

# How to Cultivate Diversity and Equity

Leaders at Schwabe, Williamson & Wyatt and OHSU talk about what works and what doesn't in today's business climate.

BY GRACIELA GOMEZ COWGER  
AND ADITI MARTIN

**BUSINESS TODAY LOOKS NOTHING LIKE** it did prepandemic. Every industry has experienced a shakeup in how organizations are managed, operated and shaped. COVID-19-driven pivots, the groundswell of demand for social change and continuous uncertainty has led to a long-overdue shift in business priorities. Chief among those is the need to drive innovation, which has never been more essential to success.

To bolster innovation, business leaders need to create the right environment, and that includes putting diversity and equity at the forefront. As two female leaders who have long worked in innovation across the legal, design and manufacturing, and biomedical industries, we've seen what works — and what doesn't. Today's business leaders must take steps to cultivate an atmosphere that allows everyone to contribute.

Start small by creating room for conversation. In a leadership role, it's imperative to acknowledge that diverse perspectives improve business and client outcomes. By embracing different voices, you'll fuel innovation. In meetings, presentations and brainstorming, open a direct dialogue with all participants. It's easy for extroverted people to dominate conversations, and those who may not view themselves as part of the "in group" can feel they don't have room to speak up. Create a space that allows each person to share their thoughts comfortably. Ask them directly: "So what do you think?" If it's clear someone isn't comfortable contributing in group settings, take them aside before the meeting or send them a note after to see what thoughts they have to contribute. By inviting each person's voice, you might just come up with the solution you've been looking for as well as build trust within your team.

Another small but impactful action that leaders can take is implementing a mentorship program. This is important for employees who are new in their careers and is especially beneficial for underrepresented groups. A mentor not only serves as a guide within the company but as a safe space to discuss professional goals, ideas and more.

Embrace failure openly. That's right — as a leader, you need to let your team know that it's OK to fail. It's something you have



GRACIELA GOMEZ COWGER, J.D.



ADITI MARTIN, PH.D.

to proclaim outwardly to make your team feel safe and able to test out new ideas. This is incredibly important for employees of color. Not everyone has a safety net, so the anticipation of failure can feel profound. Often we've had the experience of being the only woman or person of color in a room. In many instances, what we say is reflective of who we're representing. This is an unfair reality of being an "other." As a leader, you have to recognize that some team members may be apprehensive because they stand out. Give your team the permission to fail by explicitly saying it, supporting them by brainstorming back-up plans and truly demonstrating this support when the team does encounter failure. After all, failure is realizing that there's a different way of doing things.

At this point in our careers, we embrace being an "other." To us it's more of a superpower because people don't know what to expect. Even so, it's important to always check yourself and continuously learn from the constantly changing environment in which we live. At both Schwabe and Oregon Health & Science University (OHSU), we've found that this outlook gives everyone the ability to do their best work.

Measure success. In the past, OHSU Collaborations and Entrepreneurship didn't measure diversity, equity and inclusion, so we didn't know where we stood. But that's changed. And it's become a key indicator for the strides we are making toward innovation. For instance, OHSU awarded equity and inclusion grants to 16 projects: One of those projects is for the development of a program to provide support for women and innovators of color, groups that have been historically underrepresented in the innovation process. We plan to expand this program to include other underrepresented groups in innovation. With metrics in place, we can look at the outcomes year after year and determine what's working and what's not. Ultimately, measuring outcomes helps improve engagement and trust among our innovators. Our end goal is to grow and retain as much talent in Oregon as possible.

At Schwabe, our firm culture is a big driver for innovation. It's what sets us apart, especially in a highly competitive job market. By focusing on a purposeful culture, with dialogue and collaboration at the forefront, we build each other up and help one another learn and grow. It's key for developing creative new ideas and retaining employees with specialized industry and client knowledge needed for innovation. This was one of the reasons we switched to an industry-specific model years ago.

Cultivating an innovative, diverse and equitable workplace starts at the top. As a leader, it's incredibly important to be authentic, receptive, self-aware, calm amidst chaos and, most important, flexible. Taking these steps sets the tone for your team and opens the door to entrepreneurial thinking that is necessary for businesses to succeed today.

*Graciela Gomez Cowger, J.D., is an intellectual property attorney and CEO of Schwabe, Williamson & Wyatt. Aditi Martin, Ph.D., is the senior director of OHSU Collaborations and Entrepreneurship.*