

Cultivating Diversity, Equity & Inclusion in the workplace

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Cutter Business Technology Journal® is published monthly by Cutter Consortium, an Arthur D. Little company, 37 Broadway, Suite 1, Arlington, MA 02474-5552, USA • Tel: +1 781 648 8700 • Fax: +1 781 648 8707 • Email: cbtjeditorial@cutter.com • Website: www.cutter.com • Twitter: [@cuttertweets](https://twitter.com/cuttertweets) • Facebook: Cutter Consortium. ISSN: 2475-3718 (print); 2475-3742 (online).

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Opening Statement



by Carla Ogunrinde, Guest Editor

When we are pushed, what was once impossible becomes plausible, what was unacceptable becomes a consideration, what was once certain breaks apart into tiny pieces to form new and oddly shaped curiosities — we tilt our heads to wonder what it will all mean in the end, but in the moment of crisis, when pushed, we instinctively find our way forward in order to survive. This year has delivered us a giant push to do things differently. Every aspect of living has been affected by a once-in-a-century pandemic, by accelerant partisan politics, by a volatile economy, by human suffering witnessed in high definition, and by inequities and injustices that have existed, always, as a second skin just beneath the orderly veneer of the American Dream. It's been a lot. Any one of these forces would challenge our creativity to solve for X, but as a collective bombardment, these forces have overwhelmed our senses and shaken norms.

Today, our homes double as conference rooms, while parents fuse identities to become working parents, stay-at-home parents, and newly minted homeschool teachers. Our shared experiences are common in this alone: we are doing our daily best to survive. In this historic moment, survival is obvious, more binary, and fundamental. We move through our day with fewer freedoms and choices and so decisions are black or white, good or bad, win or lose, and, quite literally, life or death. Businesses are being pushed to be more curious about diversity, equity, and inclusion as they support their entire workforce and strive to be attentive to individual needs. In this moment, there is finally a collective recognition that choice is a privilege.

Are we there yet? For decades now, responsible companies have developed multiyear goals and allocated significant funding to soberly address diversity, equity, and inclusion as part of a progressive work culture. But the programs lacked sincerity for real change and the stamina to see results. All those well-invested performances for diversity, equity, and inclusion felt like pantomime and received the same applause as that typically reserved for a kindergartner at a ballet recital — effort over outcomes, “but we’re trying and that’s

what counts.” These many years later, reports still show pay disparities for women, lack of diversity in leadership, and biases and microaggressions as commonplace for people of color and, more broadly, anyone “Othered.” Underrepresented groups have long known what it’s like to survive and make it work, both inside and outside their corporate homes, experiencing lamentable diversity and inclusion efforts as more frustrating than helpful. As a result, what persists is fatigue, distrust, and a resolve to get along without any real expectation of truly belonging.

Businesses are being pushed to be more curious about diversity, equity, and inclusion as they support their entire workforce and strive to be attentive to individual needs.

It would be right and fair to say diversity and inclusion are hard. These efforts are complex, difficult, deeply rooted, and systemic. The stated goals of diversity, equity, and inclusion, in its purest form, are to seek out differences, ensure fairness, and behave in ways that actively include all. However, these goals directly compete with thoughts that are fundamental to our corporate upbringing. In business, we hold certain truths to be fundamental; among them are the notions captured by these phrases: it’s not personal, it’s just business, manage your career, this is just how we do it, what’s in it for me, get small wins, get bigger wins, technical skills are hard, people skills are soft, who do I have to know to get a seat at the table, do more with less, be resilient, be a go-getter, and, naturally, there is no crying in baseball.

There is a cellular-level reaction to the imperative of survival, expressed by fight, flight, or freeze. Our thoughts declare a threat or danger to be present, and our bodies accommodate the signal by breaking down complex cells into smaller cells and providing our bodies with useful hormones like adrenaline and cortisol to do hard things in the face of win/lose

scenarios. This extraordinary and primal process keeps us in the game toward victory. When using energy in this draining way, three elements are needed: the game must be time-bound, the opponent clearly identified, and the rules of what it takes to win known and fixed. In our businesses, limited resources, comparisons, and competition create ongoing win/lose scenarios and keep us in a perpetual state of survival because the opponent often wears the same jersey, the rules for winning are defined and redefined by those in power, and the game itself is only interrupted by a weekend. Diversity, equity, and inclusion simply cannot thrive in conditions of a perpetual fight for survival. They require fertile ground to pause, to consider, to be curious, and to go beyond the threat of I win/you lose.

We long to arrive at the idyllic place where we are more the same than different; where we can easily find common ground if we only look hard enough. However, that's a gift at the end of doing the work to first be OK with being different. As our workforce becomes more diverse, companies must resist the urge to declare victory. What follows more diversity must be the education and interest to discover what might be fair for one person compared to another based on needs and life experiences and the very challenging job to approach that work with curiosity. If you're tired of effort without any meaningful outcomes, if you'd like to move beyond simply being aware of the problem, if now is the time to be pushed, I invite you to read on.

In This Issue

This *Cutter Business Technology Journal* issue dives deeper and looks at diversity, equity, and inclusion from different angles with the help of seven stellar voices who lend their expertise to educate, examine, enumerate, and offer solutions.



Upcoming Topics

Fintech: COVID-19 Impact & Opportunities for Economic Growth
Philip O'Reilly and Kevin O'Leary

Data & Digital Architecture: Enabling Successful Digital Transformation
Gustav Toppenberg

In our first article, Ebonye Gussine Wilkins challenges us to do the work. Gussine Wilkins goes beyond the data that may have us enjoy a false sense of progress and unpacks what the numbers mean when parsed by marginalized groups and their lived experiences. She goes deeper still and offers historical perspectives that further explain racial divisions and spells out why data without insight tells a partial story. Her premise focuses on knowledge, education, insight, and wisdom as necessary, yet missing, elements to achieve diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. Gussine Wilkins encourages company leaders to keep going, to widen their scope, to lean in. She urges them to go beyond race and gender and to consider other groups who are left out, like disabled, non-binary, or trans people. Gussine Wilkins offers the data and then artfully reveals the people, their experiences, and the historical context behind the data. She concludes with what companies must understand about their own organizations and what they can do to advance an inclusive workplace. She ends with hope and a call to seize this moment. As she says, "Truth is, we have most of the pieces."

In our next article, Samin Saadat and Jim Brosseau take us into their workshops and their research. The authors provide meaningful context to describe the barriers to inclusion, such as the history of management and leadership, communication technologies, and the effects of addictive social media platforms. Saadat and Brosseau offer practical steps for companies to include on their way to becoming a more transparent culture and also outline the costs companies will inevitably pay for failed attempts and a lack of inclusion. They conclude with data from their research and assessment of 150 professionals, measuring, along a continuum of diversity competency, the professionals' level of awareness and attitude regarding diversity and inclusion to their moving to take action and implement change. Finally, the authors summarize next steps and approaches for organizations that acknowledge their responsibility to the growth and well-being of their members.

In his article, Michael A. Tennant unapologetically shares hard truths about white supremacy in the US. He generously shares his personal experiences as a "striving and high-achieving" Black professional and the shared experiences among people of color more broadly. He holds nothing back as he counts down 10 common phrases that reinforce inequities, micro-aggressions, and racism. Most compelling is that Tennant brings you along the countdown in a first-person narrative of hard truths, discoveries, and, finally, clear-eyed choice. It's an intimate journey that begins

in his backyard of Bedford-Stuyvesant, a Black and Hispanic neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York, and ends with his last corporate job. Tennant offers no apology. Why would he? The code to unlocking diversity, equity, and inclusion is to acknowledge why we're here in the first place.

Our next piece outlines a clear case for diversity, equity, and inclusion as a strategic priority. Viola Maxwell-Thompson begins with a declarative proposition as she describes the next decade's horizon and the expected growth in computer and mathematical occupations. She acknowledges the committed efforts of corporations that have recommitted themselves toward gender and ethnic diversity, yet demonstrates the lagging percentage of women, the lesser percentage of women of color, and, further still, the stagnant representation of Black and Brown professionals in senior roles. Maxwell-Thompson starts at the top with the CEO and makes an urgent case for change supported by unrelenting and unavoidable facts. What may be felt or known anecdotally, she supports with compelling data; for example, women are 3.5 times more likely than men to be 35 or older and still in a junior technology position. Maxwell-Thompson offers a laser focus on gender disparities, addressing quit rates, toxic workplaces, and pay equity. She concludes with a final callout to CEOs and their boards to take a stand now and offers a list of organizations with proven solutions that are ready to partner.

Next, Nicole D. Price focuses on technical professionals and their underused skills, knowledge, and insights when tackling diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts. She offers for consideration seven specific attributes of technical professionals and discusses how those attributes are well suited for this challenging work. Among them are logic and reason, reliance on evidence-based research for problem solving, the ability to imagine a better future, and healthy conflict. Price argues that technical professionals "will use qualitative, quantitative, and empirical data to identify where issues of exclusion, systemic oppression, and racism lie."

We conclude this issue with an interview with Areej Khataybih, a transformational coach, who offers a psychological perspective on women leaders and what contributes to their success and their challenges. She highlights the challenges that come from internal obstacles and beliefs of not being good enough and the battle of competing with male counterparts and, in the process, denying women's full selves, the emotional and the logical. She walks through the challenges created by the interplay between expectations and desire and also highlights the "fear of success."

Khataybih summarizes three phases of leadership for women: the first phase is the pending promotion, the second is when things are working well, and the third is when a woman is actively looking for what's next. Each phase comes with unique challenges, but her rich discussion offers many insights on how women leaders can be their most unique selves.

Set an Energetic Intention

If all things happen for our good, our thoughtful response to this challenging year may well be an important piece of a grander picture. As we move closer to integrated technologies, augmented reality, and artificial intelligence, our ability to adapt and thrive as human beings must keep pace with an evolving ecosystem. We cannot survive alone. Choice must be a privilege enjoyed by everyone. As an energy coach, I work with my clients to aggressively engage survival energy for those things that are binary — win or lose — and truly urgent. Once that becomes a skill, what becomes clear is that most things are not worthy of that draining energy. In its place, a broadening of perspective is possible; for example, curiosity over certainty, discernment over judgment, inspiration over motivation, cultural acumen over business acumen, inclusion over isolation.

We have been pushed. There is a force at the front door banging to be admitted entry. That force is the human spirit desperate for relief from merely surviving. We are standing in a moment of choice to thrive together with concerted efforts in diversity, equity, and inclusion.

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Inclusion in the Workplace: Are We Doing Enough?

by Ebonye Gussine Wilkins

Achieving an inclusive workplace is an evergreen goal. It's seen as the penultimate step to becoming a perfect company, organization, or nonprofit. We're always just a few initiatives away from reaching the organizational North Star of inclusivity — where folks can work together harmoniously, regardless of background. Entering an office and collaborating with folks of every shade and creed at every turn; it sounds right. It even *feels* right. This is the lofty marker of success, beyond dazzling annual reports and healthy profit margins. It's something that makes an organization seem even more special, because inclusivity goes above and beyond what everyone else is doing. "We're doing the right thing," and every permutation thereof, makes folks feel better about small measures taken. "It's a step in the right direction," we tell ourselves. "Starting the conversation," is the first, logical move that seems within our reach.

We're not bringing inclusive ideals into the workplace. We are compartmentalizing what we believe are relevant parts of work and business, and anything else is a plus.

These are the loud, spoken statements we are not afraid to make. But the elusive question, "Are we doing enough?" is the one we ask privately and quietly when reflecting on our progress toward workplace inclusivity. We ask this question among ourselves and feel somewhat reassured that no one else quite knows the answer either. However, bigger questions remain: Why are the achievements of diversity, equity, and inclusion always somewhere in the future? Why are they always "bonuses" beyond profitability, sustainability, and achievement of an organization's mission?

If we know that having knowledge and education is key to achieving diversity, equity, and inclusion, why do we hit the reset button periodically and begin all over again with yet another diversity initiative?

It's because *what we're doing isn't working*. We're neither retaining knowledge nor applying it in a way that transforms the ways we interact with each other. We're not bringing inclusive ideals into the workplace. We are compartmentalizing what we believe are relevant parts of work and business, and anything else is a plus. We've adopted, and heavily relied on, an attitude of, "Well, that's a nice goal — if you can manage it." We're simply not doing the work but are somehow still expecting it to get done.

If we were setting any other goal in business, we'd prudently ask if it's S.M.A.R.T — specific, measurable, actionable, relevant, and time-bound. But we haven't meaningfully applied this inquiry in our approach to increasing diversity. What specifically are we making more inclusive? How do we know when we have met our goal? How do we get there, and does it make sense in terms of what we're doing within our organization? How long do we have to make inclusivity a reality?

Thinking about diversity this way can be uncomfortable. Data is easier to deal with because it feels impartial. We're used to putting numbers to nearly everything, because that's how we can "prove" that we are making a difference. But data without insight tells an incomplete story — one that is prone to manipulation and one that can conflate significant indicators of true trends. For example, a common statistic, which fluctuates a bit from year to year, is that women make 79 cents for every dollar that a white, non-Hispanic man makes.¹ But when we disaggregate the data by race, we find that Black women make 62 cents per dollar and Latinx women make 54 cents per dollar.² The numbers for Native American women, Alaskan Native women, and disabled people aren't very encouraging either, hovering around the 60 cents per dollar mark. Even data showing that Asian women are making 89 cents to 91 cents per dollar is misleading; when disaggregated by ethnicity, there is a staggeringly wide range among Asian women.³ The quantitative data tells one story, but the qualitative data tells another. When we combine the two to give us a clearer picture of the kinds of disparities that hinder achieving workplace equity and

inclusion, the results are often discouraging — if not embarrassing.

Outside of the wage gap, there are multiple stories to be told about how far we are from creating more inclusive workplaces, and many of them are backed by data. In a 2019 brief by the Center for Talent Innovation,⁴ the picture painted is quite common:

The majority of Black professionals have experienced racial prejudice at work. Unsurprisingly, this cohort is nearly four times as likely to encounter prejudice as White professionals are (58% vs. 15%) — but we also find a marked difference when we compare Black to Latinx (41%) and Asian (38%) professionals. In our sample, Black professionals working in the West and Midwest are even more likely, which could be due to lower Black population levels in those regions.⁵ Without as much exposure to Black people, colleagues have fewer opportunities to correct for stereotypes they've picked up.

This isn't surprising. Typically, people associate only with folks who they know. A 2014 report by the Public Religion Research Institute⁶ pointed out that in the study's scenario, the average white person in the US has only one Black friend, while the average Black person has eight white friends. While the report noted that the white population is much larger in the US than the Black population, proximity plays a factor. If we dig deeper and consider the enduring history of redlining,⁷ which made it exceedingly difficult for non-whites to obtain mortgages to purchase homes in certain areas, it is no wonder people are unfamiliar with each other. If people don't live near each other, socialize in the same places, or even attend the same schools, how many opportunities are there for folks to get to know each other?

That's one example of where and how these disparities appear. We know that some differences in how our lives unfold run across racial lines. But there are other factors, too. Many cultures have binary perceptions of gender identity and prescriptive ideas of what gender, sexual orientation, and gender expression should be, which affect how people are treated inside and outside of work. Worldwide, people with disabilities are deemed incapable of participating in everyday activities and are treated according to that perception. Many of us grow up in environments where most buildings are inaccessible to people with disabilities.⁸ Often, even children don't use the same playgrounds as kids with some disabilities because designs don't accommodate the needs of all children. These are things that we already implicitly know. We've been socialized into and immersed in non-inclusive, prescriptive norms

and expectations that many don't notice — despite the fact that they've always been there.

If workplace change is constructed with knowledge and education around cultural and other differences, then why does the transfer of leadership, the departure of key individuals, and the end of a diversity initiative mean that we start from scratch yet again?

Education around differences is never enough. We need the wisdom that comes from applying that knowledge appropriately. We must learn to understand the responsibility we have to each other and take the actions necessary to create the inclusive workplaces we're seeking. There is too much at stake for us to assume that the problem is not ours to hold.

A quaint adage suggests that learning that tomatoes are fruit is knowledge, but not putting tomatoes in fruit salad is wisdom. Far too many of us have memorized the right things to say, in a particular order, to satisfy the optics of doing more — but without doing much at all. Slacktivism⁹ fails us at every level. Typically, nothing gets done until compliance with the law is an issue. That's usually the nudge — or sudden shove, depending on your perspective — that gets companies and other organizations to start making changes.

Any action at all is usually triggered by new laws mandating change, internal pressure from staff, or outside demands from a public misstep. These prompts force us, with reluctance, to address matters that are typically tabled — but, usually, only when ignoring them is no longer an option.

When this happens, many will say that the organization's or company's culture change must come "from the top." Oftentimes, leadership will seek out workplace diversity training and staff members become the main participants. It's an outwardly palatable, knee-jerk reaction that offers good optics but ultimately falls short. Some of the staff in attendance at these trainings could lead comparable workshops with their eyes closed. The rest either resent being there at all — because it isn't a priority in their minds — or have been to so many similar trainings that they know just enough to fly under the radar of accountability.

We know that we could do better. We also know that we have a handy, reliable list of mission-driven priorities that allow us to safely kick the can down the road until the next internal or public relations crisis emerges.

Even when responses to diversity, equity, and inclusion disparities are obligatory, we're still missing the mark. Many diversity initiatives focus primarily on race. Measures taken usually lead to temporarily addressing race and ethnicity among staff, management, and board members. Occasionally, a binary perspective of gender is also considered. Usually, the folks who are left out are disabled, non-binary, trans, have certain religious beliefs, work above or below arbitrary age thresholds, or are otherwise part of marginalized groups across many social cleavages. How diverse can an organization be if multiple facets of inclusion are left out? If we're focusing on knowledge and education to make the changes required to be more inclusive, which pieces are we missing?

Truth is, we have most of the pieces. We're not applying the knowledge that we have, which is why we're missing the big picture.

How diverse can an organization be if multiple facets of inclusion are left out?

Let's consider the scenario of business and how we navigate employment. We don't all show up for work in the same ways. When beginning a typical workday, some are thinking about the investors, the competitors, or the revenue for the current and previous quarters. Others may be thinking about caregiving duties — for adults and children of any age — while also managing the week's workload. Some may be preoccupied with genocide or state-sanctioned violence against folks who share their background and are also worried about making next month's rent. Others are reminded that climbing out of poverty or earning living wages can push them over the income threshold that allows them to keep their healthcare insurance or affordable alternatives. Truthfully, many people are thinking about all these things concurrently. These scenarios may seem hypothetical, but hundreds of millions of workers face these realities, and more, daily — with little reprieve.

Every day, whether or not we acknowledge it, a substantial number of our white-collar colleagues and peers are juggling competing demands from their personal lives, while being pushed to answer emails faster, attend meetings with cameras on, and make sure that deadlines are not missed. Comparable requests are made of our blue-collar peers. Every single one of these

people is expected to continue to show up and perform as if these life factors do not exist. Without their needs considered, we're not making room for them — during the workday or throughout a work project. For example, someone who is facing eviction — and who also attended a vigil the night before for a friend slain by the police — will not show up to work the same way as someone who has a financial safety net, affordable and reliable childcare, and has experienced only a few inconvenient — but not nearly fatal — traffic stops. Yet, from an organizational and work perspective, we expect all employees to arrive and perform in similar ways. We don't concern ourselves with what is happening outside of work even though it directly affects how people fare on the job.

Even with similar expectations for overall performance, regardless of the type of job or position on the organizational chart, the representation of different groups at various organizational levels falls in familiar and predictable ways. A 2020 study notes:¹⁰

At the support staff and operations level, 64% of employees are white, 12% are Black, 10% are Hispanic, 8% are Asian or Pacific Islander, and 6% are other races. The share of positions held by Caucasians increases with each upward wrung [sic] of the ladder. By the executive level, 85% of positions are held by white employees. Black and Hispanic employees make up just 2% and 3% of these positions, respectively.

This already grim reality gets worse. Seventy-nine percent of employed workers are of so-called prime age (aged 25–54). Yet, only 40% of disabled individuals of prime working age are employed.¹¹ So, even when we think we're working with a diverse set of colleagues, often we're neither considering nor working with disabled people. Many disabled people are quite capable of working but they just aren't being employed or considered for employment. For years, people with disabilities have been left out of the workforce — one reason being because they weren't offered or given reasonable accommodations, such as being allowed to work remotely.¹²

For a long time, disabled folks have been told that remote work wasn't possible. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced us to adapt to unavoidable circumstances — including lockdowns and mandatory stay-at-home orders — and make accommodations for people with caregiving obligations and for disabled workers. But the lessons we've learned in equity seem short-lived. Even when adaptations to the COVID-19 pandemic proved that remote work is often viable,¹³

many newer job postings — listed as “remote” — come with the remark that location-independent, flexible options end once the pandemic is over. Clearly, we have the knowledge that we can do better for prospects and current staff, but we make a different choice. We risk losing the small strides made toward greater inclusivity by reversing decisions toward equity simply because of mixed feelings about the potential implications of realizing a more accommodating workforce.

The bottom line: we cannot have diversity without both equity and inclusion. When talking about diversity, equity, inclusion — DEI — we can’t decide to focus on just one of the letters. The entire effort falls apart without careful attention paid to all three facets. We have the knowledge to achieve the results we want for our companies and organizations. We don’t always have — or want — the wisdom to make it work.

To earn that wisdom, we have to understand the people who make up an organization, better assess the applicant pools we source from, accept what we don’t know, and seek answers in the right places. None of these is a checklist item. There is no scenario where the work is “done.” It must be a persistent and consistent commitment to meaningful action and accountability to put us on the path toward building a more inclusive workplace.

Creating a compassionate and productive work environment requires more than just having the right people in-house or bringing in the best consultants. We must remember that every person we interact with is a whole person, not just a tool or a means for bigger profits or “intellectual bragging rights.”¹⁴

Companies and organizations of all sizes must understand the following about their employees and consultants:

- **People need to show up as their full selves.** No person should be required, implicitly or explicitly, to just focus on work for the sake of work. Paying a person for labor is not a reason for forgetting there is a real person behind that work.
- **People may not complete tasks the same way, but it doesn’t mean they won’t achieve great results.** Whether work style differences stem from neurodivergence among colleagues, invisible or readily apparent disabilities, or alternate schedules and remote work, the work can and will get done with supportive flexibility.

- **People’s need for boundaries between their work life and their personal life is not optional.** Respecting boundaries goes a long way, especially when microaggressions and non-inclusive company culture go unchecked. Many people feel forced to accept hostile and demeaning treatment simply to keep their jobs because past experiences have shown that speaking up improves nothing for them.

The bottom line: we cannot have diversity without both equity and inclusion.

Company and organizational culture can be examined and addressed in a few ways:

- **Focus on the values, not just the mission.** Ask honestly, does your workplace value who people are and not just what they can offer professionally?
- **Redefine what “professional” means in your workplace.** Do you really mean manner of dress, general appearance, years of experience, or a formal education? Or does being professional mean being reliable, trustworthy, compassionate, and firm but thoughtful?
- **Create a culture of accountability.** What happens when we fall short? How do we assess what has happened and how do we address our mistakes, visible or not?

Not only do we have to reexamine what diversity, equity, and inclusion mean, we also must honestly think about what they would look like within our organizations and companies.

We have received education on what inclusion means, but how does that show up at work? Do we have adequate buffers for deadlines, or are we pressuring folks to be “eleventh-hour heroes” because we value some employees’ time more than others? Are we giving our employees and consultants the tools and resources they need to set them up for success? Have we acknowledged that some new ideas might be scary and untested but that they could be fruitful for learning and growing? Have we empowered and supported our employees so that they can lead the way for new initiatives?

The answers to these questions will differ according to the scenario. When you have created space for

individuals — of varying backgrounds, experiences, and education — to work with your organization, the support required for each won't be the same. If an organization has never been led by a disabled person of color, for example, the support that person needs will be different than what previous leaders needed.

When underrepresented individuals are placed in environments where they have traditionally been underserved and overlooked, they are bringing with them every lived experience — including negative work interactions. If the structures in place have supported leaders only from overrepresented groups, there will be persistent obstacles. If you happen to be part of the overrepresented groups, those impediments may not be obvious or visible to you, making your awareness of other people's experiences critical. Diversity, equity, and inclusion require that everyone, especially underrepresented individuals, be given what they need to do their best work and thrive.

Advancing an inclusive workplace with working knowledge of our differences is within our reach. In this moment, we are uniquely positioned to bring forth levels of meaningful inclusion that have not yet been achieved on a large scale. We must embrace an ongoing commitment to learning about each other and to leveraging technology to create a thriving work environment for all. The work we must do to make that a reality begins right now.

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Critical Elements for Effective Workplace Inclusion

by Samin Saadat and Jim Brosseau

Diversity to Inclusion

In a recent workshop, Jim (coauthor) was discussing diversity and inclusion, suggesting the value of having explicit conversations about how to work better as a team in a diverse environment:

“Oh, that theoretical stuff...,” one participant remarked.

“By ‘theoretical,’ do you mean that you have never experienced this on a real project?” Jim asked.

After a moment, the participant admitted that was indeed the case.

Both within the workplace and in society in general, we are witnessing an intense focus on diversity: the Black Lives Matter movement; the renaming of professional sports teams; “cancel culture” campaigns; a demand for more women in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) disciplines; and hiring practices geared to ensure that a business’s internal demographics more closely represent the demographics of the environment outside the business. On one hand, emphasis is placed on trying to find an appropriate balance across different forms of diversity within the workplace while, on the other hand, diversity can become a wedge driving us apart rather than bringing us together in some elements of society.

Diversity is easily measured, and we tend to create metrics based on easy measures rather than seeking out insightful and valuable measures. For example, we identify project success through the lens of “on time” and “on budget,” instead of determining whether we have delivered the value desired. Merely being able to quantify that our organizations are diverse in no way achieves the outcomes we seek; rather, we need to leverage and manage all forms of diversity to bring us to the point of *appreciative inclusion* in the workplace. Appreciative inclusion goes beyond mere tolerance of diversity to recognize that, when harnessed, diversity can dramatically improve creativity and innovation, improve employee well-being and retention, and truly differentiate the organization — making diversity a strategic advantage.

Having diversity is a stepping-stone in the process of effective workplace inclusion, not a conclusion. Moreover, diversity and inclusion are very distinct ideas, though often misinterpreted. Diversity is a measure of how widely a group differs along one or more continuums, such as race, gender, age, experience, title, or a large list of other qualifiers; it is a metric. Inclusion, in contrast, is a set of practices, behaviors, and attitudes that allows us to leverage these various forms of diversity to make the organization more effective, creative, and innovative, with a broader range of experience, knowledge, and perspectives from which to draw.

We believe there are critical elements to consider as we move toward greater inclusion.

Barriers to Inclusion

In our workshops, our first exercise is to have participants identify the core distinctions between their best and worst project experiences. The outcomes of this exercise have not changed in decades and do not differ between domains or organizational roles. The distinctions are always about aspects of human interaction: trust, respect, effective communication, shared goals, integrity, and a host of others.

Yet these participants are often surprised when we suggest that appreciative conversations within teams to explore diversity are possible and that such conversations intentionally craft a culture that builds behaviors to bring a group of individuals together as a team.

The history of management and leadership that began with the Industrial Revolution, aided and abetted by the philosophy ingrained into our educational system, have trained us from an early age to be compliant and to work within a hierarchy. This has become part of workplace culture, and, as is true of any culture, it requires effort to move beyond the position of “that’s the way we do things around here.”

Traditionally, little support has existed for practices to improve inclusion in the workplace. Hierarchical leadership practices and command-and-control behaviors rely on compliance to be effective, and guidance from, for example, the Project Management Institute (PMI) over the years has been process-centric, with passing statements suggesting the human element is important but with no guidance on how to achieve inclusion. In our experience, most Agile implementations, for example, despite stated principles leaning toward consideration of the human element, have been largely process-centric as well.

We believe we are in the midst of change with respect to inclusion, however; a change that will take years to progress through the stages of the diffusion of innovation curve.¹ As with any significant shift, there are innovators and early adopters — shining examples of effective practices for inclusion in the workplace. Others, the laggards, will fight the shift ruthlessly, whether because of a perceived loss of power, inertia, or simply lack of awareness of the possibility of intentional intervention.

Today, there is a Canadian national standard for psychological health and safety in the workplace and an accompanying practice guide that provides guidance for organizations.² The entire discipline of organizational development can now be more closely tied to ongoing operations rather than having a supporting role. The rising popularity of insights from people such as best-selling author Daniel Pink,³ researcher and professor Brené Brown,⁴ and *Ted Talks*-famed Simon Sinek⁵ are raising awareness of critical practices to increase inclusion, and the barriers to leveraging these ideas in the workplace are slowly falling. Indeed, it is expected that the next iteration of the PMI's *A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK Guide)*⁶ will move from a phase-based perspective to one focused on principles that are far more aligned with inclusive team development.

Technology, Culture & Personal Security

Every day, we communicate globally through various communications technologies: email, social media, Internet, and apps. We have started to see the world as one transparent entity where differences appear not to matter as much as they did previously. It is fair to say that technology plays a significant role in increasing the amount of information to which we have access, often resulting in greater transparency. Despite these positive

impacts of technology, however, one pressing question remains unanswered: does technology increase our capacity to absorb information wisely?

Familiarity gives us comfort, which is why we tend to seek out information that enhances our existing ideas and knowledge. Information providers frequently take advantage of this psychological tendency, or confirmation bias. Social media platforms are designed to selectively expose us to the type of information we are already seeking, reinforcing our preexisting views. As an example, we may hold a bias against a certain group of people; a quick perusal of specific social platforms easily finds information to validate our bias. Another example comes from news feeds, which are designed to share information tailored to our preferences and search habits. Information tailoring can create a false belief that everyone shares our opinions. Consequently, it becomes easy to believe that our false assumptions about certain groups are 100% validated and that everyone else also believes what we believe.

Many people use technology platforms as a way to surround themselves with others who share their beliefs, and many also use these technologies to project hostility toward those they perceive as different. Unfortunately, social media algorithms and the addictive nature of the platform have made such behaviors both easy and fast to execute.

In fact, for a user to gain popularity and followers (e.g., social media influencers), social media platforms incentivize sharing information that the majority of that user's followers want to read or see. These eye-catching, popular posts often center around extreme differences and unusual behaviors — think clickbait articles — to capture viewers. As individuals who are exposed to such distorted information, we should apply strong critical thinking skills to ensure the information we consume does not create a warped view of reality.

In comparison, how often do we see articles about how people are *similar* to each other? About how there are no black-or-white distinctions? About how a certain group of people feel, act, and think differently based on values that are not evil or worthless? The answer is very, very seldom.

In our work with companies in creating transparency that allows them to cultivate intercultural learning and an inclusive decision-making culture, we implement a few important interventions before providing access to large amounts of information. These interventions include:

- **Creating mutual understanding** among an organization's members that they are responsible for handling such information wisely and critically
- **Establishing policies and procedures** to ensure that no one uses the information to sabotage or harm anyone
- **Providing training** on how decisions should be made using the information, considering each person will have different perspectives on the information

Moving beyond the organizational level, we believe that technology has created more transparency and more access to information at a global level. There is, however, room for improvement in learning how to take a critical approach to information, in fostering intercultural learning, and in creating a sense of responsibility to handle information intelligently. Human behavior remains similar to what it was before the existence of today's technology; the technology has only made it faster and easier to scale our behaviors and enhance our existing challenged interpretations.

Current Costs of Lack of Inclusion

Even in the era of technology, no organization can successfully produce goods and services without its people. Production and development do not arise from the product itself but require people and their mental effort and knowledge. An organization's goods are successful only if they can be integrated into the knowledge and culture of the market.

On one side, we have to ensure our solutions are tailored to the specific market they are designed to serve. And on the other side, we are solving a common problem for a diverse group of people with different mindsets. How are we going to make sure our solution addresses a common problem for a diverse market? Of particular note is that the greater an organization's market share, the more diverse its market. Perhaps our solution meets the basic and universal needs of the market, but how can we ensure our solution responds to individual differences in the market? Individuals all come to the workforce with unique patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaviors they have learned over the years. Based on their individual experiences, they have built strong mental schemas to make sense of a complex world and create an image of reality.

Imagine a workforce where employees leave their individuality at the door to function only in the organization's preferred homogeneous way. While this hypothetical organization is trying to grow its market share by providing more diverse solutions to its market, the organization's diverse people leave their best selves and their distinctive uniqueness at home to play it safe. The people in this organization no longer represent the organization's diverse target market, and the organization misses out on much hidden potential.

Now imagine a competitor company that creates an environment where its people feel safe to share their differences, make mistakes, challenge the status quo, and simply learn and grow. The best employees from the homogeneous organization — who never had a chance to flourish — may take their brilliant ideas to this competitor, which then successfully captures more market share due to its innovative solutions that solve a problem for a diverse group of people. The competitor accomplishes this feat because of its ability to leverage its people's differences to produce goods and services that are relevant to its diverse market.

Beyond this loss, organizations that stifle individuality are adding more cost that result from a likely high turnover rate and poor employer brand. Lack of inclusion is extremely costly for an organization.

Finally, workplaces that do not honor individual differences create incredibly lonely work environments due to a lack of genuine empathy and understanding. These environments may render actual harm to the individuals who work there every day. When people feel lonely, when they don't find meaning in their work, and when they feel they cannot learn and grow, their physiological and psychological well-being is negatively impacted, which may contribute to maladies, including cancer, addiction, diabetes, and heart disease.

Considering these factors, inclusion is not a "nice to have" within organizations; it is a *must* for creating a successful organization with employees who enjoy high, subjective well-being.

The Maturity Continuum for Diversity and Inclusion

The path toward inclusion, both inside and outside the workplace, starts with the individual.

All of us have evolved internal mechanisms that we use to simplify and compartmentalize information (e.g., the Ladder of Inference⁷), which have allowed us to make quick decisions even with the massive amount of information that comes our way constantly. These mechanisms work well when facing with familiar situations and contexts, but more than ever we find ourselves immersed in new cultures, increasingly diverse teams, and a shift in technology that challenges the efficacy of these mechanisms. As the perspectives that drive our behavior become overly simplified or no longer serve a different context, we make decisions that no longer serve us well.

One issue is that the simple word “diversity” represents a very broad category. While we often think of gender, age, race, or ethnicity when we hear the term, there are many other forms of diversity that we need to manage effectively. We may face diversity of appearance or lifestyle; long-term forms of diversity, such as personality, attitudes, and internal values; and short-term shifts based on mood, feelings, and the current context, which are also forms of diversity. In the workplace, we encounter forms of diversity involving education and skills, role and seniority, and organizational power distance. Diversity comes in many forms, and as our environment changes around us, what is important also shifts, and how a particular behavior is perceived by others can shift as well.

It is often assumed that we tend to see diversity and inclusion as Boolean elements — we are either a diverse team or we’re not, we’re inclusive or we’re not. In reality, we exhibit a continuum of maturity as we deal with these issues, ranging from destructiveness to proficiency.

The many examples of diversity continuums available online almost all focus on culture. Based on these, we have created a continuum of diversity competency (see Figure 1) that illustrates how our awareness, attitudes, and skills evolve as we develop competencies for intercultural interactions and learning.

Diversity Competency Research

To understand where our society falls on this continuum of diversity competency, we assessed 150 professionals from different industries in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. Figure 2 summarizes the data findings from this research. On the y-axis, a high average desirability score means that the average response of participants in a given category presented the desired, positive, and constructive outcome. For example, high desirability in the category “Destructiveness” means that participants presented the desired and constructive behavior in this category and scored low on having a destructive attitude, such as a discriminatory attitude. Most participants scored very well and presented the desired outcome on the questions that measured level of awareness and attitude toward diversity. However, the average score of participants dropped significantly in the areas of taking actions and implementing changes.

There are a couple possible explanations for this pattern:

1. **Social desirability bias.**⁸ Individuals tend to overreport socially desirable characteristics or behaviors in themselves and underreport socially undesirable characteristics or behaviors. It may

Destructiveness	Incapacity	Blindness	Pre-competence	Competence	Proficiency
Forced assimilation; subjugation; rights & privileges for dominant group only	Discrimination; maintaining stereotypes; unfair behaviors & treatment	Differences ignored; treating everyone the same; only meeting needs of dominant group	Exploring cultural issues; committed to assessing needs of organization and individuals	Recognizing individual and cultural differences; seeking advice from diverse group; hiring diverse, unbiased staff	Implementing changes to improve services based on individual differences & their needs

Figure 1 – Continuum of diversity competency.

be a fair assumption that our participants chose responses that they believe are more socially desirable or acceptable rather than those that provide a true reflection of themselves. However, it is much easier to reflect on one's tangible actions when being questioned on specific change behaviors rather than on beliefs; therefore, we observed a drop in the competence and proficiency score for behavior-related questions.

2. **Illusory superiority bias.**⁹ Individuals, when comparing themselves to others, overestimate their own desirable qualities and underestimate their undesirable qualities. Figure 3 shows our data findings that could support this assumption. When participants were asked to rate themselves on diversity competency metrics, they would report that it is usually *not* true that they themselves present the undesirable behaviors. However, they would report that it

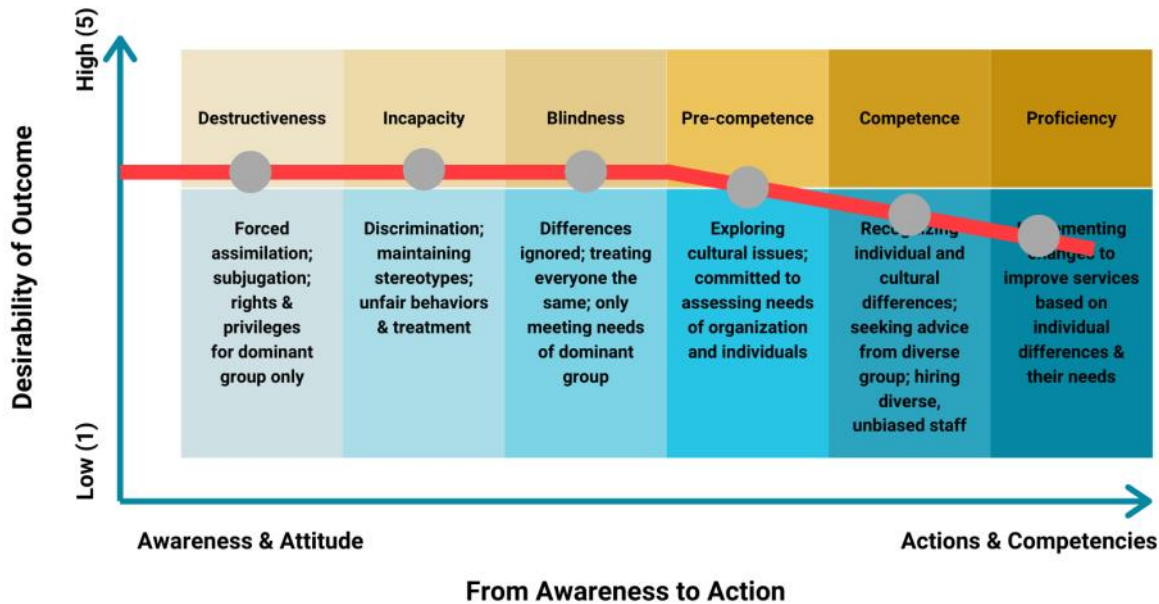


Figure 2 – Continuum of diversity competency: assessment results (150 professionals).

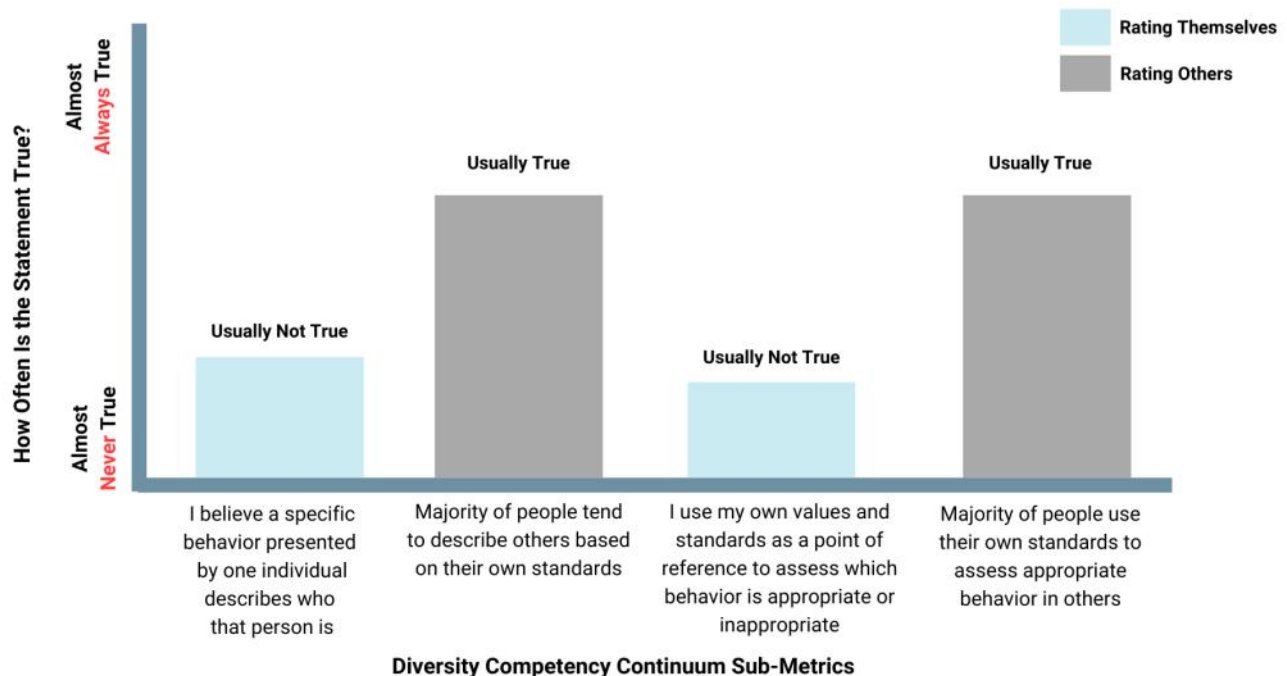


Figure 3 – Evidence of illusory superiority bias (rating self vs. others).

is usually true that others present the undesirable behaviors.

Another important finding from our research relates to the confusion around the definitions of diversity and inclusion and how to distinguish these two concepts. The majority of participants defined diversity in terms of ethnic background, individual differences, acceptance and welcoming of differences, equal rights, and “hearing different voices.” However, we observed similar themes when participants were asked to define inclusion. We may, therefore, conclude that there is a lack of real understanding of what diversity and inclusion are and what distinguishes one concept from the other. Our research findings may perhaps provide some insight into where to start to move the needle on diversity and inclusion. For change to occur, there must first be a real mutual understanding of the concepts involved as well as the ideal end point.

Working in Teams to Build Inclusion

In a team setting, the emphasis on building and maintaining an inclusive team culture should be just as strong and relentless as the emphasis on managing a current plan to completion — failure to emphasize either one will bring challenges to the team environment.

Inclusion in the workplace can largely be distilled to the degree to which everyone experiences psychological safety. Do all employees feel empowered to express their perspective, particularly if they feel they are being diminished in any way? If your people withhold or temper their opinions when the boss is in the room, you’re not there yet.

If your organization has a culture where employees “leave personal issues at the door” or individuals are not appreciated for being who they are in any sense, you’re not there yet, either.

Building inclusion in teams starts the very first moment someone joins a team and is continually being refined as long as the team is intact. Through appreciative conversations about past experience, exploration of what members hold as core to who they are, and taking the time to process different perspectives on an issue, the team works together to develop norms of behavior that will allow everyone to engage with a strong sense of self-worth.

Often there is pushback on this process, either generically (seeing inclusion as “that theoretical stuff”) or more specifically (“there’s a lot of work on this project; we don’t have time for this”). In reality, though, for organizations that do careful cost accounting, much of the time and money wasted on projects has its basis in some form of communicating ineffectively, withholding opinions, or diminishing the perspectives of others. Building and managing inclusion in teams is therefore an investment that can be among the strongest ROI measures for the organization.

Improved Organizational Approaches to Strengthen Inclusion

To take the steps necessary to move the diversity and inclusion needle within organizations, we must *first understand that organizations are responsible for the well-being and growth of their members.*

Through the lens of the economy and employment, we view businesses and companies as organizations that offer goods and services. However, we barely talk about the significant role that organizations play in fostering the growth and well-being of employees. If all the people the organization promotes are similar (i.e., not diverse) and no one exhibiting diversity has had the opportunity to grow and advance, the organization is certainly responsible to explain this dissonance.

Human development is largely shaped by the systems and environments with which we interact. The first of these systems is our family, followed soon after by our experience in the system of educational institutions. We then enter the workforce, where we spend 30+ valuable years and large portions of our days, often not reaching our full potential. Therefore, organizational leaders need to understand their important role and responsibilities in shaping the development and growth of their employees. In other words, another important product of the organization, besides goods and services, is also its most valuable asset: its people.

When we are evaluating how dedicated organizations are to the growth and development of their members, we need to consider several questions:

- What resources does the organization invest in its people to ensure they are developing the essential skills for global interactions?

- To what extent is the organization willing to understand its blind spots?
- What responsibility does the organization accept for creating leaders that add value, not only to the organization, but to society?
- How much does the organization invest in creating a safe environment where people can bring their whole selves to contribute to the company's growth?

As leaders within organizations, it is essential to recognize that as soon as we hire someone into our workplace, we are responsible for that employee's personal well-being and growth. We must create an environment where that individual feels included and where it is safe to make mistakes and to challenge the status quo.

Second, we must understand the power organizations have in building culture. We must be careful that our organizational norms and rationales are not defined solely by the company founders and/or national norms and rationales. We have the authority and responsibility to learn from each other and develop new ideas about how to have a distinctive, unique culture that helps our company and our people succeed. The cultures that organizations build affect not only the organization's members, but also its customers, partners, communities, and other stakeholders.

A society consists of organizations. If each organization plays its part in creating diverse and inclusive environments, we can create a society that values differences and provides equal growth opportunities for all, regardless of age, sex, race, gender, socioeconomic status, mental health, or physical ability.

Third, we must recognize and understand the urgent need to develop our skills for interacting in a diverse environment. Due to the fast pace of globalization and expansion of technological communication, we are being presented with tools and environments that we often are not prepared to navigate. We do not have the skills required to use these new tools wisely, largely because change is happening at such a fast pace that we are not able to adapt organically. For this reason alone, diversity learning and training should be a mandatory, key component of every organization's onboarding process.

Finally, we must understand the importance of keeping our diverse teams engaged by constantly evaluating and readjusting our reward systems, recruitment systems, and

policies to accommodate and appreciate individual differences. Doing so will encourage greater employee engagement and higher performance in the workforce. One of the main reasons we spend significant resources on employee training, benefits, performance management, and rewards but do not achieve an acceptable ROI for these efforts is that we develop recruitment and reward systems based on our own norms and standards without considering individual differences in motives, values, talents, and norms.

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White Lies! 10 Common Phrases That Reinforce White Supremacy in the US

by Michael A. Tennant

My life has been a transient one, but in a way that is not uncommon to a cohort of striving and high-achieving Black people and people of color more broadly. One where academic or athletic achievement thrusts us into a world very much unlike the one we once called home, one more akin to the dominant world order. A world that perpetuates white supremacy. The worlds of academia and corporate America.

I grew up in Black and Hispanic Bedford Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, New York City — a proud, bustling, albeit under-resourced, ghetto — in the 1980s and 1990s. It was, to me, a wabi-sabi-like¹ bundle of joy born from white flight in the aftermath of the 1968 race riots, like those sparked by the murder of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the most famous example of national outcry against public attack on Black bodies in the US. The violence that arises out of a broken social contract; the opposition to a system that encourages and protects breaking the law and committing violent acts that aim to protect white supremacy.

Racial animus is invisible, yet audible like a dog whistle for those attuned to hearing it.

These public violent attacks grab headlines. However, there exist even more pervasive private attacks, attacks on our collective psychology that have a disproportionately negative effect on Black communities — sometimes subtle and other times very overt racial propaganda. I’m talking about the stereotypes and microaggressions that serve to subjugate Black people. Thoughts, that in the right conditions, like the cases of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd, escalate into murder.

I first learned about these racist whispers when I left my home in Brooklyn to attend an elite private boarding school. The behavior I experienced wasn’t a surprise.

My teachers and mentors, who had identified and groomed me for this opportunity, also took great care to warn and prepare my family and me. And boy, did these future white leaders of America not fail to disappoint.

I could build a list of overt transgressions, often described as “boys being boys.” But instead, I want to bring attention to the constant reminders of my race and socioeconomic status, as a means of undermining my merit. It’s that part that stuck.

In this microcosm, I learned to exist in this sort of empathetic dissonance. A world where white is right and Black is wrong, no matter what. Racial animus is invisible, yet audible like a dog whistle for those attuned to hearing it.

Well, this list is meant to tune your ears with 10 subtle, or not so subtle, phrases and microaggressions that protect the white male supremacy status quo in the US.

#10: “There Are Two Different Kinds of Black People. Black People and N*****s.”

We lead off with a gut punch.

Most people who read this will feel their chest clench up and their body temperature rise. I know, because that’s what I felt when I wrote it, or the hundreds of times I’ve heard it. This phrase, popularized by comedian Chris Rock in his mid-1990s comedy tour “Bring the Pain,”² is just one of many stereotypes to have graduated from the depths of private conversation and Black subculture into popular culture, which somehow gave white people permission to think, repeat, and believe such phrases.

We must ask ourselves, have I heard this before? Are such labels or dichotomies racist? What am I doing by

repeating them? And how would I feel to hear it tomorrow?

Make no mistake, this “joke,” like the remaining nine points on this list, is 100%, unequivocally, universally, and objectively racist! Now let’s move on.

#9: “I Can’t Say/Pronounce That, Do You Have a Nickname?”

Perhaps no other microaggression reinforces normalization of the white Anglo-Saxon ideal more than the common conscious disregard of people’s names.

One’s name can say a lot about a person’s history, which oftentimes has negative implications if you aren’t part of the dominant group. Historically, family names served to place people in their class. For example, my last name, “Tennant,” referred to a farmer who held his land from an overlord by obligations of rent or service. Many of our Jewish, Italian, and Asian brothers and sisters have, in their history, instances of family members altering their names to fit in.

Choosing to use a name that is uncommon here in the US, but significant to one’s national or cultural identity, is a choice to be proud of one’s history despite the threat of not blending in. This is the context that often goes unrecognized, when white colleagues quit before they start, in learning to pronounce or spell someone’s name. It’s a privilege of those that belong, one that excludes those who’ve been included more recently. It’s insulting and also invalidating.

If Americans can learn to pronounce names like that of Duke University head men’s basketball coach, Mike Krzyzewski, they can learn to pronounce and spell names like Nii Ato and Tennesha. They just have to be willing to recognize the bias that prevents them from ever trying.

#8: “Oh Wow. I Never Had to Learn That. I Just Wasn’t Taught That in My Schools.”

This one is a bit more palatable. I went to all Black schools (until high school), where there was a significant focus on Black history in America, as well as in Africa and the Caribbean. I would later learn that this was completely unlike the experience of many of my

white and even Black or other non-white friends. I learned that the American education system grossly omits or boils down years of Black achievement and oppression when we teach our children history.

Our past shapes our present, our disadvantages and our advantages. The systematic omission of Black history robs all of us of a true understanding of the contributions and resilience of the ancestors of 14% of the US population and reinforces a distorted narrative about merit and causality.³ Plainly stated, it diminishes the importance of the role of Black people in the advancement and wealth of our nation, and it absolves present-day white society of responsibility for maintaining the inequalities that still exist.

If you did not learn about Black history as a kid, you have to ask yourself, why? If this question seems like a bother to you, you might also ask yourself, why? But I’ll help you. The answer is racial privilege. We venture on.

#7: “You Still Think Racism Exists, Especially After Obama?”

The election of President Barack Obama, America’s first Black president, was a joyous moment that shocked me and people like me. I, sadly, never thought I’d live to see a Black president.

With the rise of the alt-right in our country, it might be said that his election produced many ripples, positive and negative. It helped give communities of color hope that the American dream is actually accessible to all. Divisive politicians use it to persuade citizens to believe the inequities in our country have been eradicated or, worse, flipped to disadvantage white people.

The leadership of Barack and first lady Michelle marked a breaking through of a monumental color barrier. It would also reinforce the status quo in many ways. The symbol of achievement they represent signaled that significant progress had been made for Black Americans and, ultimately, helped women’s rights take priority over racial equality for the next eight years.

People needn’t look far beyond their employers or even local government to see a lack of representation of Black leadership. Or they can look into their children’s school curriculum, where they find omission of the real history of genocide and slavery that built our nation’s wealth. Or even nearer, to their social media feeds, neighborhood associations, and even inner thoughts,

to find stark segregation and generalizations born from a history of systemic and cultural racism.

White America, I ask that you catch yourself the next time you reference a high-achieving Black celebrity, colleague, or friend as an example of our country's progress. Such referencing minimizes that person's achievement and obscures the racist systems, racist psychology, and the effects of lifelong and generationally endured traumas. A commitment to unlearning racist tendencies means resisting the urge to use achievements of the extraordinary few as the strawman defense of our nation's neglect of the disempowered many.

Our society needs an understanding of how and why we got here if we are ever to penetrate the armor of individuality and guilt. Are we so afraid to acknowledge the past that we are willing to ignore the history of Black oppression that surrounds us?

As we navigate through these difficult times, take comfort knowing history has taught us that what benefits the most marginalized of us benefits all of us.

Our society needs an understanding of how and why we got here if we are ever to penetrate the armor of individuality and guilt.

#6: "They (Insert Black Employee Here) Would Be 'Perfect' for This Project (Insert Project Targeting Black People Here)."

Though our country prides itself on individuality, we tend to group ourselves and others more often than we recognize. My field of marketing and advertising relies on grouping people. We examine society and generate hypotheses on how to make a connection with millions of individuals. We find large groupings with similar thoughts and behaviors and develop strategies and messages to connect with them.

While "audience definition" is part science — data, surveys, interviews, and measurement — a lot of art and intuition goes into it as well. In reality, more often than not, audiences are defined by the people who are in the room where the definitions are being created. In an attempt to generate accurate, socially aware, and

inclusive "audience profiles," teams will "cast" for representative participants from their existing employee base to solve for potential biases that may arise. This model cannot solve for unconscious bias. In fact, every layer of this model protects and even validates bias. The data collection and even analysis are often conducted by non-Black individuals, who aren't asking questions about what the data does or doesn't show about Black communities.

When we cast from the pool of Black employees that exist within an organization that lacks Black representation, the opinions received represent, at best, a narrow segment of the Black population. We get the opinion of "safe" Black people. Black people who have learned to exist and survive in white-dominated contexts by not being too disruptive. This frequent act of tokenism gives employees a seat at the table but in a marginalizing way. It says, "You aren't perfect for every project. Just the projects that target Black people." It overlooks representation issues and exemplifies implicit biases that we subconsciously accept.

Black people are not a monolith. Our community has beautiful nuances, not limited to common descriptors like economic background, sexuality, country of origin, and education. Disregarding these facts ranks high on the spectrum of systemic and cultural racism. As with any other group that celebrates its individuality, we ask that you stop trying to put us in a box.

#5: "One of Your Colleagues, We Won't Say Who, Felt the Way You Addressed Them Was Too Aggressive."

All aggression isn't created equal.

On our TV and mobile screens, in boardrooms and even public offices, aggressiveness is a virtue, so long as the person wielding it is white and male. Women, historically, have been socialized to be less assertive in professional situations and fight a double standard as it relates to aggressiveness. Rather than assertiveness being a sign of strength and leadership, women displaying it may find labels like "disagreeable" or "temperamental" being applied. For Asian employees, the perception of them as being "analytical" and possessing "high intelligence" garners them a pass on needing to strengthen interpersonal skills, if their assertiveness happens to attract negative attention.

Sadly, the culturally biased stereotype of Black people as “dangerous aggressors” is often used as a means of gaslighting ambitious and non-subservient Black men and women in business. Common tropes of the “angry” Black woman or the “threatening” Black man force individuals to contemplate and apply exceptional care not to disrupt the status quo. Plainly put, we have to shrink ourselves in order to be invited back the following day.

Even today, when a Black person is faced with accusations, bias prevails. Instead of receiving due process, invisible accusers are often given the benefit of the doubt. Workplace disagreements are always difficult, but we have to do a better job of acknowledging how bias might lead to unfair judgments in subjective situations and disproportionately marginalizing and punitive treatment for Black employees.

I personally have experienced instances of making it through the door, only to have it shut in my face for something I did or said but never had the opportunity to address. I take the time to ask myself, “What could I have done differently?” I ask my non-white colleagues who have encountered similar situations to ask themselves if the biased stereotype of Black people as aggressors might have been at play in their lives.

The racially biased view of Black people as aggressors actually serves to create a psychologically oppressive situation for the few Black representatives in majority-white environments. True allies bring this awareness with them as they do their part in dismantling racist systems.

#4: “Racial Diversity Is Not a Priority Right Now. Diversity of Thought Is What We’re Focused On.”

Too often when Black people or people of color raise an issue or opportunity born of their lived experiences of racism in America, they are met with a minimizing response. Every time that happens without intervention, a significant blow is dealt to the trust between persons of color and the environment in which they exist.

In workplaces, meeting rooms, and schools across the country where Black students, employees, and leaders are a small minority, it is common for them to face challenges to be perceived as credible and to attain

psychological security. If you are Black or a person of color operating in white-dominant environments, you learn quickly that you risk forfeiting any social gains attained if you make statements that challenge the racial status quo and equilibrium. However, if you agree that we live in a racist system, then you must acknowledge that progress will only come through disruption.

To reference the James Baldwin quote, “Not everything that is faced can be changed. But nothing can be changed until it is faced.” If the issues that shape experiences for Black people can never rise to the level of being a priority, they will never truly be faced. When white people determine the priorities and goals and exclude the priorities and goals of Black people, that action serves to reinforce a racist system.

Until we have leaders, of all backgrounds, who are willing to challenge the status quo and wade into the uncomfortable experience of creating racial progress, we will be mired in a continued state of thinly veiled attempts. An aggregation of regressive incrementality.

My actions protect my self-respect, values, and boundaries. I’ve learned that spaces that refuse to see my experiences as a priority are not spaces that merit my investments of time, talent, or money. As I learn to push past the fear of offending my white colleagues, I embrace and model bravery and vulnerability. And I ask my allies to do the same.

#3: “We Have Corporate Diversity Training.”

I must concede that it’s been a few years since I sat in a corporate diversity training. I also want to honor the dedicated and passionate people that are advancing this field of work. I will also warn that my inner corporate cynic speaks out on this one.

My experiences with diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives have, for the most part, been underwhelming. They would look like this:

For weeks, intraoffice posters and emails raise excitement and remind employees about the once-a-year, mandatory diversity training. Most people grimace at the time commitment amidst their regular workload. A few scoff at the necessity of the training at all. And even fewer, usually from underrepresented groups, look forward to the training with anticipation.

We have the training, which is often led by an overwhelmed HR leader and a consultant. The program is lacking in interaction and lands as a bit rote. As a call to action, there's usually an invitation to volunteer for affinity groups, which are populated by the underrepresented individuals in the company and a handful of their empathetic and high-achieving white colleagues. These groups meet periodically, then plan an engagement or two over the course of the year.

The high-achieving white colleagues receive promotions, after being lauded for their citizenship and corporate engagement — a shining example of the organization's racial progressiveness. The white ally leads the way ... and we end up right back at the following year's diversity training touting any statistical wins HR has been able to author.

I know this isn't a complimentary view. I wish I didn't have it, but I know I'm not alone. If this view bothers you, do what you can to make sure your actions coming out of this latest wave of Black Lives Matter activism don't end up landing like this!

Black and other non-white candidates are paying attention to how companies support employees. Think about how you would like to be viewed and take real actions to make sure you can be proud of the values you exhibit.

#2: "We've Increased Our Leadership Diversity to Include More Women and People of Color."

Numbers do not lie. Or do they? Depends on the story you are trying to tell.

One of the most pervasive and ubiquitous microaggressions against underrepresented groups is the eagerness to group us all as one, for statistical purposes. While we've seen progress in overall diversity and for women in leadership positions, there are issues that this progress overlooks.

To begin, grouping women, Asians, Latinx, Black, Indigenous, LGBTQ+, and people with disabilities into one bucket has an odd effect of pitting underrepresented groups against one another in a *Hunger Games*-like competition to siphon incremental gains from the white male hierarchy.

It seems benign enough. Especially grouped within a narrative of statistical gains. However, the problem

is that this collective acceptance, from both the underrepresented groups and the dominant white male hierarchy, leads to an entrenched belief that this form of incrementality and protection of the white-privilege status quo is the answer.

As we close out the decade, data shows that white women are the biggest winners coming out of the last 10 years of progressive cultural and social gains. In 2019, 21% of those in C-suite positions in the US were women, but only 4% were women of color.⁴ Companies have increased representation of women in C-suite positions by an impressive 25% and commitment to gender equality by 13%, while showing a 5% decrease in representation of women of color and no meaningful change in microaggressions toward women.⁵

We need significant systemic and psychological progress that goes deeper than the numbers. When you look at the entire picture of representation, you will see the reality of disproportionate opportunity and advantage. Diverse representation is not just adding more white women; it's making your leadership team look, statistically, as close to representative of the US population as possible.

#1: "I Don't See Color."

My last distinct memory of this microaggression happened during the first week of my last job in corporate America. After consecutive years of success developing results-driving and award-winning campaigns for the P&G and Coca-Cola brand portfolios and rising in the ranks of branded entertainment, I was recruited to join the executive team of a major global media agency as head of branded content.

As I was getting to know the existing executive leadership, I sat down to drinks with one of my senior-ranking leaders. Nervous, ecstatic, and eager, I used the opportunity to share about my background and path to this meeting and to hear about his. Later in the evening, a few drinks in and nearing our exit, I turned to the leader and with bashful sincerity, shared my gratitude for being trusted to lead this new venture for the agency. I acknowledged the bold nature of hiring a young Black man to do the job.

This vulnerable moment landed like a record scratch.

I couldn't place it then, but it appeared the comfort and familiarity I'd fostered was disrupted. He responded to

me that the country he was from didn't have the context that we have here in America around race, and, as a result, he didn't see color. He said, "I see you as a man or person, not as a Black person. Race has nothing to do with it."

I felt completely awkward for the rest of the night. I attributed it to the drinking, which, suddenly, no longer felt right in this situation. The trust was gone. I'd exposed my most guarded insecurity in the hope of attracting an ally. But instead, I triggered his fear about acknowledging my race. His comment was seemingly innocent, but it diminished my trust and set the stage for my future tenure.

While I managed to secure many wins in this role — increasing billings, growing a team, and securing industry accolades — I struggled to secure cultural and interpersonal fit. I never sat in a single executive team meeting, though my understanding was that the role would have that access. I fell into a bureaucratic quagmire between two related but opposing reporting structures that didn't have the time, or incentive, to set me up to succeed. I presented my bold ideas with youthful confidence, overcompensating for my insecurities about not fitting in.

In truth, I needed extra guidance and support navigating these new dynamics, personalities, and politics. I needed access and transparency to hearing opinions of my work. I needed goals and the support system to realize them. Most of all, I needed to feel trusted to do my job well. I needed validation that they believed I was the right person for the job.

From that one moment, when I vulnerably asked to be seen as I was, to my last day with that organization, I never felt safe. And so, they never truly got the most out of me.

A Cohort of Curious and Compassionate People Waiting to Support

Our lies about the effects of race in our schools and places of work serve to reinforce psychological and systemic racism at significant weight and cost. The role of race in our history, inequities, and collective psychology remains whether you choose to acknowledge it or not, and the option to ignore it is the epitome of white privilege.

We all enter the professional world with biases, beliefs, and habits. It will take proactive and ongoing efforts by organizations and the individuals within them to keep the current openness and momentum around issues of bias and to generate change.

At Curiosity Lab, we've begun to host workshops that help organizations to strengthen core competencies in creating safe spaces for marginalized communities, to listen and create action plans for inclusivity, and to recognize and address bias. The tools exist and are being created to facilitate this necessary cultural change. Start from within and trust there is a cohort of curious and compassionate people waiting to support your efforts.

Acknowledgment

The author would like to thank Nii Ato Bentsi-Enchill, MA, Ed.M founder/head coach, Avenir Careers, for his help with the initial editing of this article.

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Why Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Must Be a Strategic Priority

by Viola Maxwell-Thompson

Diverse companies outperform companies that aren't diverse. There are numerous articles, citing years of research, to confirm this statement. Indeed, one study found that over a three-year period, diverse companies, compared to their less diverse peers, see 2.3 times the cash flow per employee.¹ By investing in diversity and inclusion best practices, companies can increase profits, acquire and retain the best talent, and add value.²

Although gender and ethnic diversity clearly link to profitability, women and minorities continue to be underrepresented.³ For example, the percentage of women in the technology industry is still only 26%; the percentage of women of color in that industry hovers at 11%.⁴ If we take a deeper dive into the issue of representation, we discover that the percentage of Black and Brown professionals holding C-suite positions was in the single digits 24 years ago and still is today.⁵ What has created this stalemate? Why are we experiencing little to no movement in these numbers? What do we need to do differently to truly move the needle?

We often hear, "Change starts at the top." Yes, it does, and when we see companies outperforming their competitors, there is a direct correlation between the diversity of the CEO's leadership team, the board, and across all levels within a company — and that company's success. When the CEO is committed to creating a diverse work environment, the company's diversity mirrors that of the community and customers it serves. When the company makes diversity a strategic priority alongside its growth targets, revenue goals, and other innovative practices that the CEO wants to see implemented, that change is often sustainable.

For example, at Sodexo,⁶ a food services and facilities management company, 55% of all staff members are female; that number was only 17% in 2009. In addition, 58% of the company's board of directors are women. Sodexo has found that its gender balance has led to a 4% rise in employee engagement, a 23% increase in gross profit, and a 5% jump in brand image. Given this and other proven examples, what prevents other

companies from replicating these models, and why don't we see a consistent increase in gender and ethnic representation?

A 2018 report from HackerRank paints a clear picture when we look specifically at gender: women 35 or older are 3.5 times more likely than men to still be in a junior technology position. Men are far less likely to stay in junior level roles for long: 20% of women over the age of 35 are still in junior positions, while fewer than 6% of men 35 or older are still in junior positions; fewer than 54% of women between 25 and 34 are senior developers; while more than 74% of men between 25 and 34 are senior developers.⁷ Among *Fortune* 500 companies in 2019, only 13% had a female cybersecurity leader working as CISO, CIO, or VP of security.⁸

While we are slowly moving the needle, the additional barrier we face is retention. The quit rate of women in the technology industry is almost twice as high as that of men.⁹ A recent study reports that 53% of women leave their tech-intensive jobs for other industries; in comparison, that number for men is 31%. That same report states that more than 40% of women leave STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) jobs when they start families.¹⁰

Moreover, another survey by Capital One of 250 women who had been in IT careers for at least eight years and 200 women who had left their technology jobs found that 20% of those who had left their jobs cite a lack of opportunity as a reason for departing the industry. Twenty-three percent attribute their exits to lack of management support, while 22% claim they couldn't achieve sufficient work-life balance or work-life integration experience.¹¹

Regrettably, there is limited advancement and retention information available about people of color, and, specifically, Black professionals. However, based on research, focus groups, and surveys conducted by my organization, the Information Technology Senior Management Forum (ITSMF), people of color feel isolated and alone even in a company with thousands of employees; they

feel undervalued and unsupported and experience a slower ascension to C-suite and other senior-level positions than their peers.

Indeed, Black women in corporate America encounter the “Black ceiling” and are “double outsiders” as they struggle to find common ground with their white male counterparts and superiors.¹² Findings from a survey conducted by research firm Catalyst state that:

The common theme among most barriers perceived by African-American women is a lack of connection with influential others: not having an influential mentor/sponsor, lack of informal networks, lack of company role models of the same racial/ethnic group, and lack of high-visibility projects.¹³

USA Today notes that toxic workplaces, defined as those that harbor harassment, stereotyping, and bullying, are losing female employees and people of color, undermining organizations’ diversity efforts at an estimated cost of US \$16 billion a year.¹⁴ Improving these companies’ work culture and adopting a comprehensive diversity, equity, and inclusion strategy can reduce attrition. Almost 66% of employees who left jobs in the technology field reported that they would not have left if their companies had “fixed” the culture.¹⁵

Granted, trying to “fix” a company’s culture to make it more diverse, equitable, and inclusive can be a massive undertaking that requires time, resources, patience, and commitment. However, we must not shy away from something because it is “hard.” Making innovative changes in a company is hard, but it is still done. Imagine if Amazon had continued to focus only on selling books. Then there’s the story of BlackBerry, which commanded the cellphone market in the business community until it failed to recognize the growing importance of the user interface and technological experience of its customers. At one point, BlackBerry had 50% of the smartphone market in the US and 20% worldwide. However, the company ignored innovation and did not react to changes in the smartphone market.¹⁶ There are countless examples of one company’s success and another’s demise because a company didn’t want to change or take on difficult, unpopular actions, or was too slow to change.

With this increased understanding of the benefits of a diverse company and enlightenment around some barriers women and people of color are still experiencing within companies, let’s shift our focus toward creating an equitable workplace. *Merriam-Webster* defines “equity” as “justice according to natural law or right” and specifically as “freedom from bias or

favoritism.”¹⁷ As reported by the US Census Bureau, US women on average earn only 81.6 cents to each dollar earned by men.¹⁸ Black women earn only 63 cents and Latinas earn 55 cents to each dollar that white, non-Hispanic men earn.¹⁹ Equity has not yet arrived.

When asked, more people say that they favor “equal pay for equal work,” meaning that employees doing the same job should be given equal pay.²⁰ Assuming individuals have similar experiences, education, and performance, a company should be able to implement pay equity policies. If factors like experience and education are not equal, then pay parity policies, which reduce the pay gap based on gender, race, and ethnicity, should be implemented. Employees are only asking to be paid equitably compared to their peers.

Additionally, in 2019, for every 100 men promoted to their first management position, only 85 women received a promotion; the numbers are lower for minority women, with 71 Latinas promoted for every 100 men, and 58 Black women promoted for every 100 men.²¹ Is this reflective of an equitable work environment?

Let’s explore the final leg of this equation: inclusion. While attending a conference of minority technology leaders, the participants, of whom I was one, were introducing themselves and proudly sharing their country of origin. A white woman in attendance shared her thoughts with me while she waited for her turn to speak: “What am I doing here?” she asked. “I don’t have a similar background to the people in this room.” And so she struggled with what she was going to say. She later shared that, for the first time, she understood what it was like being in the minority — the “only one” in the room. That statement was profound and the realization informative. It was a brief view into what people of color experience every day in corporate America. While the attendees were welcoming to her and she appreciated the extension of kindness toward her, she wondered if she had previously exhibited those same expressions of inclusion to others in similar situations.

How inclusive is your company? When people of color attend a meeting where no one else in the room is of their ethnicity, are their contributions valued? Do they feel respected? Are they respected? Does everyone in the room practice inclusive behaviors? In her article, “Real Stories of Inclusion: What Does Inclusion Look Like Anyway?” thought leader Mary-Frances Winters asks:

Would there be 100 percent agreement on certain behaviors that could be defined as respect and value? I think not. I would argue that there are widespread differences in interpretation as to what inclusive behaviors look like. I think most of us instinctively know what it feels like to be included or excluded and it is often in the small day-to-day gestures that [we] feel included or excluded.²²

And now, in a situation that is already complex, we face the global COVID-19 pandemic. It has highlighted the health disparities in underrepresented communities, which has also resulted in women — especially women of color — being laid off or furloughed, stalling their careers and jeopardizing their financial security. Additionally, the unlawful deaths of Black men and women have put a spotlight on social injustice on the streets and in the communities of Black America.

These events are reflective of years of systemic racism that has existed in this country and that is often experienced by Black children in their classrooms, young adults on college campuses, and professionals in their work environment. Increased clarity on these issues has created a fertile ground for us to plant new seeds and harvest new outcomes. The time is now for CEOs and their boards to make a statement affirming their commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. To truly change the narrative and the outcomes for corporations, the same level of CEO commitment must be placed on equity and inclusivity as there is on diversity. These three elements must be bound together, and the same level of importance and priority placed on all three for a company's strategy to have successful outcomes. Additionally, CEOs and other C-suite leaders must be visible and vocal about their commitments. Rosalind Brewer, Starbucks' first female and Black COO, said, "Every now and then you have to nudge your partners. You have to speak up and speak out. And I try to use my platform for that. I try to set an example."²³

To start, all companies must be willing to be vulnerable and share their current state in order to establish a baseline and then design plans to achieve the desired state. These realignments and adjustments will not be at the expense of others; in fact, they will create even more opportunities for everyone.

Your employees are waiting, watching, and listening because of the heightened awareness and increase in conversations about disparities. They want to see what meaningful, measurable, and sustainable steps will be taken by those who are in positions to effect a change. It is going to be those companies that speak the loudest,

act the most boldly, and think the most innovatively that will be acknowledged for their actions and that will benefit from the results of the implemented changes. The companies that lead in this time will be able to attract and ultimately retain their diverse workforce.

There are tools and techniques that companies can leverage to achieve these goals. For example, diversity and awareness training can help team members and their leadership understand how to work with diverse teams. Updating talent acquisition policies to include creating partnerships with organizations that are training and developing diverse talent and with universities with highly diverse student bodies will expand the diversity of the employee candidate pool. Finally, investing in the development of your diverse employees and creating a pathway to leadership will enable companies to promote from within. A few organizations specific to the technology industry that companies can partner with to gain access to proven programs, diverse talent, and best practices include:

- **Women's Business Collaborative (WBC).** WBC is "an unprecedented alliance of women's business organizations, corporations, trade associations, researchers, and the media *accelerating* (1) the advancement of diverse female representation in C-suites and boardrooms, (2) the achievement of gender diversity and parity in the workplace, and (3) the growth of women-owned businesses and their access to sources of capital."²⁴
- **NPower.** According to its website, NPower is "on a mission to move people from poverty to the middle class through tech skills training and quality job placement.... NPower creates pathways to economic prosperity by launching digital careers for military veterans and young adults from underserved communities."²⁵
- **Hispanic IT Executive Council (HITEC).** HITEC hopes to "provide a forum for the career development and advancement of technology executives, provide exposure to accomplished leaders and the broader technology community, [and] create opportunities to connect member organizations across different business segments and share technology trends."²⁶
- **ITSMF.** ITSMF's vision is to facilitate the creation of barrier-free opportunities for Black technology influencers, innovators, and leaders. As a 24-year-old organization of senior-level technology executives, ITSMF has a strong and unique reputation for

developing people of color, mind, body, and soul. Of the 667 graduates from the forum's three academies, 50% are women of color. Seventy-five to 80% of graduates receive a promotion within 18 months, and there's a direct correlation to their participation in the academies. Partnering with ITSMF creates a repeatable forum for a company to develop their diverse talent, increase the representation of Black and Brown women and men in senior-level tech positions, and solidify a company's diversity, equity, and inclusion outcomes.²⁷

In the words of President John F. Kennedy:

We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one which we intend to win....²⁸

Our time is *now*! Lead the change!

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The Value of the Technical Professional in Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Initiatives

by Nicole D. Price

When employers embark on diversity and inclusion efforts as a result of racially charged national events, the intent is to focus on racial challenges. But, typically, labels employers use for these efforts can cause confusion. While diversity and inclusion are important, they are not the same as racial equity.¹ Regardless of the terms used, including technical professionals early in the discussions could bring perspectives that can impact the work climate in practical ways. Technical professionals often have skills and knowledge that can be critical to tackling deeply embedded, and sometimes hidden, policies and practices that create division and inequity. I have worked with hundreds of organizations large and small, and it is a rarity that people in technical roles are considered integral to the diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts.

From the biased lens of a technical professional — me — let's unpack how organizations can mitigate challenges, great and small, to diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. In this article, we explore some of the top ways technical professionals can add to the diversity, equity, and inclusion discussion.

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Benefits of the Technical Perspective

We ... Are Logical and Reasonable

It would be ridiculous to think that technical professionals don't have prejudices and biases. Us techies are just like all other humans; however, we are more likely to use logic and reason when making decisions rather than allow our emotions to move us toward a certain path.²

Exclusionary and inequitable practices are never universal. There are always exceptions to the rules. But if we collectively desire to resolve the primary issues of discrimination, exclusion, and bias, we must logically respond to the patterns we observe, not the outliers.

Logical and reasonable people notice patterns and avoid making decisions based solely on outliers or random exceptions. This ability to engage in objective analysis is important when working toward diversity, equity, and inclusion. When patterns of discrimination are clear, technical professionals are great at identifying the gaps without getting derailed.

We ... Measure Things

Often, the path toward diversity, equity, and inclusion is long. When embarking on systemic change, incremental progress can seem inconsequential. Along the way, people need to observe incremental progress to avoid discouragement when it comes to the gravity of the work. That means someone has to document the baseline, set goals, track lead and lag metrics, and so forth. Techies are great at this!

Technical professionals are also great at identifying and measuring disparities. Systems of inequity don't uphold themselves; people uphold these systems, and inequities can always be traced back to practices, norms, policies, and laws. Thus, we must direct energy and effort toward dismantling systems that work against our goal of creating more diverse, equitable, and inclusive cultures. From all the time techies spend on process improvement, they know how to make the issue more about the policies, practices, and so forth, and not personalize these larger challenges by making them solely about people and their behaviors. Therefore, we must engage more technically minded people in the process so that we can redirect energy from the personal dimensions of diversity, equity, and inclusion toward the institutional dimensions.

We ... Realize Our Way Is Not the Only Way and Lean on Evidence-Based Research to Solve Problems

Because technical teams are largely cross-functional, we have lots of experience creating teams that have varied skills, talent, and ability so that our teams are smarter. The objective lens of the technical professional makes space for objective analysis of data rather than an overt focus on, “What would I do if it were me?” Everyone has an opinion on diversity, equity, and inclusion, but not everyone has informed opinions. You can’t fix what you don’t fully understand.

When we ask people to face hard truths about topics such as implicit bias, people need to focus on the facts related to the history of exclusion and inequity. Technical professionals know to ask “why” five times — five different ways to get at the root of the issues — before deciding on a way forward. Why is it that women can lead certain countries and not others? Why is it that overweight people are universally thought to be lazy? Why do organizations have special words like “qualified diverse talent” added to job vacancies when looking for unconventional talent? It is the technical professional who will notice the patterns in historical and current data, understand the magnitude of inequities, and work to close them.

We ... Value Formal Training

Training accounts for approximately 10% of learning.³ Ten percent is hardly sufficient to meet the urgent need to increase our intellectual horsepower specifically related to race and racial equity. Employers that implement diversity, equity, and inclusion training programs have the best intentions, but the impact of some of their immediate actions sometimes results in lying, crying, and denying.

I maintain that we can illustrate the basics of the problem with a math analogy. No one skips basic math and enrolls in calculus; understanding basic math concepts is foundational to succeeding in calculus. Race is like calculus; most people have entered into and gone through school, work, love, and life without any formal training on race. However, many in leadership assume that people have the foundational skills necessary to understand race and racial equity when they do not. Therefore, we must recognize and close that learning gap if we are to make sustainable progress. It helps

to start with the basics like what the difference is between a fact and an opinion or how equality differs from equity. I have engaged in the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator for years, and it is challenging to get people to stop discriminating behavior based on personality. Imagine how difficult it is to get them to stop discriminating based on things like ability, wealth, educational level, gender, sexual orientation. Technical professionals are great at creating learning methodologies on advancing topics.

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We ... Operate Within Our Licensure

We know we are not licensed therapists. Therefore, we don’t try to act as though we are. Listening sessions about diversity, equity, and inclusion often result in an increased number of grievances and complaints, not a reduced number. One major reason is because people who have been discriminated against and excluded experience trauma. Another challenge is that some people who decide to speak up (in oppressed groups and in privileged groups) aren’t always informed on the issues causing additional trauma and harm. Technical professionals understand that there are professionals who handle trauma and avoid unearthing that trauma at work unless we can provide professional support for our employees who may need it. What we do instead is invite people to look solidly at the reasons behind trauma. Techies solve problems by investigating and eliminating the source of the problem. We address the problems within policies and procedures that historically lead to people experiencing trauma. We leave trauma support to the trained professionals.

We ... Are Familiar with Imagining a Better Future

Who imagined a cell phone and then created it? Who else imagines social media platforms and then creates them? Who imagines self-driving cars and makes that dream a reality? Technical professionals! We specialize in creating new worlds that no one else can fathom at first. We have brought new creations into being in

seemingly unimportant areas (e.g., the Cosmic apple, a newly developed and better tasting apple⁴) but also in life-saving areas, such as vaccine development. Moreover, having diversity on our teams is proven to make us smarter, better, and stronger.⁵ We have no idea which of the world's problems could be resolved if everyone belonged at the table (not just invited to the table) and was able to contribute equally.

We ... Fight

Technical professionals understand that when the stakes are high, no idea is "safe." We insist on candor and openness because we know that when an issue arises and people don't speak up, lives are literally at stake. Safe place simply means that no one is ever going to be working against people. Technical professionals will interrogate ideas (not people) that are prejudiced, discriminatory, and/or exclusionary. We know that healthy conflict helps us move toward a more equitable world.

It's a major red flag if your communications department is more involved in addressing diversity, equity, and inclusion issues than your technical and leadership departments.⁶ These are the people who will use qualitative, quantitative, and empirical data to identify where issues of exclusion, systemic oppression, and racism lie. Wherever there are disparities, it is the technical professional who will be the one to stop arguing against the existence of the problem and help us start redirecting energy and emotions toward driving change.

Why aren't technical professionals more involved in identifying and addressing diversity, equity, and inclusion issues? Well, they typically are not asked,

and I'm not so certain techies are aware of the value they bring. What I know for sure is that no one can resolve diversity, equity, and inclusion issues alone, and something is definitely missing when techies are not part of the discussions and planning. Let's change that!

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Nicole D. Price is a chemical engineer and CEO of the leadership development company Lively Paradox. Through transformational training workshops and keynote presentations, she delivers actionable insights and skills to help leaders, teams, and individuals bring their full selves and best efforts to work, every day. Dr. Price earned a master's degree in adult and continuing education from Park University and a doctorate in education from Capella University. She can be reached at nicole@livelyparadox.com.



Shining a Light on Women in Leadership: Q&A with Dr. Areej Khataybih, Transformational Coach

by Cutter Consortium and Areej Khataybih

Cutter Consortium: Tell us about your experience working with professionals in the business technology field.

Areej Khataybih (AK): My first job [in HR] was at an IT company, one of the pioneering IT companies in the Middle East that built platforms for kings, queens, and governments to help automate their systems. Upon meeting the CEO during the interview process, he asked me about my background, my studies, etc. At the time, I had my master's degree [in psychology and educational counseling]. He wanted to hire me as a "therapist" who would work on the lack of soft skills among his "guru" employees. He told me, "When it comes to emotions and relationships, they need you. But we won't call you a 'therapist'; we will place you in that department and give you the title of 'development officer.'" After four and a half years of developing the soft skills among the development team, I moved on as HR manager, then HR director, working with everyone from sales to operations. Using a psychological point of view, I helped build a new culture. A few years later, I went to the US and studied employee relations. Soon after, various companies in the UK recruited me to work in Jordan because they wanted me to bring the human factor into the IT world. Then I decided I wanted to meet and help more leaders around the world, so I quit my corporate job, studied executive coaching in the US, and established my own business.

Currently, I work as a leadership transformational coach and have a doctorate in psychology. I'm the founder of a company called The Spark Back, where I primarily work with high achievers, people with great track records of success. Some of my clients lack passion while others are truly impacting the world. They are all decision makers, with most being CEOs or directors who manage budgets/revenue. They are typically over the age of 40 and, most of the time, lack three things: (1) the energy to show their best selves, (2) the recognition from the significant people in their lives, and (3) the feeling of making a meaningful impact in a place that means a lot to them. This is where I step in. I help them

"get the spark back" through a four-step method that will move these high achievers from where they are today to a place where they will have unbound energy. People around them start to appreciate them more, which in turn helps them flourish more, allowing them to feel that they are truly "making a difference."

Cutter Consortium: Can you talk about the challenges women face in the corporate world?

AK: Usually, the women I work with face an internal obstacle, although it might look external, such as not being accepted as a woman when it comes to the board level. When a woman is on a board — and most boards in IT consist of men — she sometimes brings her own belief that she's not going to be accepted. This is her number one obstacle: the feeling that she's not good enough. She might think things like, "Because of my age, because I'm a woman, because I'm different," and this will hold her back. With this internal viewpoint, she may then prepare herself in a way that does make her appear that she is somehow different than other board members. Her self-perceptions, ideas, and expectations about what might happen during her interactions with other board members may mistakenly set her up to meet those expectations.

Let me give you an example. I remember one woman who earned a nomination to be the general manager for one of the biggest telecom companies in the Middle East. She came to me and said, "I have been promoted, but I'm about to reject this promotion because during the interview they said to me, 'You look like a petite woman, and you are going to work with very senior-level people, and they are all men. You will be the only woman there. How are you going to work with them and make your voice heard?'" Then, we "went deep" and she discovered that her size and appearance are actually internal issues that she focuses on about herself. So, when it came to that particular question, she was the one who was not convinced she could succeed. She thought, "I need to look different. I need to show up as a different person." In the end, she couldn't

answer their question and instead started to push her old mindset of “they are rejecting me because of how I look.” Although this is generally not a very appropriate question, because it certainly brings about gender bias, this woman’s battle was really an internal issue.

Another challenge that comes up is the internal battle many women have with their emotional side. Women in the corporate world sometimes think, “I am too emotional. I need to show them that I am logical.” Consequently, some women try to hide their true personalities or alter their reactions. This may directly affect how they make decisions as well as how others perceive them. They may get too caught up in trying to impress their male counterparts. Women should instead focus on how they attained their position. What got them to that place is a set of different things and being female is one of them. Women need to keep in mind that all humans are emotional and that it’s not only logic that goes into decision making. We women should be true to ourselves and not feel that others are judging us about how we come to a decision.

There’s one more internal obstacle women in the workplace face: the expectations of the “many hats” that women wear, including mom, and the general expectations from community/society. Women sometimes get locked into what they think their role “should be.” So, if a woman really wants to be a high achiever in the workplace and can see herself in that position, she should leave the internal (and sometimes external) judgment behind. Women in the workplace should be proud of themselves and their achievements and not try to hide their authentic selves because they think the “female” role puts pressure on them.

Cutter Consortium: Aside from the internal issues that you’ve highlighted, are there any other challenges that maybe women can’t control?

AK: I often see both men and women facing the same challenges, many of which revolve around desire and expectations. Sometimes we expect less from ourselves but desire more. We may have the desire to play a big, critical role but think we can’t achieve it. And we sometimes think that our environment, or the people around us, should support us more so perhaps we put in less effort due to that expectation.

Expectations come from a lot of sources. The most critical one for women is probably the perceived expectations from the significant others in their lives. It starts with parents; the way they raised her, the way they look at her, how they judge her, how they expect

her to support herself, what kinds of things they praise her for, and so on. I once had a client who thought she just needed half a million dollars to “secure” herself and after that she would stop working. Although she was successful, she told me, “I just need this job for financial security; once I have that, I will not work.”

Other times, the reason women work is not a very healthy one. They may work in high positions just to prove that they can. It’s like a source of revenge deep down. They want to prove it to the significant people in their lives; they’re not necessarily doing it because it makes them happy or content. Sometimes women may have issues when it comes to internal security and feel that if they don’t work, no one will take care of them (financially). These obstacles come from society or from the way a woman was raised. As a result, the drivers for taking on leadership positions may be unhealthy, and those drivers will bring on more challenges. In general, both internal and external challenges may be somewhat exaggerated (or elevated) in a woman’s mind, causing her to push herself into a place that doesn’t fit her.

On the other hand, there are plenty of women who just want to move ahead and be the true leaders they can be. They have great vision, they have the right drivers, and they want to create an impact in the world ... they want to prove themselves in a way that shows and inspires others, not just prove to others that they can do it or do it to counter their internal shame. It’s exactly the opposite. These women are enlightened. They want to inspire others and go into their position with the mindset of “I am here to collaborate. I am here to play.”

Yet, sometimes, even these go-getter female leaders still face some difficulties when dealing with senior-level colleagues because they think they shouldn’t give orders or be perceived as the final decision maker. As a result, they show up “in the room” as if they are “consulting” with everyone, rather than being the primary decision maker, just to make sure that their colleagues are happy with the “group” decision. On the other end of the spectrum, some women come off as overly bossy because they want to prove they are a formidable component of the team.

Another interesting thing that comes into play is fear of success. I’ve worked with women leading big organizations who earned nominations as ministers, but who used to be afraid of that step because they thought that they would lose the significant people in their lives. They would think, “Maybe my partner will start to have fears. Maybe he will start to feel that he’s not competent to my level.” So they shrink themselves. They “play

small” because they don’t want people to see them through their skills. This becomes problematic because they are already shining, they are already getting attention; people are trusting them, trusting their abilities, capabilities, experience, and decisions. But they will try to minimize and show less of that because they might be afraid of “what’s next.” When it comes to fear of success, I always tell my clients that inside every fear, there is a desire. And the desire is exactly the opposite of the fear. So, when you are feeling successful, then you crave more success. And if there is someone in your life who will leave you due to that success, then that is the wrong person to be beside you. You may need to reassess your relationships.

Sometimes fear of success comes from not yet having or experiencing success. You might think of this as “imposter syndrome”: “I’m not equivalent or competent, or I’m a fake or a fraud.” Once you experience success, confidence will come, because confidence is a consequence of your wins. Your quick wins are the things that you will succeed at — and the failures that you will learn from, too. The way you look at these quick wins, the way you see yourself there ... this is the main driver toward power and influence.

Cutter Consortium: You contributed to the book *A Woman’s Work*. Can you tell us about what you offered to your readers?

AK: I wrote about having a vision and about the mindset of a business — what’s behind the business. There’s a mindset when it comes to anything. There are three aspects to mindset: emotions, behaviors/actions, and thoughts or thinking process. This is my specialty area. I believe that when people reach a certain level in their career, they don’t need more skills to learn. Instead, they need someone who can understand their perspective — and even help them change that perspective. Just a 2% change in perspective will have a great impact on a person’s actions. I wrote about having a vision as a leader, where that vision comes from, and how to formalize it.

Prior to that contribution, I met with 200 leaders and, among that group, saw people who are achieving from a place they love. When passion is high, achievements are high. I refer to this group as “thriving.” They are doing great stuff, impacting the world in different aspects. Then there are people who have fewer achievements but still have a lot of passion; I refer to them as “mounting.” These people are just on their way; they need time to bring in more achievements from the place they love. And then there are people who don’t have

passion or haven’t yet explored their passion (they didn’t achieve more, in comparison to others). I refer to this group as “sailing.” They are just discovering the world around them and are people who are doing a lot of great things. They are role models, for example, but are not aligned with their achievements. They have something I call “low-wattage syndrome” — they need the extra voltage in their lives. These are the people I work with as my niche. I work with them to “get the spark back” in their lives and to help them align their passion with their achievements.

I discovered a lot of challenges and mistakes that people make to get to “that place.” I learned that having a vision has to start with your dreams — the image/desire that you want, the way you see yourself in the future, and how you see yourself (and your capabilities) today. Vision is a combination of these three things. When we see organizations that are not moving, it’s because the leader can’t clearly see what’s next. But with more clarity comes more smoothness; with more clarity comes more decisive decisions, more assertiveness; and with that comes a lot of engagement, enlightenment, and impact. The exact opposite happens when people don’t align with their vision. They can’t see clearly what’s next.

In my contribution to *A Woman’s Work*, I also wrote about my journey and the challenges I have faced. My recommendation in that book: keep moving regardless of who believes in you. Trust your inner voice. You might not see things very clearly just yet. It might be foggy, where you just see what’s two meters in front of you, but just move ahead and you will see the next two meters when you move, then you will see the next two.

And the other thing I say is trust that your inner voice is a true thing, like your intuition. When it comes to management, people sometimes might ignore that “voice” and, in the end, will regret it. Or sometimes our conscious can’t comprehend everything that’s happening around us at the moment, but we *feel* it. But because it’s too much, too quick, we can’t speak about it. So we need to slow down when making decisions. We need to slow down trying to impress ourselves and others. We just need to listen to what that inner voice is telling us — and move from there.

Cutter Consortium: Do you have any final thoughts you’d like to add about leadership and women?

AK: When it comes to leadership and women, there are three phases: the first phase is when women are about to get a promotion; the second is when they are moving

things along well—when things are working for them; and the third is when they are actively looking for what’s next. And with each one comes new challenges.

In the first phase, it’s about the anxiety that will come if they are willing to accept the fear of success: “Will I succeed? Will my peers accept me? Will my colleagues reject me? Will I lose significant people in my life?” I always tell women to stop and think about what their problems were yesterday, and what kinds of problems they have today. And let’s *celebrate* those problems. Then in the second phase, women think more about the tools of success: “How can I maintain this position? How can I trust myself? Am I being assertive enough when working on projects?” At this point, they may even start to feel bored, or envious. I love enviousness because when you are envious of someone, it’s the opposite of being jealous. You want what someone else has *and* you want that person to have it. Envy is a great indicator for what we want next. If a woman is envious seeing another woman lead a great organization and be an influencer in her field, it indicates that she needs to be in that position, too. She’s eager to be such an influencer. So just listen to your drivers.

When women are about to move to the third stage, some will start to “play small” just because they are afraid of what’s next. This is really important. I work with a woman who is leading in the banking sector; she’s phenomenal, but her true dream is to live as a housewife. She’s really great at what she does, but her skills and the way she “shows up” started to play out like a curse for her. People started to look to her for more and more things. So, when you speak to her, she will say, “Enough, already, 30 years of working.” But what she is really doing is pushing people away so that they can’t make judgments about her wanting to be a housewife. Sometimes women judge themselves; they judge their desires. Sometimes the desire is exactly opposite of the woman I just described: the desire is to be CEO. And a woman might self-judge that desire because she thinks she’s not supposed to do that.

Some women will say to me, “Now that I am in a new position, a very high one, what’s next? How can I overcome challenges that I have today?” I tell them that they have everything they need. Any experience in life counts, even outside the workplace, because you get to that new position carrying everything you have brought along the way. You carry with you the positive, the negative, the unique things — you bring all kinds of experiences into that role. You just need some time to settle down into your new position before worrying

about the challenges ahead. Life events are similar to challenges faced in the workplace, so we just need to bring in the parts of our life where we have faced something similar — and handle it in a similar way.

To build on your strengths, don’t focus on increasing your weaknesses; overcome those weaknesses. I see this often with great leaders: they focus on the thing that makes them great. If it’s business development, they focus on that aspect of the business and then bring in other people who are great at operations — and they work together. So, know your skills and know your strengths and then collaborate with others who are *in love* with other areas. Having such a collaboration and mindset is awesome and will give you incredible results. This will get leaders to new places. They don’t have to be experts in their field, they need to be *the experts who lead experts*. They don’t have to put pressure on themselves to learn more stuff to prove that they know *everything* and are therefore capable of leading. They just need to appreciate what others have and identify the talent. They should focus on *their core skill* (the thing they can do like no one else) and bring to their team others who are great at *their specialty*. Leaders must help their colleagues shine. When helping others shine, they will also shine.

Women sometimes think that they need to be everyone, they need to play all the roles; they need to be successful, and they need to impress. I tell my clients that you can never be everyone, so just be yourself. You will never be excellent at all the roles: motherhood, hosting guests, leading teams, and managing the bottom line. So just know who you are. Accept that you will be great in one area but may need help in others.

Finally, if you are someone who’s leading from a place of “caring” (because you care for children at home, for example), then use that caring everywhere. This is your secret weapon. We all have something unique within ourselves. Once we realize what that is and start using it, we will win hearts and achieve our goals.

Areej Khataybih is the founder of The Spark Back, a leadership and executive coaching company. Her coaching style encompasses a unique combination of psychology, transformational coaching, and business development. Dr. Khataybih has spent more than 15 years working with C-suite-level executives and CEOs, mostly in software development houses. For more than 11 years, she studied in Jordan, the US, and the UK with a special focus on the psychology behind the performance of CEOs and helping high achievers live out their secret dreams by creating the future they want. Dr. Khataybih is coauthor of the best-selling book A Woman’s Work. She can be reached at hello@thesparkback.com.



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