). One may think this doesn't apply to their team, but Change Coaches has seen otherwise. This situation often plays out with many of our clients: the executive team feels that they have created an inclusive culture, but an "only one" comes to them (for instance, the only woman manager in the company or the only person of color) feeling frustrated because they don't feel included.

That's exactly what happened at the beginning of our engagement with InsuranceTech. One of the team members (let's call him Bob) was open and coachable in our interactions, but he ultimately felt confused when a woman executive spoke up and said he wasn't including her in his process for making important decisions. It's impossible to change biases without honestly exploring them. So to get Bob's full support and participation, it was necessary for him to acknowledge and work on his own blind spot.

When working with clients like Bob, who are excluding members of their team without realizing it, Change Coaches first starts with accessing empathy by asking them to recall times that they felt excluded. Bob was a little surprised when he was asked this question and responded that no one has ever asked him to think about it before. But he did have an answer—because it's very hard to find someone who hasn't felt excluded in their life. We have seen that leaders who know what exclusion feels like from the other side are equipped to notice when it's happening on their team and respond in a way that promotes equity.

After that conversation, Bob was asked to write down the top five people he calls when he's in a pinch and when he needs to make a high-stakes decision. The Coach asked him to think about who these people are and what they have in common. He realized, with newfound empathy for the woman on his management team, that they were all white men. The next question was whether these were the people he typically invited to meetings—it was found that while all managers were invited to required company meetings, only the men were invited to impromptu meetings to make high-stakes decisions. Though he wasn't doing it on purpose, Bob realized that all of the people he thought of in those critical situations were men, and in practice, it resulted in excluding women. This is just one example of the shifts we saw in leaders throughout our time with them.

> "Working with LaTonya has been transformative for my leaders, my company, and my personal professional growth. Building a culture of inclusion at our company is critical to our success as a business—and by working with LaTonya we have refined our connection and shared vision as an Executive Team, enabling us to make better decisions on long-term, structural strategy in D&I work. Personally, I am a better people leader due to LaTonya's coaching—her ability to operate from a place free from judgment, facilitate tough conversations, and willingness to challenge in ways that increase accountability have been invaluable."

The Results: Identifying Your Unit's Own Unique DEIB Roles

One of the reasons why executive teams aren't fully committed to DEIB is that they don't fully understand their role in it. Many organizations focus on stereotypical HR-type goals: recruiting, training, and employee development programs. But what if each leader actually focused on how they can use their deep expertise to create equity and belonging in their own ways? For example, instead of conforming to HR goals, how can a CFO drive DEI from a finance perspective and a Cheif Product Officer (CPO), for example, drive it from a product perspective?

These are questions that leadership teams explore when they work with Change Coaches. In addition to our ICF credentials, this is also why we call ourselves "change coaches" and not consultants. We prefer challenging leaders to come up with solutions for themselves rather than prescribing a rigid program with lots of training. We go in with a loose plan and stay flexible to "dance in the moment" with clients, taking steps back if necessary. In this case, the key leaders and managers mentioned came away with new personal goals, inclusive habits to work on, renewed structures and systems, and new visions of themselves as Below the Surface Leaders. Our approach focuses on longer-term behavioral and structures and systems changes driven by leadership.

Building Your Culture Academy

This case focuses on our Creating a Culture of Belonging Culture Academy, but we also build them around other workplace challenges such as eliminating toxicity in the workplace, leadership refreshes and resets, and navigating conflict.

You can build your Culture Academy through choosing from our menu of services:

Listening Sessions
Customized Workshops
One-on-one Coaching
Team Coaching
Culture Roadmapping
Organizational Learning Sessions

Get in touch with us today to start the conversation about cultural change for you and your team.

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