Viola Maxwell-Thompson
Guest Editor

Diversity in Tech:

Are We Moving the Needle or Just Idling?

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Opening Statement

by Viola Maxwell-Thompson, Guest Editor

Two challenges have plagued corporate America wholistically and the technology industry specifically: the presence of workforce inequities experienced by people of color and the lack of meaningful and sustainable actions addressing these inequities. Statistics representing the number of women of color, Black, and Latinx professionals working in the technology industry overall, not to mention those holding leadership positions, remain in the single digits. As the former president and CEO of an organization of Black technology professionals and a former partner of a "Big Four" management consulting firm, I have witnessed corporate leaders launch new initiatives, commit millions of dollars to effect changes, and hire chief diversity officers who are often not empowered to effect those changes. The result is little to no movement in the hiring, retention, and advancement of their diverse workforce. This causes me to question whether we are seeing meaningful forward movement or whether we are just idling in place.

Are companies still unsure about their role and ways to create a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive workplace? We often hear that it's hard to change a culture or long-standing practices, but when issues impact the bottom line, change becomes imminent. Twenty-five years ago, the representation of Black professionals in the technology industry was at 3%, and today it sits at only 7%.[1] How long are we supposed to idle in this position? When will companies stop falling back on excuses and outdated, inaccurate myths? The data has been analyzed, the challenges documented, and tons of recommendations offered, and still people of color aren't experiencing a level playing field.

The social unrest that occurred in the US in 2020 was amplified because volumes of people were outraged by the killing of a Black man on the streets of Minneapolis, Minnesota. It was a reckoning for many who may not have been in tune with what people of color in this country have been experiencing every day of their lives. This murder and countless other deaths in the past year started a movement that caused individuals to look more closely at inequitable practices they may have been fostering or witnessing — and to call out such unjust acts. As a result, we have started to see more women of color being considered for roles when, historically, they would have been overlooked.

> *Are companies still unsure about their role and ways to create a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive workplace?*

But will this be amplified and replicated to create systemic changes across the industry? Will we finally start to see representation move into double-digit numbers? Will the number of women of color holding C-suite technology titles increase? Will the representation of people of color in senior-level positions be equalized? Will compensation and other benefits be equally aligned across the enterprise? Will companies embrace the nuances of their workforce and celebrate the differences? With the move to working from home during the pandemic, will leadership be more creative when addressing the work-life balance issues women and men face? These are some of the questions I find myself considering as CEOs and other executives make commitments and pledges to assess their current state and reprioritize the importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts.

In This Issue

It is through this issue of *Cutter Business Technology Journal* (*CBTJ*) that we hope to remind CEOs of the challenges that remain unaddressed and out of balance. The authors speak from personal experiences, extensive research, and a deep desire to contribute toward changing the DEI narrative. They share proven best practices and procedural changes that must be followed so that this time, the outcomes of CEOs' commitments

will look different, and those impacted will finally be able to have more equitable work and life experiences.

Our five articles highlight the challenges that people of color experience as technology professionals, with a focus on women of color and other diverse groups, while bringing forward solutions that will close the divide. These solutions provide step-by-step actions to move from idling to overdrive!

Our first article is written by Robert D. Scott, a Fellow of the Cutter Business Technology Council and Business Technology & Digital Transformation Strategies practice. As a former technology industry executive and current VP responsible for the development of Black and Latinx technology professionals, Scott is uniquely positioned to share insights into the hiring, retention, and advancement myths that are pervasive in corporate America. He explains why the needle is not moving, and asks, "What needs to happen to truly make a system change *this time*, versus the many previous attempts?" Scott feels that organizations are "stuck on the 'D' part of diversity, equity, and inclusion." If true, it would certainly explain why employees of color don't feel much has changed. He discusses the importance of equally aligning all three letters: "Unless organizations take an equally aggressive stance toward building equity in development processes *and* working to create a more welcoming and inclusive environment, the net outcome will be the same." After Scott outlines the myths surrounding DEI and explanations that nullify those myths, he summarizes his article with six key strategies that any company can follow to commit to shifting their mindsets.

Upcoming Topics

The Role of Technology in Sustainability
Deishin Lee

Sustainability II
Deishin Lee

Cyber Attacks & Strategies That Matter
Anjali Kaushik

Next, we offer insight from Damon Carter, whose 25 years of HR experience across multiple industries and leadership roles at several *Fortune* 50 companies qualify him to lend his voice to this topic. He shares examples of what hasn't worked and provides practical solutions. Carter states that "in order to effectively answer today's call for progressive leadership, technology leaders must begin taking a different approach that will lead to a fundamental shift in core organizational practices and procedures that have historically contributed to the disparate and unjust treatment of people of color." While calling for progressive leadership, he outlines a key pathway to launching a successful DEI journey with measurable and sustainable results: "Leaders must be willing to step into uncharted territory by employing DEI strategies that are progressive and innovative."

Next, Benjamin Duke hammers home the need for more actions and fewer words. He highlights how companies have stated their verbal commitment to DEI, but their results do not reflect these commitments. Black employees are left feeling a misalignment between their company's public comments about supporting racial justice while failing to address the concerns of their Black employees. Duke also profiles the inequities that other diverse communities experience in the workplace. He mentions how changes we were forced to implement because of COVID-19 have showcased how "relatively inexpensive, small, and doable organizational changes can help remove artificial structural barriers that may prevent people with disabilities[, for example,] from being recruited or given the opportunity to flourish at tech companies." In his closing, Duke calls for radical changes in business culture that will increase company profits at the same time they increase employee harmony.

In our fourth article, Noelle Silver focuses on the challenges women of color and other underrepresented groups face in the technology industry at all points along the career continuum. She discusses how hiring and promotion practices aren't designed to embrace the uniqueness of these women, often resulting in their inability to be given a fair chance at open positions. Silver's nontraditional successful career journey promotes the importance of organizations like the Reboot Representation Tech Coalition, which creates alternate pathways for underrepresented individuals to help them become gainfully employed in a rapidly growing industry. She shares five actions individuals and companies can take to "help the DNA of the technology industry evolve and create a better world

for everyone." If this was everyone's goal, we would all benefit from the evolution.

Finally, Keren Joseph-Browning rounds out our issue by analyzing gender stereotypes that may be holding back female leaders. Her research shows there isn't a lack of qualified women in the pipeline, though many believe the opposite. Joseph-Browning then draws a line between these beliefs and the stereotypes impeding women's ascension into leadership positions. She asks, "Is the determination of women's effectiveness as leaders fact-based, or a perception that has become a reality?" Joseph-Browning suggests that "HR professionals, working with senior leaders, must take the path of most resistance that will produce real change in our organizations, rather than simply implementing a quick fix." This suggestion will be transformative and the results impactful.

It's Time to Shift Gears

Our intent in this issue is to outline why current approaches have fallen short and explain why this lack of improvement should no longer be excused or accepted. Studies show that women have started leaving the tech industry in record numbers since the onset of COVID-19. The reasons that were limiting their career advancement, such as toxic cultures, lack of opportunities, work-life balance, and lack of sponsorship, are the same reasons they are electing to take the off ramp. Additionally, people of color are "tapping out" of the industry either to find companies whose cultures align with their values or to pursue entrepreneurship. If these trends continue, the landscape of diverse professionals in this industry will remain negligible. As a Black woman who has committed herself to mentoring and supporting the advancement of people of color in this industry, I cannot accept that destiny.

We hope these articles provide corporate America's leadership with practical examples and actionable steps that will allow them to shift out of this idling gear we have been experiencing and into full drive. Leadership must lead, and demand systemic, bold transformational changes that are long overdue. There are professionals within companies as well as external to companies who are more than capable of helping validate the effectiveness of DEI strategy. We don't

have to continue relying on the trial-and-error approach because these individuals already know what will work and can share those insights.

I fundamentally believe that CEOs and other industry leaders want to see a workforce that resembles the demographics of this country at all levels within a corporation. These leaders want to create an environment where professionals enjoy their job, embrace the culture of the company, feel valued and heard, and have an equitable path to the C-suite because studies have proven that a diverse, powerful workforce will be engaged, creative, insightful, and committed to contributing to the company's success. So, we don't need to idle any longer. Let's shift into gear and get going.

> Determine never to be idle. No person will have occasion to complain of the want of time, who never loses any. It is wonderful how much may be done, if we are always doing.
>
> — Thomas Jefferson, *Letters of Thomas Jefferson*

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[1]Gruman, Galen. "IT Snapshot: Ethnic Diversity in the Tech Industry." *Computerworld*, 16 July 2020.

Viola Maxwell-Thompson is Board Director at Insight Global, a privately held staffing firm based in Atlanta. She serves on its audit committee and provides advisory services to its diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) practice. Ms. Maxwell-Thompson is a nationally recognized thought leader in business transformation, DEI best practices, and leadership development. Previously, she was President and CEO of IT Senior Management Forum (ITSMF), a national organization committed to the continuous professional development of Black senior-level technology executives. She joined ITSMF after a successful career as partner at Ernst & Young, where she specialized in organizational development and technology implementation. Ms. Maxwell-Thompson is often featured in the media for her expert insights on a variety of business topics, and she has been quoted in numerous leading industry and consumer publications and books, including CIO, Cutter Consortium, *Chicago Tribune, Black Enterprise, The Connector's Advantage, and Diversity Careers. Ms. Maxwell-Thompson received the PinkTech award and the Harlem Fine Arts' Salute to African Americans in Technology award, and she was a finalist for both the Women in ITUSA award and the Leadership Character Awards. Ms. Maxwell-Thompson earned her bachelor of arts degree from Lake Forest College and is certified in project management. She serves on two nonprofit boards, was appointed to the board of advisors for AboveBoard, and is a published author. She can be reached at viola.thompson@tmtassociatesllc.com.*

Diversity in Tech: Stuck in First Gear

by Robert D. Scott

Over the past two years, US technology companies have ramped up their efforts to diversify their workforce. Motivated first by publicity highlighting their low enrollment of people of color and then by explosive examples of social injustice in the news, organizations became "woke" to the need to address the obvious disparities more aggressively in their workforce. Many companies announced major initiatives: donating funds, recommitting to hiring goals, implementing diversity training programs, and so forth. Much was made of these pronouncements. But as the protests subsided, so did the proclamations of change within corporate America.

So, of course, there is skepticism that any of these promises led to tangible outcomes. As Figure 1 illustrates, there are still-underwhelmingly low numbers of people of color, especially at higher career levels.[1] Figure 2 shows similarly dismal numbers for women of color.[2] Since corporations are not required to disclose statistics on the composition of their workforce, tracking broad progress is difficult at best.

Most organizations appear stuck on the "D" part of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Success is defined by headcount: do I have more (fill in the blank) than I did before. Resources, namely time and money, are invested in recruiting and usually prefaced by the lament that "there are just not enough qualified diverse candidates out there." This presumption is blatantly false. Qualified candidates with technical education and training are available in ever-increasing numbers. But unconscious bias makes them invisible. Unconscious bias prevents corporations from looking in nontraditional spaces, like historically minority-serving educational institutions or organizations like NPower, a national nonprofit providing free training to military veterans and young adults from underserved communities, preparing them for careers in information technology. Or if found, unconscious bias blinds the recruiting process from seeing technical expertise and leadership skills that manifest in nontraditional ways.

Over the past five years, surveys have made it clear that dramatic change is needed to make the composition of technology companies truly representative from a diversity standpoint; to make salaries comparable across categories like gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation; and to modify the makeup of corporate boards to show some semblance of diversity. For example, Wiley's "Diversity in Tech: 2021 US Report," released in August, "verifies the pace of progress is too slow in addressing the lack of diversity in US technology-focused jobs and reveals insights that underscore the challenges companies must address to build more diverse workforces."[3]

Why is the needle not moving? What needs to happen to truly make a systemic change *this time*, versus the many previous attempts? In this article, we debunk three pervasive myths, identify the qualities of an equitable and inclusive culture, and describe strategies organizations can use to meet their goals of becoming more diverse, equitable, and inclusive.

Myth #1: "Diverse Tech Talent Doesn't Exist"

Reality: Diverse technical talent *does exist*. It just does not necessarily look like what corporate recruiters traditionally expect. Diverse technical talent is also not always found in the typical places corporate recruiters look, like the placement offices of majority-serving colleges and universities. Rather than opting for traditional 9-to-5 office roles, diverse technical talent doesn't necessarily work in traditional ways, either. These workers seek to manage their work to accommodate a balance between family, education, and community service. The expectation of this new workforce is to manifest their talent and creativity in novel ways, and recruiting processes need to adapt.

In a strange way, the pandemic may help this situation. Because corporations have been forced to pivot to a work-from-home strategy, traditional thought on how work is done has shifted. As a result, there is a greater willingness to accept different work styles.

Figure 1 — Distribution of all employees by race, ethnicity, and career level. (Adapted from CNBC.)

Figure 2 — Distribution of female employees by race, ethnicity, and career level. (Adapted from CNBC.)

Myth #2: "If We Could Hire Enough, Our Workforce Diversity Would Fix Itself"

Reality: Statistics show a continuing lack of progress in achieving a diverse corporate workforce. According to data reported by CNBC, white workers comprise 64% of entry-level positions.[4] In other words, only 36% of entry-level positions are going to minority populations. However, 85% of executive positions are held by whites, which demonstrates the promotion gap that minorities face.[5] And, according to the Economic Policy Institute, women and minorities continue to earn less than their white male colleagues.[6] So hiring alone is not fixing the problem.

Myth #3: "Even If We Do Manage to Hire Minority Candidates, They Won't Stay"

Reality: There is an element of truth to this. But the devil is in the details. Whether they're aware of it or not, every business has an organizational culture, defined by the values and customs that make up their day-to-day activities. And women and minorities are increasingly unwilling to tolerate a work culture that is unsupportive or, worse, toxic. They actively evaluate their organization's culture and are willing to walk away. They choose to leave a culture where they do not feel like they are treated equitably and do not feel welcome and included. A business's culture includes how goals are set and communicated; how information is shared (or not shared); and how individuals, teams, and business units work together, but corporations are failing to build a DEI culture that is truly equitable and inclusive.

> *Organizations must take the specific initiative to review and examine the key processes they use to manage, promote, and reward their workforces.*

Equity & Inclusion

Equity is the fair treatment, access, opportunity, and advancement for all people, while at the same time striving to identify and eliminate barriers that have prevented the full participation of some groups. Tackling equity issues requires an understanding of conscious and unconscious bias, their root causes, and the resulting differential treatment and discriminatory consequences based on any difference: race, color, national origin, age, marital status, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, disability, religion, height, weight, or veteran status.

Organizations must take the specific initiative to review and examine the key processes they use to manage, promote, and reward their workforces. These processes include recruiting practices, performance management systems, work assignments, promotion determination, and compensation. The same unconscious biases impacting the recruiting processes are at play in these key internal processes. Bias hinders career progression. And as a byproduct, inequity adversely impacts

recruiting. Your corporate reputation will precede you; if your company is seen as one that does not grow and develop people of color, the message will get out and recruiting diverse talent will get much harder.

Inclusive environments are places where any individual or group feels welcomed, respected, supported, valued, and able to fully participate. An inclusive and welcoming culture embraces differences and offers respect in words and actions for all people, while fostering diversity of thought, ideas, perspectives, and values. Leaders must invest time, resources, and courage to make progress toward creating an inclusive environment by authentically bringing traditionally excluded individuals and/or groups into processes, activities, and decision and policy making in a way that shares power and ensures equal access to opportunities and resources.

Having an inclusive culture means everyone is made to feel like they have a seat at the table and a real voice that is heard. Different perspectives are sought out and valued, and innovation and creativity are celebrated and rewarded, not challenged or ignored.

Robert Sellers, Chief Diversity Officer at the University of Michigan, has often emphasized the importance of considering all three topics — diversity, equity, and inclusion — which he likens to various aspects of attending a dance:[7]

- "Diversity means everyone is invited to the party."

- "Inclusion means everyone gets to contribute to the playlist."

- "Equity means everyone has the opportunity to dance."

The bottom line: building diversity is necessary but not sufficient. Unless organizations take an equally aggressive stance toward building equity in development processes *and* working to create a more welcoming and inclusive environment, the net outcome will be the same. What can organizations do to truly make a difference? Based on my experience in corporate America, my work at a major institution of higher education, and my current role leading professional development for the IT Senior Management Forum (ITSMF), a national organization dedicated to developing Black technology leaders for senior executive positions, I offer six key strategies for consideration:

1. **Measure, measure, measure.** It is a truism that an organization measures what it values. Goals (not quotas) are set, data is gathered and reviewed, and action is taken. Organizations need to have clear measures in place for DEI. Measuring recruitment, hiring, and enrollment (overall and by business unit) is key. However, this is meaningless if the organization does not review measures on a regular basis and take action to move toward goals. Several available measurement frameworks are available. Pick one and commit to using it. You will not hit all your goals overnight, but let people see that you're making real efforts. The effort alone may provide encouragement to the organization that leadership is seriously trying.

2. **Recognize and reward.** Consciously and publicly share success stories as well as shortcomings. Celebrate progress. Acknowledge failings and take steps for corrective action. Rewarding positive progress in DEI creates a reinforcing flywheel effect; success breeds success. Conversely, the organization needs to see that failure leads to negative consequences.

3. **Invest in personal development.** Organizations need to invest in their knowledge and understanding of DEI issues. *Everyone* should have a chance to increase their cultural competency. Develop an experiential learning program and make it available to all. All employees need cultural intelligence skills, which include learning about unconscious bias, allyship, and other key DEI concepts. It is especially important to provide focused development opportunities for various minority groups. This is not remedial training; rather, it focuses on the unique life experiences that these groups face as they climb the leadership ladder. Organizations like the ITSMF and the Hispanic IT Executive Council (HITEC) offer comprehensive academies designed to provide focused, culturally relevant leadership training and mentoring. These programs have proven highly successful, with graduates earning expanded work assignments or promotions within a year of completion. Moreover, graduates of these programs feel valued and supported by their organizations for allowing them to participate. Recently, ITSMF offered in-house professional development workshops for minority constituency groups. This has increased the number of employees benefiting from culturally relevant leadership development.

4. **Explore partnerships and sponsorships.** Companies can build additional professional development opportunities for their employees through partnerships with organizations like ITSMF. Other possible partners include HITEC, Black Data Processing Associates (BDPA), the National Society of Black Engineers (NSBE), the Society of Hispanic Professional Engineers (SHPE), and Women in Technology (WIT). Such partnerships provide their constituent employees with opportunities to attend symposiums, participate in leadership development forums, and build strong networks that enable mentorship and coaching.

> *Organizations need to invest in their knowledge and understanding of DEI issues.* Everyone *should have a chance to increase their cultural competency.*

5. **Build the pipeline.** Organizations have a responsibility to help build the pipeline of diverse talent. For example, organizations can invest in college mentoring programs designed to recruit and retain college students in technology curriculums. ITSMF has, for one, a rapidly growing program. Additionally, companies can encourage their minority employees to volunteer as mentors for college students. This is a win for the students and a win for the employees as they develop a sense of community stewardship. Access to internships is a key benefit to students; it is a proven fact that internships provide an advantage in recruiting for permanent positions.

6. **Lead from the top.** Visible leadership in the DEI space is the single most important factor impacting results. If the most senior leaders are engaged and committed, others follow. If the senior leaders are absent, nothing will change. It's ultimately up to senior leadership to create an inclusive environment. Start by formally training leaders in inclusivity best practices: What is inclusivity? Why does it matter? Then leadership should move to develop specific strategies for making the workplace more inclusive. Finally, leaders should be visible and proactive in implementing the strategy, reviewing results, and acting to improve as the organization evolves.

Moving the DEI needle is more than a focus on enrollment. It means moving beyond headcount to understanding how processes and culture define access, availability to resources, and information. To be successful, organizations must make a commitment to a mindset change. If diversity is a sprint, equity and inclusion is a marathon. Each requires different training, conditioning, and commitment.

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[2]Stevens (see 1).

[3]"New Survey by Wiley Looks at Diversity Deficit in US Tech Workforce." Press release, Business Wire, 10 August 2021.

[4]Stevens (see 1).

[5]Stevens (see 1).

[6]Stevens (see 1).

[7]"Defining DEI." University of Michigan, 2021.

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Mr. Scott is a seasoned IT executive of Procter & Gamble Company (P&G), retiring after 32 years of service as the VP of Innovation & Architecture, Global Business Services. In this capacity, Mr. Scott was responsible for identifying and leveraging emerging information technologies, stewardship for the P&G IT enterprise architecture, and innovation of new internal and external IT-enabled business models. Over the course of his P&G career, he worked in a wide variety of roles, including an international assignment in Brussels, Belgium, first serving as Regional IT Leader (covering Europe, the Middle East, and Africa) and then as CIO for the Fabric & Home Care business unit. Mr. Scott also served as the P&G Corporate Function CIO and was a core leader of P&G's Global Shared Services implementation program. In addition, he was the VP of IT Global Market Development, responsible for P&G's global IT program for retail customer systems, including the retail e-business strategy. Mr. Scott has also served as a Principal Consultant with iGATE as well as through his own consulting practice.

He brings a wealth of business experience coupled with an understanding of information technologies and how these can be leveraged to develop or renew business models. Mr. Scott's areas of expertise include business-IT strategy and planning, shared services strategy and implementation, organization performance, and human capital development. He also participates on the boards of several local community social services and arts groups. Mr. Scott is the former Director of the Information Systems Executive Forum of the Ross School of Business at the University of Michigan. He is a member of several other IT executive councils. He can be reached at experts@cutter.com.

Building an Inclusive Workplace Culture Through Dynamic Leadership

by Damon Carter

Since 2014, the US technology industry has openly acknowledged the immediate need to significantly increase the representation of people of color at all organizational levels, and particularly in management and executive positions. At that time, many technology companies recognized myriad positive business impacts of having a more diverse workforce, and they made a variety of public commitments to begin actively addressing this issue. Consequently, many of these strategic efforts focused on establishing diverse talent pipelines and enhancing recruiting tactics to create new opportunities for diverse technical talent.

In the wake of George Floyd's 2020 murder, nationwide protests against unjust policing of Blacks and Hispanics, along with numerous acts of violence against the LGBTQ+ and Asian-Pacific Islander communities, brought about a renewed awakening regarding the cumulative impacts of systemic racism in our society. The protests also led to a heightened awareness of economic inequalities and employment disparities consistently experienced by people of color. Many corporations across America, including technology companies, expressly denounced systemic racism and made public statements committing to cultivate more diverse and inclusive workplace cultures that will create fair and equitable employment opportunities for people of color and collectively dismantle systemic racism in our society. For instance, a recent survey of 42 top tech companies discovered they collectively committed almost US $4 billion to improving diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) moving forward.[1]

Unfortunately, the technology industry has continued to struggle mightily to make significant progress with respect to this matter, and the lack of representation of people of color persists today. According to a recent article in *Fast Company*:

> [A] Wiley report found that 68% of businesses surveyed acknowledged a lack of diversity in their tech teams, with many saying they're working to fix it. The report also found that 64% of those surveyed "said they believe people from minority backgrounds are discriminated against in the recruitment process for technology jobs."[2]

In order to effectively address a systemic problem, technology leaders must apply a systemic solution.

There is a significant difference between seeking to improve diversity metrics for external gratification and making an internal commitment to being truly transformative by thoughtfully overhauling the work environment for the future. Moreover, cultivating an inclusive workplace culture is a fundamentally human issue that warrants a substantial shift in organizational behavior consistently applied over an extended period of time. Technology leaders must be willing to take a different approach by fully embracing DEI in a holistic and sustainable way.

> *There is a significant difference between seeking to improve diversity metrics for external gratification and making an internal commitment to being truly transformative by thoughtfully overhauling the work environment for the future.*

The Reality of the Situation

People of color are significantly underrepresented across the technology industry at all levels, including executive, middle management, and technical roles. This includes technology-based firms and in other industries with IT functions. A *Computerworld* article from last summer examined ethnic diversity in the technology industry and reported the latest demographic data from the US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC):[3]

- **White** — 68%

- **Black** — 7%

- **Hispanic/Latinx** — 8%

- **Asian American** — 14%

Furthermore, according to a recent *CIO* article, the National Center for Women & Information Technology (NCWIT) reported: "Of the 25% of women working in tech, Asian women make up just 5% of that number, while Black and Hispanic women accounted for 3% and 1%, respectively."[4]

> *By wisely and thoughtfully employing a deliberate strategic effort over time, technology leaders can indeed successfully advance DEI practices in an impactful way for their respective organizations.*

Answering the Call for Progressive Leadership

Technology leaders must collectively leverage their resources and influence to drive transformational changes that will create fair, equitable, and just employment opportunities for people of color and all underrepresented groups. Unfortunately, to date there has been minimal progress despite previous commitments to begin addressing the lack of diverse talent. However, these commitments were likely made in response to the resounding external pressure mounted by government officials and the public at large to significantly improve their respective diversity metrics. That being the case, these various strategic efforts collectively have not significantly improved the overall representation of people of color in technology over the past several years.

In order to effectively answer today's call for progressive leadership, technology leaders must begin taking a different approach that will lead to a fundamental shift in core organizational practices and procedures that have historically contributed to the disparate and unjust treatment of people of color. Therefore, technology leaders must fully embrace DEI strategy in a holistic and sustainable way to effectively transform the

workplace culture for people of color. By wisely and thoughtfully employing a deliberate strategic effort over time, technology leaders can indeed successfully advance DEI practices in an impactful way for their respective organizations.

The following sections outline four leadership actions to help technology leaders successfully launch their DEI journey.

Step 1: Lead with Purpose & Conviction

Technology leaders must consider taking the following initial actions among themselves as they start their organizations' own unique DEI journey, including:[5]

- **Acknowledge the problem.** Given today's prevailing social justice issues, silence from technology companies could be easily interpreted by employees as indifference or acceptance of the status quo. Instead, technology leaders must first acknowledge the existence of systemic racism in society and clearly communicate their desire to be a part of the solution for the organization moving forward. You cannot effectively address a problem without first acknowledging the problem exists.

- **Reflect and discuss.** Technology leaders should create safe spaces for their leadership teams to collectively reflect and confidentially discuss the extent to which implicit biases have negatively affected the organization's workplace culture.

- **Make a genuine commitment to being better.** Technology leaders must make a firm commitment to mitigating the negative impacts of all forms of social injustice in the organization for people of color and cultivate a workplace culture that consistently promotes equality for all.

Technology leaders must actively lead with conviction by reimagining the workplace culture and establishing a new vision that consistently demonstrates equality, equity, and justice for all employees, at all times.

Step 2: Build Genuine Connections

Technology leaders must work to thoroughly understand the specific elements of the existing workplace culture that have contributed to the present state of inequality for people of color and all marginalized groups of employees.[6] This includes developing a clear understanding of key diversity metrics and

identifying areas of strength and opportunity across the organization. Furthermore, obtaining a deep understanding of the current state of the work environment requires leaders to thoughtfully engage, listen, and learn from all employees adversely impacted by disparate treatment in the workplace. Technology leaders should take the following actions:

- **Develop an informed perspective.** Before engaging employees to discuss how to establish a fair and equitable workplace culture, technology leaders should conduct their own preliminary research to better understand the unique experiences of people of color. Proactively educating themselves about how people of color have historically been treated in the workplace will go a long way toward building personal credibility with all marginalized groups and will have a profound impact on their ability to make genuine connections.

- **Listen to understand.** Technology leaders must be open to having challenging conversations with people of color regarding their experiences at work. Most importantly, leaders must reassure people of color that their perspective matters to the organization and that their feedback will directly influence the fostering of a fair and equitable work environment. Technology leaders should remember to express gratitude to all participants for their vulnerability and commit to following up regarding next steps in the process.

- **Create a "speak-up" culture.** Technology leaders must employ inclusive leadership practices to cultivate a workplace environment where all employees feel valued and respected on a daily basis. According to research from Coqual (formerly known as the Center for Talent Innovation), the key characteristics of a speak-up culture include the following:[7]

  o Ensure that everyone speaks up and gets heard.

  o Make it safe to risk proposing novel ideas.

  o Give actionable feedback.

  o Take advice and implement feedback.

  o Empower team members to make decisions.

  o Share credit for team success.

Furthermore, technology leaders need to commit to establishing genuine connections, rooted in mutual respect and trust, with a segment of the employee population that has historically been made to feel ignored and disconnected. According to Michael Slepian, associate professor of leadership and ethics at Columbia Business School:

> Learning about individuals' unique strengths and unique experiences, and showing recognition for these, is what leads employees to feel valued and respected. This is what enables going beyond surface-level inclusion in favor of real, individual-based inclusion. Inclusion efforts may be well meaning, but without a backbone of support and respect, they may seem less than genuine.[8]

Step 3: Take Deliberate Strategic Actions

Next, technology leaders must thoughtfully apply targeted strategic actions to directly address prevailing inequalities for people of color in the workplace.[9] Ideally, technology leaders should utilize familiar management practices, with proven tools and resources, to effectively develop and implement a comprehensive DEI strategy. Additionally, technology leaders must create a dynamic action plan to improve the organization's current state by identifying specific talent strategies that target each stage of the employee lifecycle. Several examples include:

- **Recruitment.** Establish strategic partnerships with nonprofit organizations leading community efforts to create new recruiting pipelines for diverse technical talent, particularly early-in-career IT professionals. For instance, Year Up provides a free six-month job training program, followed by a six-month internship, with the goal of closing the opportunity gap, which includes IT and software development and support.[10] TechPACT, an organization founded by CIOs and technology leaders, seeks to close the digital divide and improve representative diversity by asking its members to take a pledge to "advancing inclusion, diversity, and equity with my team, my partners, and my community."[11]

- **Development.** Create targeted professional development strategies for people of color and encourage networking opportunities, both internally and externally. Several examples of diverse IT professional associations include the IT Senior Management Forum (ITSMF), the Black Data Processing Association (BDPA), and the Hispanic IT Executive Council (HITEC).

- **Advancement.** Ensure people of color are included in annual succession planning efforts.

- **Retention.** Institute exit interviews, stay interviews, and/or focus group sessions to identify and proactively address negative employee experiences.

> *Technology leaders must embrace opportunities to partner with other companies and nonprofit organizations to help address relevant social justice initiatives in their local communities.*

Step 4: Activate New Community Engagements

In today's social and political climate, both employees and consumers increasingly expect companies to get actively involved in supporting social justice initiatives.[12] According to a recent *Forbes* article:

> While the changes companies have made haven't gone unnoticed, Americans expect more, with 55% saying they want to see brands do more than make statements and monetary donations. And they're rewarding those who step up: According to a recent survey of nearly 4,000 American adults by marketing consultancy Ketchum, 20% of consumers are more likely to support companies and leaders who publicly advocate for social justice causes and prioritize diversity and inclusion in their charitable efforts and hiring practices.[13]

Therefore, technology leaders must embrace opportunities to partner with other companies and nonprofit organizations to help address relevant social justice initiatives in their local communities. In a recent *Harvard Business Review* article, Paul Argenti, professor of corporate communication at the Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth College, proposes that organizations consider the following three questions first:[14]

1. Does the issue align with your company's strategy?

2. Can you meaningfully influence the issue?

3. Will your constituencies agree with speaking out?

It is important for technology leaders to clearly communicate the overall purpose of the social justice initiative to all employees and clearly explain how it aligns with the company's core values. They should also invite employees to get actively involved in supporting new community engagement and directly engage the board of directors to strategically support it.

It is important to commit to addressing a social justice issue that is bigger than the organization's current sphere of influence. Taking this approach opens the door to establishing new strategic partnerships that create continuous learning experiences for all parties involved in the community engagement.

Leadership in Action

The Technology in Business Schools Roundtable (TBSr) is a global organization composed of technology leaders who are responsible for managing IT in business schools across the US and Canada.[15] The organization is devoted to providing opportunities for technology leaders in higher education to collaborate, learn, and share best practices through networking sessions. Earlier this year, several members of the TBSr board of directors committed to inviting its membership to engage in a robust discussion. They acknowledged the various challenges and opportunities currently facing technology leaders in business higher education related to effectively promoting diversity and inclusion. Below are several clear examples of how the TBSr board of directors effectively applied the four DEI leadership actions to initiate their own journey.

Example 1: Lead with Purpose & Conviction

First and foremost, the group collectively acknowledged a lack of diverse and inclusive workplace practices across the technology industry, including in business higher education. They also made a genuine commitment to determining how the organization could play an active role in regularly educating, engaging, and inspiring its membership to cultivate diverse and inclusive workplace practices in the future.

Example 2: Build Genuine Connections

During a series of regularly scheduled board meetings, the group openly discussed various DEI issues that they have observed in their respective organizations and shared personal stories with one another. As a result, the group began to lean into uncomfortable topics of discussion regarding prevailing DEI issues in technology based on their professional experiences and differing points of view, which resulted in genuine connections and new mutual understanding among group members. Additionally, the group shared helpful resources and best practices with one another and began to foster a continuous learning environment

focused on DEI workplace practices by identifying specific talent strategies that target each stage of the employee lifecycle.

Example 3: Take Deliberate Strategic Actions

Next, the board identified specific strategic actions that they believed the organization could effectively apply to promote diverse and inclusive workplace practices among membership. For instance:

- **Recruitment** — expand institutional memberships to include more HBCU (historically Black colleges and universities) partners.

- **Development** — identify and share actionable DEI best practices with membership.

- **Advancement** — share all job postings with membership to promote career mobility in higher education.

- **Retention** — create affinity groups among membership to obtain targeted feedback.

Example 4: Activate New Community Engagements

Lastly, the board hosted a virtual webinar session for the sole purpose of initiating an open dialogue regarding DEI with the entire membership. They educated its membership about the cumulative impacts of systemic racism on people of color in society and reviewed key strategic actions that technology leaders can take to begin cultivating a more diverse and inclusive workplace culture. The board president announced the organization's commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging.[16] Attendees were also invited to participate in several roundtable discussions to solicit their feedback regarding the organization's proposed DEI strategic actions. Each roundtable discussion was hosted by members of the board, and topics included HBCU outreach and engagement, DEI best practices in business higher education, potential DEI strategic partners in the community, and promoting authenticity and belonging in IT higher education.

Through this dynamic strategic effort, the TBSr board of directors successfully initiated an engaging conversation with its membership and learned how to advance diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging in a meaningful and sustainable way for the organization.

Starting Your DEI Journey T.O.D.A.Y™

All technology leaders need to determine how to best proceed with answering the call to effectively cultivate a more diverse and inclusive workplace culture in their own way. It starts by taking one deliberate step at a time toward building a dynamic workplace culture that consistently provides people of color with fair, equitable, and just opportunities in each area of their own employee experience. There are several key leadership commitments that are integral to the development and implementation of any successful DEI strategy, including:

- **Transparency.** Be open and honest with all employees and the local community about the organization's DEI strategy, including opportunities for improvement and planned strategic actions to properly address them.

- **Ownership.** Acknowledge that the current workplace culture is not where it needs to be with respect to DEI and hold yourself accountable for being a part of the solution moving forward.

- **Dialogue.** Consistently promote constructive discussions with all employees in order to clearly communicate the DEI strategy, solicit their feedback, and provide regular updates regarding the organization's progress toward desired goals.

- **Accountability.** Establish key performance indicators to regularly track progress against desired DEI goals, provide regular updates to all internal and external constituents, and ensure appropriate measures are instituted to hold all technology leaders accountable for doing their part on a daily basis.

- **Yearning.** Always demonstrate a strong commitment to getting better every day through your own personal growth and show a willingness to do the work required to make a difference in the lives of people of color, no matter how long it takes to do so.

Technology leaders must also acknowledge that their unique DEI journey will be daunting, intimidating, and controversial at times, for various reasons. This being the case, it is imperative for technology leaders to embrace the idea of "getting comfortable with being uncomfortable." If the organization elects to play it safe by implementing DEI strategies that are conservative in nature and do not challenge the status quo with respect to current workplace practices and procedures, then the company is not doing enough to shift the workplace

culture in a new direction, as necessary. Instead, technology leaders must be willing to step into uncharted territory by employing DEI strategies that are progressive and innovative. To successfully advance DEI workplace practices in technology that will ultimately transform the overall employee experience for people of color, all technology leaders must learn to truly value their own DEI journey more than the desired destination.

I have discovered in life that there are ways of getting almost anywhere you want to go, if you really want to go.

— Langston Hughes

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Closing the DEI Gap

by Benjamin Duke

The case for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) is overwhelming. It has long been recognized that technology company staff rosters are insufficiently diverse. Tech industry studies report that the situation is worse now than it was in 1984.[1] An often-cited report from the World Economic Forum provides a stark warning: at the current rate of progress, it will take another 100 years to achieve global gender equality.[2] A wide range of business studies have shown that companies that incorporate DEI into their mission are often market leaders and more profitable. These business studies also found that both diverse boards and diverse teams outperform.[3]

Words vs. Actions

Well-intentioned company mission statements are often deprioritized, leaving employees to voice concerns over working for tech companies with a public image of promoting diversity and inclusivity. The main observation has been that these fine words have not been subsequently matched by action. In a recent *Forbes* article, career coach Ashley Stahl wrote, "Between 2014 and 2020, Black and Latinx workers at Facebook rose by only 2% per group. In 2018, at the most recent count, Google listed only five Black female executives among their top 357 officers — that's just 1.4%!"[4] Similarly, *Wired* magazine described the actions of tech companies such as Google, Amazon, and Pinterest as "diversity theatre" for their failure to address concerns of Black employees while publicly supporting racial justice.[5] It is all too often that company payrolls bear little resemblance to the demographic profile of the area they serve.

Examples of good DEI hiring and working practices include making recruitment teams deliberately gender diverse and setting goals to promote more women to management positions. While hiring practices and retention need to improve across all underrepresented demographic groups, this article will focus on women, people with physical disabilities, and people who speak English as a new language, and how diversity measures can consider their needs.

The Call for Flexibility

A societal attitude that home and childcare duties should be carried out by women is widespread in many countries.[6] During the COVID-19 global pandemic, more women than men lost their jobs or felt they had to stop work.[7] But the IT sector initiated, and needs to continue with, COVID-19-induced societal transformation toward remote work. Thought leadership is required to engender corporate acceptance of flexible working, recognizing that employees can fully function in their roles while working remote.

> *Examples of good DEI hiring and working practices include making recruitment teams deliberately gender diverse and setting goals to promote more women to management positions.*

Workers with disabilities also benefit from flexible work. For employees who wish to work on site, corporate institutional structural barriers can be removed by adopting a policy of upgrading assistive technology to help them become more productive. However, these employees may have adapted their own homes to suit their particular individual needs. It is often easier for this population to work from home than to travel to the office. It is cheaper for employers to allow a person with a disability to work from home than to pay the conversion costs for this staffer to come into the office. A member of staff with a disability could move on within a year of the conversion expenditure, leaving behind a setup that often cannot be used by anyone else.

Certainly, it is possible that tech company DEI initiatives, which include being able to work from home if desired, will increase profits in the long run, alongside a staff satisfaction dividend. Thought leadership is required to oversee this small change in working practices.

More transparency is necessary in the tech industry as well. But as with business in general, it is difficult to get information on corporate recruiting practices at the granular level of the individual company. Thus, we cannot find out national statistics regarding how many tech companies have adopted the identified best practices of implementing diverse recruitment teams and diverse candidate pools. An ideal senior interview shortlist should include a minimum of one disabled person, one woman, and one woman of color, each of whom is a different person.

AstraZeneca seems to be going in the right direction. The company is a founding partner of the World Economic Forum's "Partnership for Racial Justice in Business" initiative.[8] This coalition of 48 organizations campaigns and provides a platform for inclusive policy change. This is the type of progressive policy thinking required to oversee adoption of change in organizational approaches to the recruitment of the senior leadership team.

> *Thought leadership and changing attitudes in tech company working practices must manifest themselves in multiple ways.*

An easy but often overlooked response to the tech industry's need to become more inclusive is the impact of collecting the correct data. For example, does the company provide childcare? How affordable is it? How often is it used? If it's underused, why? Are people able to work from home? What are the barriers to working from home? Collecting this data would be really beneficial for companies because it would help them identify what all their employees need to be productive and successful. The challenge for tech companies is not figuring out what they need to do. The real challenge is getting them to recognize that the business needs to do it. That's the critical issue.

Evolving Attitudes

DEI problems are created by offensive and archaic attitudes that persist in the workplace. Cultural and patriarchal attitudes in many countries still hold that home and childcare duties be carried out mainly by women. To begin to eradicate gender bias within tech companies, the workplace culture must change, and in order to achieve that, societal culture needs to change.

Looking at Sweden is helpful, as it is widely recognized that Sweden delivers excellent gender equality policies. Several of Sweden's government ministers are women. And paid parental leave is available to both mothers and fathers. This is the type of political impetus required to change the culture of workplace attitudes to diversity in tech companies.

Thought leadership and changing attitudes in tech company working practices must manifest themselves in multiple ways. Corporate institutional structural barriers can be removed to make the work environment more inclusive. For example, adopting a policy of upgrading assistive technology for employees who require it can help them be more productive. Providing hearing-impaired workers with cloud-based artificial intelligence–automated headphones, which memorize personalized hearing settings to access work-related audio content, can make a significant difference as well.

Relatively inexpensive, small, and doable organizational changes can help remove artificial structural barriers that may prevent people with disabilities from being recruited or given the opportunity to flourish at tech companies. These companies should be investing in strategies and tools to help them become more equitable. Onboarding and recruitment policies should be digitally accessible to potential recruits.

Tech organizations should make more of an effort to have training and consultancy delivered or led by people with disabilities. Workers with disabilities should have access to a communication system that meets their needs, where they can contact either their line manager, a designated officer, or duty officer to help address a sudden concern. These and other equality adjustment tools can support DEI efforts by creating a more supportive workplace for all.

The Language Barrier

Language can be another obstacle to DEI. Attorney Donald MacKinnon writes, "Language issues must be handled tactfully and proportionately in order to avoid potentially costly claims."[9] Legal issues aside, language barriers can cause tension in a workplace.

The universal language of business is English, but at many tech organizations, the main language of employees and customers may be different. In this instance, having access to translation services can help overcome this disparity.

Helping employees learn another language at work is one approach to breaking down diversity and ethnicity barriers and increasing inclusivity. Employers could even incentivize employees to learn another language, including sign language, and to use the new language during the working day. This may help colleagues who are not confident in speaking English to feel less isolated at work.

Using inclusive language is another strategy that can help create an equitable workplace and advance DEI. Inclusive language refers to "[avoiding] the use of certain expressions or words that might be considered to exclude particular groups of people."[10] For example, referring to "mankind" as "humankind" makes the word gender neutral.

The Perils of Inaction

Fully incorporating DEI will require political impetus from national governments to ensure tech companies and the wider community change working practices. Companies that fail to embrace and promote inclusive policies face a number of business risks. These may include a growing inability to recruit and retain staff, alongside a perception of organizational failure that may lead to a fall in valuation, with investors wanting to sell their company shares. Moreover, employers should receive macroeconomic incentives in terms of additional tax relief to offset expenses related to accessible office equipment.

Next Steps

In 2021, more than 2,000 CEOs signed the "CEO Action for Diversity & Inclusion" pledge; tech companies are a significant proportion of that number.[11] This pledge includes increasing or introducing training focused on eliminating unconscious bias for the company's workforce and designing a corporate strategic action plan for DEI improvement, which must be approved by company boards. This is clearly welcomed, but in part misfires due to a lack of political will.

What really needs to happen is there must be radical change in business culture: the workforce where the organization is based must closely match the demographic profile of the area where the business trades. Making it a legal requirement to do so would be radical, and in all honesty, currently that is the missing bit. Tech companies should lead the way here, especially when so many business studies have found profits increase

when DEI efforts are viewed as successful. Studies show beauty is in the eye of the beholder; recruiters tend to recruit people who look and sound like themselves; customers buy more from people who look and sound like themselves. The benefits of this radical suggestion are double dosed: tech companies, and the business community at large, would begin to really move the needle on DEI and also experience increased profits alongside increased employee harmony.

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5 Actions We Can Take to Increase Representation in Tech

by Noelle Silver

Women — and particularly women of color — are chronically underrepresented in tech. The situation is even more alarming for Black, Latina, and Native American women. Today, Black, Latina, and Native American women make up just 4% of the computing workforce — and things are getting worse, not better.

— Reboot Representation

According to the Reboot Representation Tech Coalition, an alliance of leaders and companies seeking to double the number of Black, Latina, and Native American women earning technology degrees, community is the element that attracts women to the field and keeps them in the industry longer. Here are five actions we can take to help the DNA of the technology industry evolve and create a better world for all.

1. Be Open to Different Cultures & Backgrounds

During every phase of growth, it's important to consider different backgrounds and cultures as you consider whom to hire and promote. If you only make your decision based on job title or degree, for example, you will eliminate candidates who have already been unfairly passed over or decided to learn through non-traditional means. It doesn't mean they are not capable. If you are not intentional, you will eliminate good candidates before even considering them.

It is also important to think about inclusive wording and messaging points when writing job descriptions. So many hiring managers copy and paste job descriptions year after year without taking the time to be thoughtful about who they are targeting and creating space for in their organizations. When creating new leadership roles, default to hire from within. I have watched organizations and leaders hire some people on potential and hold others back because they weren't a perfect fit. You have a wealth of talent in your own organization, and more often than not women and people of color are passed over for opportunities.

2. Create a Diverse Work Environment Where Everyone Feels Included

This is easier said than done, but it is achievable. Employee resource groups aren't enough; we need to establish leadership practices that encourage sharing ideas and an openness to listening to each other, even if there is disagreement. We need to normalize psychological safety in teams. We need to teach our teams to communicate with empathy and compassion, and learn to disagree and commit. I honed the practice of "disagree and commit" during my time at Amazon, as it is one of the leadership principles the company tries to instill in every employee. This approach encourages open and transparent discussion about possible options and leverages a data-driven approach to determine the outcomes and next steps. The trick is that once a data-driven decision is made, no pocket vetoes are allowed. There is no one waiting to say "I told you so" because everyone agrees on the decided direction. This takes practice and communication.

3. Encourage Employees to Bring Their Whole Selves to Work

We have a symphony of talent, interests, motivations, and values. Allowing employees to be themselves and bring their whole selves to work, including family lives, hobbies, and interests, can help them operate at their best, align with their best work, and serve in the best way, leading to happier employees and higher productivity.

"Code switch" is the term used to describe what some people of color (and any divergent thinker) have to do to be seen as the same, to avoid conflict, and avoid backlash. Code-switching is defined as the process of shifting from one linguistic code (a language or dialect) to another, depending on the social context or conversational setting. There is even a successful NPR podcast with this very name. But this practice may feel

inauthentic. It's important not only to encourage people to bring their whole selves to work but also create an environment that is accepting of this authenticity and vulnerability. There are several ways to do this; creating social media campaigns that encourage people to share all the things they care about outside work is one approach. Use company all-hands meetings to celebrate "15 minutes of fame"[1] and allow people to submit their proudest accomplishments, work or otherwise, and share them with the company. Ensure that you allow the creation of channels in Slack or Teams for individuals to share with each other a little more about their lives. This will breed trust, and with trust teams will work better together, creating more value for the business and humanity.

4. Attend Conferences Focused on Inclusion of Underrepresented

There is very little difference in technical content or expertise between mainstream events and underrepresented group events. As a top speaker globally, I have observed that the circuit of speakers at technical conferences is often the same. So when in doubt, choose to attend conferences created for underrepresented groups. Conferences like *Afrotech*, *Lesbians Who Code*, or *Women in Analytics* provide exceptional technical content and the chance to meet and mingle with people who are different from you. Envision a symphony of talent and aim to join conversations where your unique voice can make an impact. We also need to create and celebrate more role models in this space. Ensure that the event you attend has a balance of ethnic diversity, gender diversity, and neurodiversity among the people speaking and presenting. If it doesn't, ask the organizers to add more. If it does, celebrate it. If you are a member of an underrepresented group, consider submitting a talk and taking the stage. The world needs to see and hear what you have learned.

5. Offer More Opportunities for Training & Education

This is how my career began: school didn't work for me. I needed a nontraditional way to obtain knowledge, learn to code, and find early success in my career. Today, it is often thought that the only path to a technical career is through academia or a college degree, but I am proof that there are many ways to get into the industry.

Technical training and coaching can help underrepresented groups develop skills they need for high-tech jobs, but accessibility is a challenge. How do we make sure that kids and young adults know a career in tech is possible? How do they know they can learn to code, that it is not only available but also achievable? This is why I created Lift Up Tech. One component of this program helps underrepresented individuals find a role in tech they like, which is only the beginning. Participants also receive mentoring and career planning support. Communities like Lift Up Tech and others are being created around the world, based on Reboot Representation's finding, mentioned earlier, about how community and support help boost the number of people who get started and stay in technology. Now we need companies to see the value in these programs and support these groups.

> *We have to celebrate differences and elevate leaders who build bridges and inspire others.*

Final Thoughts

Inclusive practices are not just about having a diverse team of individuals. Supporting inclusive practices is about creating and maintaining a culture of openness and transparency. It's about building a sense of psychological safety and allowing the healthy and empathetic exchange of ideas. It's about realizing that systemic bias exists, and to change and combat it in our companies, we have to hire and promote differently. We have to celebrate differences and elevate leaders who build bridges and inspire others to be themselves. We are still in the early days, and we have a long way to go, but you can make a difference. You can be the change.

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Is Gender Stereotyping Holding Back Women Leaders?

by Keren Joseph-Browning

Women in leadership is a topic of debate that has occupied much attention in recent years. Despite considerable research proving that diversity in the workplace makes business sense, a big gap still exists between the number of men and women in the workplace, particularly further up the leadership ladder — and this is especially true in the technology space. However, today we know that gender is on the agenda in all boardrooms in ways that were unimaginable a decade ago. Indeed, companies are seeing the benefits of different perspectives in the boardroom and across the organization, and the issue has moved to the media mainstream. This attention is underpinned by research that shows a correlation between diversity and superior financial performance.

> *Despite considerable research proving that diversity in the workplace makes business sense, a big gap still exists between the number of men and women in the workplace.*

Noticeable by Their Absence

Unfortunately, the inescapable reality is that women remain noticeable by their absence within the senior ranks of the corporate world. According to a survey a few years back by the World Economic Forum, chief HR officers from more than 350 leading companies attributed several causes to the absence of female leaders.[1] Across all industries, almost half of the respondents (44%) said that both unconscious bias among managers and a lack of work-life balance were significant barriers to gender diversity in the workplace. Nearly 40% pointed to a lack of female role models. Moreover, while women outnumber men at the university level today, and the graduate level by higher numbers, 36% of respondents still said there were not enough qualified women for the positions they were looking to fill. Only 6% blamed lack of parental leave, while just 10% claimed there were no barriers.

Furthermore, Sheryl Sandberg, Facebook's COO and author of *Lean In*, asserts that women hold themselves back in different ways, jeopardizing their prospects for promotion.[2] And when it comes to cutting-edge technology positions, the World Economic Forum's latest report reveals that positions in cloud computing comprise only 14% women, while females in data analytics and artificial intelligence jobs represent less than a third of staff in those areas.[3]

According to a report from CNN Business, "one in five women report they are often the only woman, or one of the only women, in the room at work."[4] Those of us women who are an *only* also report feeling restrained, under pressure, and judged. We also find that people tend to question our competence, doubt our authority, or even mistake us for a lower-level employee, turning to us to ask when lunch will be arriving or if we will be taking the minutes.

Given the high occurrence of such unconscious bias, often rooted in stereotyping, this article considers the influence of gender stereotypes and their possible impact on female leadership.

The Seeds of Stereotypes

Researchers have found that children begin to absorb gender stereotypes and expectations in early childhood.[5] By early secondary school, girls are less likely than boys to say that their own gender is "really, really smart." They are also less likely to choose activities described as intended for "super-smart" children.[6] This pattern continues throughout the educational track.[7]

Additional gender-focused research provides interesting insights into the nature of leadership in children's play. Boys rely on direct demands, commands, threats, physical force, and a greater use of statements that express their personal desires and assert leadership, while girls use indirect demands, polite requests, and persuasion to influence their partners' behavior.[8] Girls' communication also consists of a more collaborative speech.[9]

In addition to social experiences, we know children internalize the messages they hear from their parents and teachers and what they see on television and in video games, movies, and music. Though parents and teachers often try hard not to stereotype based on gender, the assumptions we make about boys and girls may be conscious or unconscious and can result in different treatment of one group compared to another. These biases do not necessarily make a person ageist, sexist, or racist, but people can be unconsciously influenced by a stereotype — even if they do not rationally subscribe to the limitations implied by the stereotype.

Gender stereotypes shape self-perception, affect well-being, shape attitudes to relationships, and influence participation in the world of work. In a school environment, they affect a young person's classroom experience, academic performance, or subject choice.

Therefore, should we turn our focus more on the traditional roles we play at home and in schools? Should we determine whether a gender-stereotyped behavior has been entrenched within all of us, from the very start of our interaction with the opposite sex? After all, our daycares, preschools, schools, and homes are the first environments that socialize us. Our upbringings and the different roles our parents play are relevant as well. So is it reasonable that we make the predicament of the shortage of female leaders the sole responsibility of our CEOs and our organizations' diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) teams? Maybe we should focus instead on the behaviors we acquire as children along with the behaviors we teach our children.

What Research Tells Us

Stereotypical assumptions about how men and women differ have given researchers much to investigate during the last several decades. Gender stereotypes have been measured in terms of, for example, ascribed traits, role behaviors, occupations, and emotions. Researchers also have distinguished personality, physical, and cognitive components of gender stereotypes and have investigated how men's and women's self-characterizations differ in stereotype-consistent ways.

Today, the most common measures of gender stereotypes involve traits and attributes. But the measure that is most relevant and potentially useful to us

concentrates on how gender stereotypes, biases, and discrimination affect leadership opportunities. Research has found that cultural beliefs about masculine and feminine characteristics disadvantage women in leadership assessments.[10] It is assumed that men are naturally seen as leaders because authority, activity, rationality, emotional self-control, career motivation, and other characteristics associated with strong leadership are masculine.[11] Characteristics linked to weak leadership, such as passivity, low ambition, irrationality, a preoccupation with emotions, and lack of emotional control, are associated with femininity.[12]

> *Perhaps we should examine whether women's leadership styles truly are different from men's. And, if they are, is one style more effective?*

Another Place to Look

Perhaps we should examine whether women's leadership styles truly are different from men's. And, if they are, is one style more effective? Is the determination of women's effectiveness as leaders fact-based, or a perception that has become a reality? Personally, I believe women's leadership style is different from men's, but men can learn from and adopt the style of women and use it effectively as well. In other words, effective leadership is not the exclusive domain of either gender, and learning from each other is possible. Women's styles are not at all likely to be less effective; in fact, they are more effective within the context of team-based, consensually driven organizational structures that are more established in today's world. The assessment of a woman's leadership style as less effective than a man's is not based in fact. Rather, it is driven by persistent perceptions based on stereotypes.

Common stereotypes hold that men are task-oriented, and women are relationship-oriented. Therefore, gendering of approaches used in managing employees, as well as allocation of individuals to specific occupations based on masculinity and femininity, would lead to classifications of both sexes. Constructing a theoretical framework on what is purely female, or male, has the same consequences. A trait like "relationship-oriented" is not confined primarily to female leaders; there is a high probability that a wide range of male leaders share this skill. Just as independence as a trait could be found among male or female leaders.

Men are also often characterized as being more competent than women, as taking charge, and being in control, while women are characterized as more communal, being connected to others, and building relationships.

> *To help promote equality and diversity at the leadership level, HR professionals, together with DEI teams, need to look at ways to inform and indicate on best practices.*

"Women May Make Better Managers"

To date, contemporary theories, which include the behaviors, attitudes, and skills attributed to women in management roles, appear to have had little success in shifting the attitudes of decision makers in organizations to appoint women into leadership positions, and this includes the technology domain. It has been a quarter of a century since researchers Bernard M. Bass and Bruce J. Avolio proposed the idea that "women may make better managers."[13] Despite this pronouncement, the increases of women in senior or executive roles over the past two decades have been less than inspiring. It would seem, therefore, that although leadership literature has played a significant role in raising the profile of women in management, much needs to happen in actual board rooms and management suites in order to advance the careers of women in leadership positions.

When reviewing gender and leadership theory timelines, we need to step back and think about the demands placed on leaders today. Some observations are relevant. First, these different approaches help us focus on individual traits, the behaviors associated with successful leadership, the relevant context or situation, the nature of followers (and their relationship to the leader), the type of influence that is brought to bear (transactional versus transforming), and the collaboration required to address tough issues. Second, we must recognize the interconnectivity of our globalizing world and the complexity of organizational leadership. As a result, it is no surprise that system leadership is today's cutting-edge theory. In this context, research reveals that the importance of optimizing the potential of every player in the system becomes apparent.[14] Different players will have different roles. The expectation that they will lead from their own strengths and that their contributions will be recognized and leveraged is a significant shift from historical patterns of hierarchical leadership models. Third, we must acknowledge the speed of change in so many areas of our cultural and organizational life.

Our Next Moves

I have been "one of a few" or an "only" during all the leadership-level years of my career. But I realized I had a choice: I could let this intimidate me, or I could use it to my advantage. There could be power in this situation, and I chose the latter. I believe that being the only woman in the room creates an opportunity for women to stand out and create a long-lasting impression from the start. The fact is that when women become leaders, they provide a different set of skills, imaginative perspectives, and, importantly, structural and cultural differences that drive effective solutions. In bringing a creative standpoint, a new sense of awareness may allow the finer details to surface.

As an HR professional, one of the biggest challenges my colleagues and I face is how we can work with senior leaders to support true gender equality in our organizations as we struggle with societal norms and business expectations to break gender stereotypes. I believe setting quotas around gender balance, an option pursued by some business and governments, restricts our understanding of diversity to a narrow set of characteristics, ignoring complex cultural identities. Surely, when considering board and organizational structure, we should be accounting for factors such as economic, educational, and social backgrounds, among other criteria, rather than limiting our focus to a single aspect of a person. Thus, HR professionals, working with senior leaders, must take the path of most resistance that will produce real change, rather than simply implementing a quick fix.

To help promote equality and diversity at the leadership level, HR professionals, together with DEI teams, need to look at ways to inform and indicate on best practices, such as working together with the early years education community to understand the role of socialization and early age stereotyping and their impact on women leaders. Furthermore, although the majority of people at the top of organizations are men, we know that studies indicate that it is actually women who have what it takes to effectively lead. So perhaps rather than advising female executives to act more like men to get ahead, society would be better served by more male leaders trying to emulate women leaders.

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