The Conference Board) May 1, 2007 â€¦ Middle Management buy-in is essential to the success of any diversity initiative, according to a report from The Conference Board.

Managers play a key role in hiring, development and promotion decisions. But they're often at direct odds with diversity practitioners, who by definition challenge the status quo.

The report, which outlines a number of strategies for getting middle managers involved in the diversity process, is based on a meeting of The Conference Board Diversity Business Council` Participants include senior diversity officials from Hewitt Associates, United Technologies Corporation, ADP, Avon Products, Merrill Lynch, Colgate-Palmolive, Safeco, Lucent, PepsiCo and others. Middle Management: Roadblock to Diversity and Inclusion Middle managers focus on long-term strategy and the status quo. Because they're generally rewarded for maintaining current results, they often become roadblocks to inclusion initiatives. There are many barriers to engaging middle managers. "Beneath the headlines are layers of complexity," notes the report, "including a lack of understanding for the business case for diversity, competing priorities, time pressures, legitimate questions about how they'll be rewarded for their efforts, measurability, lack of authority to make much of a difference, and a sense that they're at the mercy of the candidates recruiters provide them."

Middle managers need to see what's in it for them and the overall business. Key to winning them over is demonstrating that diversity and inclusion will contribute to goals such as increased capacity, better solutions for business challenges, employee engagement/ownership, innovative ideas, reduced turnover, and the ability to resolve complex business issues.

Getting Middle Managers Involved

Members of The Conference Board Diversity Business Council offered a number of strategies for getting middle management involved in the diversity process:

Executive leaders must carry the banner of diversity deeper into the organization. They should model the behaviors they want from middle management, such as attending diversity training and mentoring diverse employees.

Companies should ask affinity groups to ground their efforts in business relevant issues. Ensure their programs have broad appeal beyond their direct constituency by addressing broad-based business issues or employee needs such as career development. Ask affinity group members to invite their managers to events.

Require all affinity groups to have executive sponsors that come out of the middle management ranks.

Find a highly-respected manager who is ready to be a champion and ensure she gets high-profile visibility for her diversity commitment.

Enhance education and awareness through relationships. For example, reciprocal mentoring with someone culturally different.

Encourage middle managers to participate in local diversity councils. Have middle managers participate in diversity events as a speaker, panelist or host.

Reward the champions. Tie financial rewards to performance and development plans. Recognize managers by putting role model awards on the corporate intranet.

To make diversity sustainable, embed it in the performance management system. Conduct a 360-degree feedback process to gain input and observations on inclusive behaviors.

Include cultural competence as a component of an Interview Skills Workshop to enhance managers' ability to connect with potential diverse candidates and ensure they hire the best talent.

Use employee satisfaction surveys to identify areas where diversity resources could be used to help resolve what would otherwise be identified as HR or general organization issues.

Be transparent about how goals are set and measured.

Provide middle managers with internal and/or external resources - including an online resource -when they need help dealing with diversity-related issues and challenges.

Develop a Balanced Scorecard and publish it in a highly public way. A scorecard should have measurable behavioral changes such as employee satisfaction surveys, exit interviews, as well as measurable representation changes such as attrition, succession, etc.

In talent reviews, include diversity/cross-cultural competency as a valued competency for the advancement of managers.

Create a diversity index -- a series of diversity-related questions asked of all employees through an existing employee engagement survey or as a stand-alone effort. Track trends over time.

Identify middle managers who have several open positions and provide them with invitations to attend diversity recruiting fairs so they can meet a critical mass of candidates.

The Conference Board creates and disseminates knowledge about management and the marketplace to help businesses strengthen their performance and better serve society. Working as a global, independent membership organization in the public interest, The Conference Board conducts research, convenes conferences, makes forecasts, assesses trends, publishes information and analysis, and brings executives together to learn from one another. The Conference Board is a not-for-profit organization and holds 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status in the United States. [www.conference-board.org](http://www.conference-board.org)