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How to Build a Diversity and Inclusion Council

Grace Frye

Building a company culture that champions diversity and inclusion takes intentionality, support from top leadership, and commitment across the organization. But making measurable changes in company culture shouldn't rely on a single employee or department.

Here's how Shazia Hussain, the People Generalist and D&I Program Manager at Newfront, created a cross-functional Diversity and Inclusion Council focused on creating real cultural change, moving D&I initiatives forward, and bringing in stakeholders from every level of the organization.

About Shazia

Shazia has been with Newfront, a San Francisco based insurtech company, since 2018. As the first People hire, Shazia has helped the team grow from 40 employees to over 200 and has worn several different hats along the way. She says while her work has shifted with company needs, she's always made an effort to view her work through a diversity and inclusion lens.

With this eye for D&I, Shazia spent the first half of 2021 working within Newfront to create the first ever Diversity & Inclusion Council.

What is a Diversity and Inclusion Council?

At Newfront, the D&I Council is a group of volunteer employees from across the organization and CEO, Spike Lipkin, is the executive sponsor, who provides the business perspective to ensure the Council's direction is aligned with the company's mission. The D&I Council focuses on bringing awareness to D&I related topics, auditing current practices and processes to ensure they are inclusive, and elevating voices of underrepresented groups.

Shazia believes everyone has a role in diversity and inclusion, and this council is a way for employees who are passionate about D&I to make a deeper impact on company culture. The council is just one part of a larger strategy to ensure each

company culture and economic goals. The part of a larger strategy to ensure every part of the employee life cycle is looked at through the D&I lens.

Structuring the Diversity & Inclusion Council

Creating Roles and Responsibilities

To start, Shazia developed a mission statement for the Council which aligned with the company's overall D&I strategy. Then, she defined roles within the council. She said this structure helped provide clarity and set expectations on what the Council was responsible for and what potential Council members would do as a part of it. While these roles offered guidance for Council members, she says in practice everyone naturally gravitated to a set of responsibilities that made sense for them as an individual and for the Council as a whole. Council members were quick to support each other and pick up work outside of their role descriptions where their skills were applicable. Here are the roles that were part of the Council at Newfront:

- Council Co-Chairs (2) - Facilitated meetings, prepared agenda and notes, and assigned action items
- Vice Chair - Stepped in if a Co-Chair was unable to make it
- Communication & Design Coordinators - Focus on internal communications
- Community Outreach Partners - Focus on building partnerships with external organizations that support diversity

Applying to the Council

Shazia says it's important to follow inclusive practices when creating D&I initiatives, so she made sure to create an inclusive application process so everyone had an equal chance of joining. In order to make sure employees understood the commitment and were able to accomplish the goals set out for their 6 month term, she created an application that helped formalize the process for those interested. The application was shared with the entire company, and anyone interested could apply. All applicants' managers were also required to sign off and approve their role on the Council.

Building your team of Advocates

Of course, there are always those who want to be a part of the D&I Council, but are on the fence about joining. Others may want to join but aren't approved by their managers. For these employees, Shazia created an additional role: the D&I Council Advocate. She defines advocates as employees who are excited about D&I work, but aren't required to attend Council meetings and don't have any formal obligations to the Council. Throughout their term, the Council was able to tap their team of advocates for one-off projects and additional support on an as needed basis.

Setting D&I Council Goals

At the start of the D&I Council's 6 month term the team realized the importance of setting realistic expectations and attainable goals. After taking an audit of the programs and understanding the many areas of opportunity to make an impact, the Council decided to narrow their focus around recruiting and hiring, more specifically around creating inclusive job descriptions and trying to source from colleges that support diversity.

The D&I Council met once a month and completed most of the project work asynchronously in between meetings. This allowed more time for collaboration and thought partnership during the monthly meetings, and gave the team time to work together to set goals, share updates, and create to-dos for the next month.

At the end of the first term, the Council accomplished the following:

- Established best practices for writing inclusive job descriptions and shared with managers to reference when writing job descriptions for new roles.
- Reviewed & edited open job postings to include more inclusive language and

- Reviewed & edited open job postings to include more inclusive language and reviewed company images to also reflect inclusivity.
- Created a framework for reaching out to colleges/student groups regarding Newfront's opportunities, culture, and how we can collaborate.
- Attended a virtual job fair at a college to discuss insurance career opportunities with prospective students.
- Connected with an insurance fraternity with chapters in over 100 universities across the US and Canada. Learned about opportunities such as project-based internships, career fairs and diversity fairs, job postings on their internal career center to attract talent.
- Posted an open role on a college job board careers page, which was highlighted in the college's student newsletter.
- Reached out to community colleges and universities with risk management departments to see how they can provide role opportunities at Newfront to students.

Challenges + Looking Ahead

Shazia says the D&I Council was a huge success and with support from leadership the initiative will continue to grow! However, the first term was not without challenges. Here are a few she suggests keeping an eye out for:

Scheduling

Finding a monthly meeting time for all Council members and an executive sponsor is not an easy task. Shazia recommends scheduling in advance as many meetings as possible. In the future, the Council plans to set a predetermined meeting time and schedule the whole 6-12 month term at the start of the year.

Sharing responsibilities across the team

With a new initiative Shazia says it's not uncommon to fall into the expectation that one person on the team will have all of the answers or will make the final decisions. Shazia says creating the Co-Chair positions gave her team a chance to share responsibilities and keep a balance of everyone's voice in discussions.

Increasing term length

The first two D&I Councils will serve for 6 month terms, but starting in 2022, Shazia plans to increase the term to a year long. This will allow the team to tackle bigger initiatives that take more time.

Looking to the future, Shazia is excited to continue managing the D&I Council in an advisory role, and hand-off the Co-Chair roles to two fresh Newfronters. While some members of the previous council may choose to reapply, following the success of the first term there has been overwhelming interest from employees. With widespread possibilities for furthering D&I initiatives, she is excited to see what comes next!



Grace ([LinkedIn](#)) is a journalist, writer, and story teller, passionate about cultivating team cultures.

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