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Is a DE&I Policy Always Required? –
How HVJ Associates Amplifies Every Voice Without the Need for an Explicit Diversity, Equity,
and Inclusion Policy

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Gender, race, and nationality are dimensions contributing to the ever-increasing diversity in the workforce. Of the economic arguments for diversity, the “most compelling is the connection made between a workforce that brings valuable and different perspectives and its ability to connect with a wide spectrum of customers” (Harvey & Allard, 2015, p. 261).

A more diverse workforce gives the economic arguments: increased likelihood of hiring capable managers, increased creativity, and increased capability of instituting and accepting change. Ethically based decisions are judged sometimes by the reasoning that leads to the decision, not the decision’s outcomes. One could argue that decisions are made from duties and moral obligations. It could also be ethically argued that the good that comes from a focus on the ends achieved by a contemplated action holds that decisions are right or good if they produce a desired goodness and bad if they produce badness. Pragmatism, an approach to decision-making including that about diversity, could be defined as: if it works, do it. HVJ Associates, a geotechnical, environmental, and pavement engineering, construction materials testing, and civil design services company, utilizes both economic and moral arguments for diversity in their workplace. Taking into account both points of view allows for the combination of the two methodologies to maximize the size of the pie – to find the most economical, yet ethical, outcome.

Focusing early efforts on geotechnical and environmental engineering and construction materials testing, HVJ Associates was founded by Herbert V. Johnson soon after graduating college in 1985. By the early 2000s, HVJ grew to include pavement engineering and civil design services. Herb’s idea for business growth, rooted in spiritual growth, was focused on improving the community and everyone who interacts with the firm (HVJ Associates Inc, 2022). With this ideal integrated throughout business practices and their values, HVJ formed a company structure that was not emphasizing engineering services, but instead character and learning. When Didi Ndando, PE Senior Vice President at HVJ, was asked about their companywide diversity, equity, and inclusion policy, she said, “Believe it or not – we do not have any formal Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DE&I) program at all! It just so happens that the values we have held as a firm for decades (long before DE&I became fashionable) have lent themselves to us coming across as such regardless” (Ndando, 2023). Steadfastly, believing that the success of infrastructure projects

rests on the character of those involved (HVJ Associates Inc, 2022), purposeful hiring and thoughtful brand training is essential.

Herb's idea for business growth, rooted in spiritual growth, adds to the interconnectedness of the self and others. "Spirituality can take on numerous forms and in this respect, spirituality in itself is diverse" (Byrd & Scott, 2018, p. 21). Spirituality in the workplace is often silenced or overlooked if it is present. Leading with spirituality where HVJ employees come to work as their authentic selves, "opens a space for bringing one's heritage... to the workplace (Tisdell & Tolliver, 2000)" (Byrd & Scott, 2018, p. 21). When setting out to hire talent, HVJ analyzes internal needs and determines the job description for hire. Through a meticulous and purposeful talent acquisition process, HVJ recruits potential talent through a Credible Proof Process (CPP) equating to the aggregate of "Getting it," "Wanting it," having the "Capacity to produce it," (G – W – C), The Briefcase technique, and Believability (Crawford, 2022, p.3). The Briefcase technique and Believability assessments are tools used to enable HVJ to determine the G – W—C. The CPP condition of satisfaction gives a clear results statement, with the associated constraints and resources articulated, that will make the best match – the right person to the right job – greater than 80% of the time. The CPP method provides a way to hire for mindset over skillset, where skillset is a threshold competency where the applicant "gets it," wants it, and has the capacity to produce it.

This process has proven to be a better decision maker by making a grounded assessment of the candidate applying their briefcase technique and believability components. "GWC + BB is a cut above the competition; in our research, the best we could find in results was a 25% match of a person to a job using traditional search methods; the CPP objective is an 80% match" (HVJ Associates, 2022). By fulfilling all parts of the formula, HVJ achieves a candidate match to the culture of the company ("Getting it"), desire for the role (Wanting it), and assurance that the candidate can achieve the objectives of the role (the Capacity to produce). When candidates "Get it," meaning the desired outcome – they get the driving force behind HVJ. It is imperative to understand HVJ's ownership mindset, the way they lead and do business, their process, and their systems. Candidates can show that they "Want it" by demonstrating their desire and motivation to be in the job with the company. This bit of the CPP brings about the conversation and asking

the candidate “What is your why? Why us? Why this job? Why this company?” Also “Want it” is demonstrated by the interest to “play the game.” It gives the space for follow up actions the candidate takes and what they choose to present to the company. Encompassing knowledge, skills, and ability, having the capacity to produce, “Capacity”, is being able to do the job or have the potential to do the job by applying what they know. Relating to spirituality, the mindset, beliefs, emotions, and what is engaging or relevant to the candidate can be seen to be either open or closed. BB – Briefcase Technique and Believability, adds the credible proof. Applying these candidate assessments, there is a forced a decision-making process that reduces subjectivity and the “gut feeling” approach to interviewing. When focused on the criteria, HVJ invariably tends to end up with diversity.

After the candidate passes the qualifications of the Credible Proof Process, with spirituality focusing on the whole person, the company focuses on associate development. The Accelerated Generative Leadership Program (GLP) is designed to provide associates with the fundamentals of what makes the HVJ culture and brand what it is. The GLP is designed to focus on the nature of conversations and mastering the art of personal interactions, which in turn create a brand experience that differentiates HVJ from its competitors who do not focus on creating a shared expectation of collaboration. Client value comes from “the character of our people and their belief in the manner we conduct our business that contributes most to the success of HVJ” (HVJ Associates, 2022). Before learning the cultural values of HVJ either as an employee or before employment at HVJ, one may be defensive in their position when questioned about their thoughts and ideas. They may also be defensive of their position when it is questioned or countered with a different idea. To HVJ, there is more value in achieving a desired result, than there is in being right. When approaching understanding the different perspectives colleagues from different background offer, Didi Ndando offered her viewpoint in an interview; “It takes practice to get to a point where you don’t see that (differing opinions) as a challenge. You see that as a perspective and you begin to ask, ‘I wonder why that is?’ and you approach that more from a point of curiosity.” Value emerges when employees expect that no two people will think the same on everything. There are nuances, and almost self-consciousness in saying “I agree,” because a different angle can always be brought to an idea one agrees with. Employees in the company treat one another with dignity and respect while also valuing the differences that

contribute to their individuality. This respect has led to an appreciation and inclusiveness that has helped them capitalize on the strengths of their differences.

Managing diversity as a moral imperative comes from practice over time to the diverse executive team. Herbert V. Johnson, Mike Hasen, Hossam Esmail, and Didi Ndando specifically focus on inspiring excellence, owning the solution, growing with gratitude, and amplifying every voice (HVJ Associates Inc, 2022). A practice integrated within the company where employees feel a sense of inclusion, belonging, and equity occurs during Speculation Meetings. Groups meet and discuss questions such as: What is working well that should be preserved? What is not working that needs to be changed? What ideas do you have moving forward? The rules for Speculation Meetings: listen, write it down, and no comments. Ideas could be small or even outlandish, but everyone must produce their own idea, everyone must respect that idea, and no one can simply agree or say the same idea. By establishing companywide meetings that afford people the opportunity and the space for these conversations, employees are required to think critically, be creative in their suggestions, and ideas are continuously generated. After everyone has had a chance to contribute, ideas are then grouped into respective functionalities, for example human resources, finance, or project management, and then looked at more closely. After grouping is when logistics are considered, and a deep dive of the idea ensues. Oftentimes, in an unfamiliar situation or when dealing with unfamiliar ideas, different emotions may arise. Differences evoke emotions, and these emotions can lead to conflict; however, “conflict is not a prerequisite to managing differences” (Harvey & Allard, 2015, p.40). By tackling this common diversity issue of differences and learning to address differences effectively in the workplace, a significant positive aspect includes the generation of creativity. Differences allow for people to share experiences. The sharing of experiences generates more variability and allows the testing of strength to one’s position. With multiple perspectives, an enhancement occurs in the outcome. Managing differences is not the responsibility of one person and using this one example of a practice in HVJ, it shows that it is a process that has to be done by all parties involved.

HVJ Associates emphasizes the value of its cross-functional teams; this creates a basis for their competitive advantage. Different work departments have different functions, yet HVJ has harnessed their cultural diversity within their company and the creativity generated from

different viewpoints to use it as one of its greatest strengths. When discussing ideas, Herb will deliberately ask for different opinions. He also takes the time to hear every idea and think about all facets of it by presenting counter arguments for all to consider. Understanding the effects of culture on human behavior, he has instilled emotional intelligence within the company culture involving awareness of self, managing self, self-motivation, awareness of emotions in others, and managing interpersonal relationships (Harvey & Allard, 2015, p.42). As noted by Taylor Cox Jr. in *Cultural Diversity in Organizations*, “In a recent study illustrating the relevance of individuals’ perceptions to work outcomes, Eisenberger, Fasolo, and Davis-LaMastro (1990) examined the impact of attitudes on various individual work outcomes with samples of police officers, brokerage clerks, and public-school teachers. The authors found that employees’ perceptions of being valued by an organization had a significant effect on their conscientiousness, job involvement, and innovativeness” (Cox, 1994, p. 10). Diverse environments bring the challenge of peoples’ opinions varying based on their background and history. Moreover, the perspectives people have on the issue at hand is based on what they care about. It can be problematic for people who have not been exposed to differences; however, the more exposure you have to diverse experiences, combined with the values HVJ teaches their employees, diversity becomes the expectation. If employees are in situations where diverse opinions are not presented, they are found asking for varied opinions. The company shows that they care about its employees by actively seeking out their thoughts. Herb has modeled the importance of thinking critically, generating creative counter arguments, and amplifying every voice. This demonstration shows that everyone is valued, camaraderie can be found on some level, and thus innovativeness results.

Frost and Kalman said in their book, *Inclusive Talent Management How Business Can Thrive in an Age of Diversity*, “At core, it is about taking personal responsibility for becoming more conscious of the unconscious decisions we take every day and reconciling personal interest with collective good” (Frost & Kalman, 2016, p. 14). Regardless of their position, employees are encouraged to voice their opinions, ideas, and concerns. With employees from all around the world, HVJ values cultural diversity, seeing it as vital to problem solving. Stakeholder voices matter, and customer feedback shapes HVJ’s continued growth (HVJ Associates Cultural Summary, 2022). The HVJ Associates Cultural Summary is a document perspective employees

receive before they are considered for hire. If candidates qualify for a full sit-down interview, they are given this document and then it is reviewed and linked to expectations. If the cultural expectations of HVJ are not in the natural tendencies of the potential employee, the chances are that their application will be deferred. Team member standards are discussed and there is an expectation set that if employed at HVJ, you bring your whole brain to work – meaning, if you see something out of the ordinary, or if an idea is sparked, speak up. The last thing HVJ wants is people not speaking up – there could be money left on the table or the company could be heading toward a cliff, but it would remain unknown, unless it was brought to attention. When people hear others speak up, their manager encourages them to speak up, and there is no negative consequence for speaking up, employees are thanked and shown that it cannot hurt to share your thoughts.

To help people see the big picture, HVJ is working on incorporating storytelling into the brand. Stories resonate with people, and when people can visualize something, it makes it easier to latch onto that thing. If one can put themselves in another's shoes and divorce themselves from being on autopilot and thinking only the way they see it, it allows for diversity of thinking. Speculation Meetings, mentioned previously in this paper, are an example of the deliberate practice of diversifying thinking. Analyzing one's own limiting beliefs is a deliberate deep dive that challenges and expands the way they think to see how others are thinking.

Presently, HVJ Associates is not employing diversity recruiting techniques, such as targeting Historically Black Colleges or Universities (HBCU). The company guarantees that their ads for job openings reach many different avenues, however, they are not purposefully targeting one platform over another. The qualities that they look for naturally draw a diverse applicant pool. The engineering careers themselves offered at HVJ also lend to the diverse applicant pool. In the future, there is potential for diversity recruiting strategies if it is noticed that the current way in which HVJ is recruiting candidates is not offering a solid, diverse group. As described by Didi, “We are so diverse we call ourselves the United Nations over here!”

Many employees at HVJ are US citizens, whether they were born in the United States or naturalized. The infallibility with which HVJ Associates notices the value of each human being

in the company is remarkable. In their *Principles People Performance* PowerPoint, HVJ draws from Peter Drucker, “At its heart, management as a liberal art deals with questions of the human condition. The liberal arts ideal involves the study of disciplines that deal with human behavior, creativity, emotions, decision making, and moral values” (HVJ Associates Principles People Performance, 2022). HVJ lives these values out, but they do not use those terms. Management invariably involves organizing people to be as productive as possible, however, to accomplish such a feat, it thus requires an understanding of what it means to be human. To illustrate how principles, people, and performance affect profit and growth, HVJ made parallels between Drucker’s Categories of Practice, previous ServiceMaster Corporate Objectives, and HVJ company values. Integrity and value from Drucker’s categories, to honor God in all we do from ServiceMaster objectives, and inspire excellence from HVJ values align. In the same respective order, people and their development, to help people develop, and own the solution are parallel. Strengths and opportunities, to pursue excellence, and grow with gratitude mirror one another. Finally, performance and results, to grow profitably, and amplify every voice reveal parallels. When advocating for diversity, equity, and inclusion with colleagues who do not understand its importance, Michael Isakson, Senior Member of the HVJ Advisory Board notably said, “We have to get results, but I think first and foremost that associate has to be convinced that there is value in every human being.” There is an innate value in every human being. The opportunity that people bring is their ability to give an additional perspective. People from different cultural backgrounds have different behaviors, and being in an increasingly diverse society, practicing and learning what they may be sensitive to is an integral part of being a flexible communicator.

Employees who develop an awareness that improves understanding between cultures “will have a better chance of doing business effectively than those who continue to overlook the importance of developing more mindful and flexible intercultural communication skills or who assume that all members of a particular culture communicate with the same style” (Harvey & Allard, 2015, p. 212). HVJ has found that for someone to get it, they must care about something at some level. They have harnessed the ability to meet them where they are at and show them how to use HVJ cultural ideals through their employee interviewing and training processes.

Economically, there is a benefit to the HVJ brand and process. Inclusion is seen in the results of long-term revenue and EBIT growth. If diversity and inclusion were only occurring for ethical reasons and not for both economic and moral reasons, the business may not be doing as well as it currently is. With a combination of economic and moral value, HVJ is continuing its mission of improving peoples' lives because of the diverse workforce contributing to its revenue growth and profit.

Effective diversity leadership is a combination of “making diversity visible, being specific about what needs to be done, evaluating for results, providing constant reinforcement, and making change intentional” (Harvey & Allard, 2015, p. 326). Each aspect of diversity leadership has been described above in HVJ's various practices and processes. Herbert V. Johnson has done colossal work in incorporating diversity, equity, and inclusion within his company because he championed diversity and made it a core business value by living and leading through his values daily. He meticulously assembled an executive team who share the same core values. Together, they have accomplished a synergistic workplace without requiring an explicit DE&I policy. Through demonstratable actions, owning the solution, thoughtful guidance, and relationship management, HVJ Associates has found a way to always amplify every voice.

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