Kwik Lok's quick lessons for DEI

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YAKIMA, WA — For many companies, diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) is top of mind for a host of reasons. To some, these are nebulous buzzwords that leaders are still trying to get their minds around. For others, DEI is a platform for change or the foundation of major shifts in a corporate culture. But at the end of the day, it's truly a matter of awareness.

Kwik Lok, a global leader in packaging closures, has spent several years redefining its corporate culture in areas such as sustainability and diversity.

In 2016 when sisters Stephanie Jackson, Kimberley Paxton-Hagner and Melissa Steiner took the helm as the third generation of Kwik Lok ownership, they had a focus on corporate social responsibility. But in the past two years, they have placed an emphasis on DEI as its own entity.

What began with difficult conversations stemming from social and racial injustice has become a full-fledged cultural transformation for the company. To accomplish this, Kwik Lok promoted Christy Pettey from director of human resources to chief people officer (CPO). In this role, Pettey has spearheaded internal research and developed new strategies for a healthy corporate culture of inclusion.

DEI is a journey, not a destination, and Kwik Lok recently shared some lessons the company is learning along the way.

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Be prepared to be uncomfortable. "If you're not willing to have difficult conversations, you're just putting wallpaper up," said Ron Cardey, Kwik Lok VP of sales. "Our leadership team, owners and board have gone through diversity training, and it's not easy. But you have to go into it with an open mindset and understand the importance."

Cardey noted that diversity of thought is just as important as diversity of background. It's those varying ideas and opinions that bring about change. While those differences can be challenging to overcome, they're the best path toward an authentic transformation.

Get in it for the long-haul. "You can see improvement incrementally over time, but it's just not something you can hit hard for a year or two and expect everything to be great," Pettey cautioned. "It's a marathon."

Developing a culture of equity doesn't have a deadline. Culture is constantly evolving, and as people from underrepresented groups join the conversation, company leadership must be prepared to ensure everyone is provided opportunities for success.

The first step is defining what the culture should look like. By doing that, a company is then able to define the gaps and create actionable steps to fill them. And once a culture is defined and created, adapting to change becomes not only easier but also logical.

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Start at the top. For Kwik Lok, the conversation started with the three owners, along with a few other top executives including Pettey.

"The first step for us was asking, 'In an ideal future, in 30 years, what do we want Kwik Lok to look like?" Pettey said. "We talked for about two hours about

what we wanted the future and our culture to be."

That's not to say DEI should be dictated in a top-down fashion. But when the workforce looks up at leadership, that's where the umbrella of inclusion needs to hang; culture is driven by those at the helm, and companies with leadership that recognizes a need for DEI are the ones that will be the most successful not only in getting it off the ground but also in the long run.

Set realistic priorities. In that initial meeting, the leadership team identified needed changes and ideas for activities to bring about those changes; Pettey then shined a light on gaps that were a little harder to see from the inside.

"I added more things to the list that I thought needed to happen," she recalled. "Then we sat together as a team and I asked, 'Which of these are causing the most pain? Which will provide the most impact?"

Pettey suggested ranking priorities on a 1 to 4 scale. Those ranked "1" were items that did not align with the company's core values or DEI mission, or things that people had been asking for over a longer period of time. Items ranked "4" looked more like things that should be implemented at some point but are not immediately critical to the success of the mission.

When in doubt, she suggested, look at the realistic feasibility of implementation.

Focus on behavior. A focus on diversity — of people and thought — inherently comes with disagreement and dissent. So, how can a company bring everyone on board into a culture of inclusiveness without homogenizing the opinions?

It requires empathy and, perhaps most importantly, behavioral expectations.

Sometimes its as simple as reevaluating the verbiage of a job description that was unintentionally designed to attract a specific age or gender. Or it could be as complex as respecting a person's opinion while setting boundaries (or identifying legalities) of what can or cannot be said — and what the consequences are.

Act with empathy and respect, first and always. The craft of baking is as old as time, but for many in the industry DEI is a new concept — a solution to a problem perhaps as old as the craft. In that respect, the most seasoned professionals are also neophytes.

"Every company is going to have different starting points," Cardey said. "But it's like that old saying, 'How do you eat an 800-pound gorilla? One bite at a time.' You just have to keep nibbling away at it."

The most important thing to remember is that every company has its own culture, and each group must find its own path to start the journey. There will be mistakes along the way, but as long as the purpose is defined and the intention is authentic, success will eventually come.

And success will look different in each particular setting.

"There's no absolute 'right' or 'wrong' way to execute DEI practices," Pettey said. "What matters most is understanding what works best for your