

Do Your Employees Know Why You Believe in Racial Equity?

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July 8, 2020

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Structural racism has conditioned us to accept that including people of color in majority-white workplaces, especially Black people, equates to lowering the bar. Not only is this framing incorrect, it is dangerously divisive. Still, it remains pervasive. Too often in my work helping organizations strategize on diversity, inclusion and equity goals I hear from people who tell me they would love to hire, advance, or invest in more companies founded by underrepresented people, but they are worried about reducing standards and outcomes.

As corporate America finally steps up to vocally condemn racism and discrimination (and in some cases, make big commitments (<https://www.theverge.com/2020/6/17/21294692/google-175-million-racial-equity-black-businesses-entrepreneurs-commitment>) to reducing bias within their organization), I worry that companies are approaching inclusion and equity with this flawed narrative. Falsely labeling diversity efforts as charity or compulsion will only further divisions between employees. As someone who has been called a "diversity hire" in previous roles, I know all-too-well what it's like to have one's contributions underestimated because those in the majority thought standards were lowered to bring me in.

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In reality, ensuring people from underrepresented communities are recruited and advanced is far more beneficial for an organization than any one individual. Diversity, equity, and inclusion attempts to level the playing field to allow the best ideas to flourish, connect talented individuals from underrepresented backgrounds with opportunities that those in the majority often have unfair access to, and empower the best organizations to thrive. Done right, creating diverse, equitable, inclusive organizations yield greater profitability (<https://hbr.org/2018/07/the-other-diversity-dividend>), innovation (<https://www.bcg.com/en-us/publications/2018/how-diverse-leadership-teams-boost-innovation.aspx>), and smarter teams (<https://hbr.org/2016/11/why-diverse-teams-are-smarter>). The problem is, much of these benefits aren't communicated well by company leaders, so many employees think steps to create greater DEI are check-the-box.

Too many leaders implicitly frame their solutions as: *We're doing this because we are forced to. We're downgrading our processes to accommodate. This is a side project or charity, it's not related to our company's core strategic priorities or mission.*

It is possible to do better. Much better. Instead, focus on equity—address how many of our systems were created to be inequitable, but now you are committed to removing the barriers that kept people of color out in the first place.

Recently, when I was working with a team on announcing a new startup accelerator program for underrepresented founders, I advised the company's leaders to regularly communicate the purpose of this initiative—that it was not a charity, but a highly-selective program for startups that would go on to raise a lot of money for its investors. I advised the organizers to ensure all communication would center around this narrative: Propelling underrepresented founders would unleash a significantly more powerful, innovative, and profitable entrepreneurial ecosystem of the future. At end of the eight-week program, a number of investors committed to investing in the startups—emphasizing how the diverse backgrounds represented in the cohort would yield significant investment return, as they were solving novel problems and reaching new markets.

This experience proved how you communicate the *why* of equity is so important. But the style of communication can take different shapes. Here are some suggestions for how your team can meaningfully communicate and execute your commitment to anti-bias and dismantling racism:

Do not send communication on diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts without explicitly calling out the reasoning for it. It is fine (even encouraged) to name existing racism and bias but operate from the framing of: "We are missing out on incredible opportunities by not examining and dismantling systems of exclusion today. As an organization, we could be significantly more productive and innovative by focusing on this. That's the reason for us launching better hiring and promotion practices." If it's the first time your organization is publicly talking about structural racism, it's a good idea to admit that the recent protests against anti-Blackness were a reason for the commitment. But if that statement fails to align that decision with the organizations's strategic priorities as a profit-making business, the sentiment is incomplete. For example, if your company's key priority is making life easier for customers, tie your efforts to this: "We realize we aren't reaching *all* our customers when we have systems that are biased, and we aren't making life easier for a diverse range of customers when we don't have leaders from a diverse range of backgrounds. Here's how we're changing that."

Understand the history of bias and discrimination—which explains how these initiatives and programs are righting past wrongs. While many of us theoretically believe discrimination of an employee because of their race, gender, ability, or other identity is wrong and even illegal, in practice, bias is present in many key decisions made in the workplace. A small but eye-opening example; a 2003 Harvard study (https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/pager/files/pager_ajs.pdf) found that employers preferred white candidates with a criminal record over Black employees who didn't have a criminal history. Professional women of color face a number of impediments to hiring and advancement (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0191308518300121>) that white women do not. From historical segregation to newer barriers to equality for people of color in the workplace, there are very good reasons for why organizations need to prioritize leveling an unequal playing field.

Invite buy-in and advice from people of color...and listen with humility. As you embark on this work, you must get expertise and buy-in from people impacted by racism. An all-white team making proclamations on anti-racism is not meaningful, without seeking input on existing issues and opportunities for improvement from people of color, especially Black employees. Ensure this work doesn't end up adding to their workload; most people of color are already dealing with emotional trauma. Be humble as you seek feedback; it may be hard to hear. Then, demonstrate that you've listened by taking action. When leaders make a commitment to combating bias and share examples of the changes they've personally made, more of us are likely to take notice and be motivated to follow suit. Inspiring action from other white and non-Black people on your team will require you to lead by example.

Prioritize anti-racism efforts in-house. Leaders must do the tough work of identifying where bias shows up in their organizations right now—hiring, retention, or advancement of employees of color—and fix those issues before moving to grand gestures that could be misinterpreted as PR stunts. Indeed, corporate donation to organizations working to dismantle racism in society is necessary right now. But these measures also ring hollow if companies are not creating opportunities for people from underrepresented backgrounds to enter and progress within them.

Show up personally. For most people of color, the conversations now happening are nothing new. In fact, many of us have been having them for generations. It should not be our role to educate corporate leaders, but I do wish more leaders were present and engaged in conversations already taking place right in their backyards. Last year, I was invited to a Fortune 500 company's in-house workplace inclusion conference, which had engaged celebrity women of color as keynote speakers. The organization's leadership team were conspicuously absent from this conference. Without leaders demonstrating a growth and learning mindset right now, where they take the time to really listen and familiarize themselves with what people of color, especially Black employees are facing, it will be hard to build employee trust with corporate statements alone. When those in charge don't engage in the work personally, it gives others in the organization permission to also take a back seat in this important work.

We all have a part to play in undoing institutional bias. When leaders communicate the why, align new anti-bias initiatives with the organization's strategic priorities, and do the tough work of identifying and fixing barriers within their organization, they're more likely to get buy-in from a wide range of internal and external stakeholders. Otherwise, we'll be back to status quo in no time.

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