Diversity & Inclusion: Designing An Equitable User Experience

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Looking to better understand diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) from a community perspective?** Ashleigh shared 6 best practices.

- **Do you want to improve cross-representation among certain community groups?** Ashleigh struggles with this, too, particularly in well-established groups. However, she was able to offer 2 very practical suggestions.

- **Wonder how to gain executive support for DEI?** As with the implementation of almost any change, it requires this tried and true best practice. TheCR has always touted this practice since its inception.

SPEAKERS

Ashleigh Brookshaw (ASSP) and
Kelly Schott (TheCR)

COMPETENCIES

Strategy, Culture

MATURITY PHASES

CMM1, CMM2, CMM3, CMM4

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OVERVIEW

- **Background Ashleigh Brookshaw.** Ashleigh is the Manager of Community Engagement at the American Society of Safety Professionals (ASSP). She manages 4 diversity, equity and inclusion groups, as well as an online members-only community for about 40,000 ASSP professionals.

  - Ashleigh is also the Founder and Chief Innovation Officer for C2M Digital, which is a digital culture change management and strategic consulting business. This organization is dedicated to improving organizational systems and technology.

  - Ashleigh has a BA in Advertising Public Relations from Loyola University in Chicago. She has an advanced degree in Masters of Art and Multicultural and Organizational Communication with a concentration in Training and Development.

    - Ashleigh also has a Change Management Certification from the Acuity Institute.

  - Everything that Ashleigh shared in this presentation has been based on her experiences and perspectives when creating an online equitable user experience that is situated in organizational culture.

OVERVIEW

- **Why are we here?** Ashleigh explained that the purpose of the presentation was to learn:
    - The foundational components of organizational culture through a change management lens.
    - To learn the foundational components of diversity, equity and inclusion.
    - To learn the connection between organizational culture and the user experience and how that shows up in different online communities.
    - To share 2 case study examples of how Ashleigh has seen and implemented DEI in her career.

- **Organizations don't change, people do.*** Ashleigh always starts with this quote because she believes that it reinforces the relationship between an organization and its people. In order to really understand the organizational culture and its intersection to the online community, you must first gain an understanding of your users or the people within that organization.
    - This will continue to examine the role of the organization's cultural management, the role that people play and how this is demonstrated in online communities.
    - Ashleigh believes that the goal of community managers should be to design an equitable experience for all users. From Ashleigh's perspective, that really does begin with foundational, organizational and cultural components.

*Quote taken from Prosci.

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OVERVIEW

- **The online ASSP community.** ASSP provides education, advocacy, standards development and a professional community for its members in order to advance careers in the OSH (Occupational Safety and Health) profession as a whole.
    - Since this is a place where OSH professionals find their community, it's centered on education, networking and professional development.
    - The organizational member structure includes ASSP members who are able to participate in 3 member communities, which directly led to the development of ASSP's online business case.
        - There are 150 chapters.
        - There are 18 technical online communities in various industries, such as oil and gas, construction, engineering, etc.
        - Diversity and inclusion groups include Blacks in Safety Excellence, Women in Safety Excellence, Hispanic Safety Professionals and emerging OSH professionals.
    - In Ashleigh's opinion, the key to implementing a strong online community from a cultural perspective is to tie it to the strategic objectives and structure within your organization. This requires a strong value proposition. ASSP's online community is an exclusive members-only virtual place where they can connect with a community of practice in their technical communities or, for the purposes of this discussion, the diversity, inclusion and equity groups.
    - As it relates to their organizational culture, the member communities are prominently featured online. For instance, the practice specialty communities include a value proposition that is centered solely on virtual engagement. As for the chapters, their value proposition is predominantly centered on the local-level with face-to-face engagement.

OVERVIEW

- **Online community use case #1.** This was created using a variety of different factors to fulfill the value proposition of the system, including the DEI groups as previously stated. Since ASSP is a membership-based organization, everything from the user experience to the engagement strategy was built with diverse members in mind. This includes having them prominently featured on the ASSP community, as well.

  - Ashleigh shared ASSP's journey. Fortunately, the organizational culture is reinforced at the highest level.

    - A few years ago, ASSP underwent rebranding, which included visual logos and language for all of its member communities. They modeled this into their online community as a reinforcement of the organization's cultural commitment to their DEI communities, as well their technical communities.

    - Elected leaders are also featured prominently on the page to demonstrate a sense of belonging and, from a business perspective, to encourage members to get involved with their common interest groups, since they are volunteer based.

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OVERVIEW

- **Online community use case #2.** This use case ties DEI to the organizational culture with Allstate Insurance.

  - Ashleigh was hired by Allstate as her first job in a corporate relations function. A big project was the implementation of a systems platform migration. Ashleigh was hired to ensure that all the business objectives were met, as well as to increase member engagement. As part of this strategic initiative, Ashleigh saw that there was an opportunity to further tie the organizational culture to their DEI groups. The use case was a collaborative community. DEI manifests itself in different types of communities. However, the common thread is that it typically lies within the organization's structure and culture.

    - Ashleigh noted that the DEI groups were difficult to find. She used that as a strategy to see how Allstate shows up in the media, what they are known for, employee engagement and work/life balance.

    - When you work to create an online DEI equitable experience, look at it in the context of your overall culture.

BEST PRACTICES

- **Understand the elements of organizational culture.** This includes the values, beliefs and the norms that are shared between people. That could be any and all types of people, i.e. employees, users, etc. No matter the experience, it should be reinforced at the highest level of the organization through its leadership, its governance documents, its branding and through its language. These basic elements will also show up in your online community. It's essential that they follow your organization's strategic model.

  - Think about your organization's values and beliefs. Specifically, does your organization value diversity, equity and inclusion? How does that reveal itself in your online community? Is it even showing up in your online community?

    - *The organizational structural triangle.* Think of a triangle. Organizational culture is central (in the middle of the triangle). The structure is at the top and processes and people on the left and right hand side of the triangle. For the purposes of this presentation, Ashleigh instructed participants to think of the structure as the online community and the people as the users. The online ecosystem is, therefore, a subset of the dominant organizational culture.

      - Community managers know their users best. Therefore, think about how users are showing up in the community. Do you have diverse users? Do they feel welcome and heard? Is there space for them? What functionality either reinforces or hinders them?

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BEST PRACTICES

- **Understand diversity and organizational culture.** Ashleigh defines diversity as the collective elements and characteristics that compose a person's identity. There are a few elements that can contribute to the definition, such as gender, race, sexual orientation, ethnicity, skills, etc. The basic elements of your organization's culture include values and beliefs that are reinforced through organizational governance and organizational language.

  - Think about the structure of your online community. As community managers, what do you see? What are your users talking about? Is there a need that the community has not yet fulfilled? What can you do as an online community manager to create equitable access?

- **Understand the meaning of equity.** Ashleigh describes equity as "providing fair treatment and opportunity, as well as access, across different stakeholders." As this relates to online communities, Ashleigh thinks about online systems as a great equalizer and a tangible manifestation of organizational culture. This will depend on individual business and community cases, i.e. the type of community. It could be focused more on external customers and reinforces products or it could be an internal community where people collaborate, etc. From Ashleigh's perspective, no matter what type of user you have in your community, just the mere fact that you have a community that exists and that each user has a functioning user name and password demonstrates the commitment to equitable access within the organizational structure.

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BEST PRACTICES

- **Understand the meaning of inclusion.** While diversity requires a multitude of perspectives, inclusion centers on how those different pieces come together to create a larger impact. Ashleigh showed a slide with puzzle pieces of different colors, shapes and sizes on one side (representing diversity). The other side showed all the pieces fitting together (inclusion). With online community, look to how it drives your business objectives. In organizations, this may manifest itself across collaborative teams, such as the ones that you need to create a thriving online community. You need a multitude of perspectives to not only align your community to the business objectives, but you also want to meet the needs of all users whether that is from an internal or external perspective. By doing this, it will not only enrich your community, but it could lead to an increase in user adoption based on your organizational needs. This will translate to the all-important KPIs required by executives.

- **Connecting the pieces.** Organizational culture is the lifeblood to your organization. That can manifest itself as a cultural significance in online community. Ashleigh believes that diversity, equity and inclusion are great examples of how an organization's cultural values translate into an online community experience by keeping the different stakeholders in mind. As previously discussed, that could be internal stakeholders, external stakeholders, etc.

LESSONS LEARNED

- Kelly asked participants to share how DEI shows up in their online communities:

  - One participant's organization hired a diversity and inclusion VP last year. They have begun to incorporate this into the community. The initial step was just to have a place for the conversations as a whole. As they are moving forward, they are introducing employee resource groups. They also have 4 groups, but they are a little different than what was described by Ashleigh. They are in different stages of being rolled out. Even before they had the VP, they had a Women in Technology group. Typically, women are under-represented in technology and/or they are found in very specific roles. There was a big focus on this at this participant's organization, resulting in a very strong employee resource group. They are also now starting to see movement in the LGBTQ+ area. This participant feels that there are different challenges within the specific groups. Some people may want to be a part of the group, but not yet comfortable letting others know their true self. Your platform may not be able to support those challenges in the way that you want, so be aware of this when going down this path.

    - Ashleigh added that Allstate had established DEI groups as part of their overall strategy and it came from the top down. What Ashleigh sees in terms of designing equitable access at ASSP is that the burden of proof is on the member. There is an entire governance structure that they have to go through in terms of a business case, X amount of signatures, metrics, etc. As a community manager, it's important to have these conversations with members to get a sense of which groups need representation. It's so important to cultivate a place of belonging.

LESSONS LEARNED

- Another member shared that DEI started back in late June of this year. They crafted a mission statement, started to collect information that could be added, but this member feels that this will be ever-changing. They don't have a designated DEI person hired to oversee this initiative. It has been put on this member's plate, spurring her to partner with different people in various departments. They are still trying to figure it all out. The guiding light they are following is to make sure that the community feels inclusive for each community member.

    - Ashleigh encourages this member to do some research. There is plenty of ERG (Employee Resource Group) training, including diverse populations like veterans, disabilities, etc. to represent the overall employee ecosphere.

- Yet another participant also shared that they didn't have a separate area for the DEI conversations before June 2020. They do have someone who has recently been appointed to lead this work. The question of whether to create a new online community space for these specific discussions is being asked right now. The struggle is that not everyone participates in the current internal community. Some people question the validity of creating a space for DEI conversations because it's always the same people participating anyway. This participant feels that it is important, but doesn't know how to go about convincing others.

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LESSONS LEARNED

- Ashleigh noted that this is a timely perspective because she just had a meeting to discuss the strategy for her online community. Contextualizing it at the organizational level, ASSP is reviewing what DEI means, what is sustainable, what is measurable, rolling out a task force and then determining a strategy for sustained engagement afterwards. When you examine the online community, you need to look at it through the lens of a variety of different factors. As always, ensure that it is tied to your organizational strategy.

  - If you see decreased participation in general, ask yourself what the implications are to create a new DEI space. Will it just lie there or will there be seeded discussion?

  - As community managers, you are the product owners of your system. No one knows your users better than you. If you have data that supports a DEI space, Ashleigh would look at the pros and cons. She would then have a collaborative discussion across the organization.

  - One participant added that if you don't have a DEI group in your community, where will it be? It's not something that can be done in an email, which would seriously discourage activity. What's the purpose if you don't have a place for everyone to participate?

LESSONS LEARNED

- Another participant described "councils". Various individuals guide the council and the community can be used to feature these individuals. This way, if people have questions, they have resources. If they are a little timid, they at least have someone that they can reach out to, share and become involved. It offers a place for members to learn more about different DEI groups. This participant currently has 6 councils.

- One participant shared that culture really does play a part in the engagement level of DEI. For instance, when the Black Lives Matter movement became active again recently, one staff member posted what it was like to be a black man in America today. The post received lots of likes, but no engagement. People are still afraid to engage in topics like this publically in the workplace.

  - Ashleigh stated that there are organizations that approach DEI as a hot trend. There needs to be an organizational strategy, i.e. is the company taking a stand on DEI? What does that look like? When people ask Ashleigh about this, she counters with another question with respect to the company's commitment. Is it just a one and done just to say the company did it or is there a long-term commitment? It must be tied to organizational culture, strategy and values. Lots of companies still need to do work here.

LESSONS LEARNED

- Ashleigh was asked how to improve representation on various committees within the organization, particularly since it is all volunteer. For example, one such committee in one participant's organization consists of over 100 white men, aged 55 plus. It's very hard to break into that committee to gain greater cross representation. This really came to light this year when 12 Awards of Merit were handed out and 11 went to older white gentlemen and one woman. However, it's easy to see why this happened as the award recipients were nominated by their peers.

    - Ashleigh replied that they also struggle with this at ASSP. Ashleigh has worked on trying to improve diverse representation within leadership positions. They have created a PowerPoint presentation for various member groups on the process, how to become involved, the timelines, etc. For this participant, however, Ashleigh recommends understanding first off that the structure doesn't yet exist in his organization. Therefore, there is a need to be organic and to have conversations with cross-functional departments. This participant needs to generate grassroots awareness. If it is a "boy's club" currently, there is a Catch 22. Are people not participating because they don't know? Or are they not participating because there's no one that looks like them?

        - Ashleigh also recommends taking a look at the governance structure and bylaws, etc. Assess if it is a barrier to being inclusive from a diversity perspective.

        - This participant felt that there might be more of an opportunity in the newer groups to begin improving diverse representation, particularly since this is all staffed with volunteers. It is much harder to try with the ingrained and established groups.

LESSONS LEARNED

- When it comes to approaching executives about this type of conversation, Ashleigh recommends as a first step to build the use case for diversity, equity and inclusion by tying it to the company's business objectives. Given her background in change management, Ashleigh approaches this from that standpoint. Next, seek out the stakeholder identification pieces, including training and development.

  - Something that Ashleigh has seen done well is the creation of a shared language and a shared vernacular among the leadership team. In full transparency, Ashleigh stated that she is in the middle of trying to do this now and is finding it difficult. She recommends seeking out and connecting with a leader who seems to be open and willing to spearhead it. Remember, from a change management perspective, you need executive buy-in for this to work.

  - Always listen to how this topic is discussed among the leadership level. Craft a use case based on the language, values, objectives and what the executives want to accomplish, particularly their business goals. Then use research from Deloitte, McKenzie Group, etc. to gain an understanding for what the research experts are saying around this topic. Next, tie it to your executive's goals – a tried and true best practice.

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LESSONS LEARNED

- As expressed by one member, community managers actually have the ability and the power to make a change. Ashleigh challenged participants to hold their organizations accountable. Delivering the message takes tact, but the environment is open and accepting to needed change. Just keep in mind that what you do and whatever commitment you make must be measurable in order to show the value. If the organization can be held accountable, you need to be held accountable, too, for the changes you wish to bring forward.

RESOURCES

- Kelly asked participants to shared what community means to them:
  - It's your tribe of people around a certain element of your life, i.e. work.

  - A group of people who come together around a shared purpose or shared goal.

  - It's about being connected. It's not just about work, but also the personal connections.

  - Being very active in the Open Source world, diversity and inclusion, this participant has learned the value and power of community. It has encouraged her to turn her career in this direction.

  - It's even more than just connecting. It's about leveling the playing field and making sure that everyone has access, everyone has a voice, everyone can find and participate where they want and how they want.

  - In the broadest sense, it's a group of people with some kind of shared experience or interest. It could mean different things to different people depending on the purpose of the community.

  - Rachel Happe feels passionate about communities because they distribute access and leadership to everybody. Community helps to meet people where they are and empower them to take the next step, whatever that means to them. For Rachel, it's about promoting human potential and making sure people have the support they need to fulfill that potential.