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Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Strategies: Using Measurement to Support Your Black Employees

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Blacks in I/O

Table of Contents

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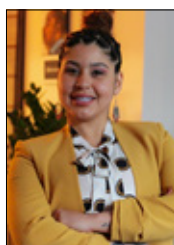
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Introduction

A cataclysmic shift occurred in the United States that has strongly underscored the need for change within organizations in addition to society at large. The murder of George Floyd and subsequent reactions became a resounding call to action for organizations to re-examine their positions on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), especially with regard to the Black community. The historical events that occurred in the year of 2020 served to embolden the rapidly growing social justice movement, thus, leading to a cultural land-scape in which organizations were no longer permitted to ignore or dismiss their short-comings with regard to workforce inclusivity. Boykin et al. (2020) echoed this sentiment, among others, calling for increased knowledge, awareness, and accountability from all parties to help fight racism. Many organizations decided to begin the process of transi-tioning their workplace "cultures of inclusivity" from those that were largely performative in nature to more actively diverse, equitable, and inclusive cultures. The "check-the-box" initiatives are now being challenged. In this paper we will identify and discuss the im-portance of implementing a well-structured DEI plan and how organizations can create a sustainable and truly inclusive culture as a result.

Aversive Racism

The modern culture of the United States emphasizes the idea of true meritocracy, which has contributed to the idea of a postracial or "colorblind" society (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2004). However, recent events and research alike have shown that negative racial prejudices and stereotypes continue to show themselves in many aspects of our society as well as within the minds of those who do not acknowledge their own prejudices, resulting in what has famously been termed "racism without racists" (Bonilla-Silva, 2006, p. 4). According to Dovidio and Gaertner (2004), the cognitive dissonance that people experience from holding learned prejudices while also wanting to distance themselves from the idea of being prejudiced leads to modern racism taking a more subtle form, which has been termed aversive racism.

The aspect of aversive racism that is most important to the workplace is that it is moderated or impacted by situational ambiguity. This is to say that aversive racist behaviors are more likely to manifest when a situation does not have a predefined "script" detailing how people should act and react. This effect has been observed in research on selection with White participants only displaying anti-Black bias when a simulated candidate's fit for the position in question was unclear (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000). Additionally, due to the overtly negative connotations it carries in our society, anti-outgroup bias is a much less frequently observed manifestation than pro-ingroup bias (Dovidio et al., 2014). In other words, people are more likely to openly help their own groups than to openly discriminate against other groups.

Considering aversive racism as a conceptual framework, it is logical to conclude that most, if not all, organiza-tions currently have employees engaging in some form of aversive racist behaviors of which Black applicants and employees are currently experiencing the ill effects (Dovidio et al., 2014). Although it may be comforting to continue feeding the myth of a fully meritocratic organization operating under a truly colorblind paradigm, ad-ditional progress will continue to be impeded until these issues are faced openly. One should assume that one's organization has diversity and inclusion issues to be solved, because research shows that this is likely the case.

Implications for Practice

In order to move from performative to transformative action, our recommendation is to begin with a focus on measurement as well as on the evaluation of archival data. Every organization is unique, and the individual experiences of Black employees at each organization will be shaped by the environment in which they find themselves.

Employee Surveys

Collecting and analyzing current data around the employee experience through theoretically grounded and psychometrically validated measures is paramount. Employee data that are of particular importance include perceived inclusion, which can be measured through surveys such as Mor-Barak's (2005) Inclusion–Exclusion Scale or Jansen and colleagues' (2014) Perceived Group Inclusion Scale. Collecting this specific type of data gives insight into employee perceptions that can help organizations know which facets of inclusion are lacking in the workplace broken down by demographic. This level of detail helps move organizations past looking at diversity numbers to focusing on the human aspect of inclusion. Although having a survey specifically dedicated to this topic is ideal to gain a robust view of how inclusive the environment is, that is not always feasible due to a variety of reasons such as cost limitations or survey overload. In those cases, adding a cluster of DEI-oriented items to pre-existing annual surveys or analyzing existing survey data by demographic group can be used as reasonable starting points.

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Employee Lifecycle

Data do not necessarily have to be sourced from current employees to be useful. Both job applicants and previous employees can hold a wealth of information. Review organizational statistics pertaining to recruitment practices (e.g., relative selection rates, the spaces in which openings are being advertised), and use these data points as a baseline to aim for more inclusive recruitment. Another way organizational leaders can gain additional insight into improving the level of inclusion in the work environment is through examining turnover rates and employee reasons for departure by demographic group. Evaluating these data points from various tools (i.e., exit survey, exit interviews, intent-to-stay interviews) will help guide organizations during recruitment and retention decisions.

Equity Analysis

Reviewing quantitative organizational criteria such as pay equity and relative promotion rates between different employee groups can serve as an additional avenue to inspect, as they represent organizational jus-

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tice. Employee perceptions of organizational justice, which can be split into the subcategories of distributive justice (such as fairness in compensation) and procedural justice (such as fairness of policies), have been related to multiple positive workplace outcomes (McFarlin & Sweeney, 1992). As such, a lack of perceived inclusion can hamper job satisfaction. After equity analysis is complete, it is important to be transparent with employees regarding results. If issues of inequity are found, leaders should make a plan to address them in a timely manner and keep employees apprised of their efforts. If issues are not found, transparency regarding results will help employees gain trust in the organization. However, trust is not gained overnight. It is possible that even in the face of equitable practices, employees may not agree with or trust the results. Having listening sessions can help leaders dive deeper into possible reasons for this perceived lack of equity and create a space to address those concerns. We have found through our professional experience that sometimes a perceived lack of equity is actually a perceived lack of transparency.

Senior Leadership Support

After collecting the data discussed above, it is vital to present the results to senior leadership to garner stakeholder support. Referencing quantitative and/or qualitative data helps highlight the importance of any DEI initiatives you are trying to initiate. Executive-level buy-in is necessary to ensure that proper organizational resources are allocated to this initiative. Having data to support this conversation will improve your chances of getting leadership buy-in.

Ownership

Based on anecdotes from professionals in the field, we know that when this work is done "side of the desk" (i.e., as one's secondary focus), it is more likely to be pushed aside for more "urgent" or "important" work. Should it prove logistically feasible, it is recommended that a position dedicated specifically to DEI efforts be created instead of folding these responsibilities into the large number of tasks already expected of HR. Often organizations will create a DEI council and/or a DEI office. In either case, we recommend one DEI officer to oversee these efforts, and they should be a part of the C-suite to ensure this work is made a priority. The presence of a dedicated DEI officer will help increase accountability of the organization's leadership and general employees alike, applying consistent pressure for progressive initiatives and change. Although having a DEI officer is ideal, it is imperative for all senior leaders to champion this work. Displaying ethical behaviors is one valuable way to support DEI efforts. Ethical leaders are people focused and role model the ethical conduct they expect from their employees (Treviño et al., 2003). When senior leaders role model behaviors, it encourages other employees to participate in the same behaviors. Furthermore, it is recommended that organizations create standard practices of linking performance goals to leadership effectiveness. 360-degree feedback surveys can be administered to subordinates of people leaders. This survey tool can be helpful to identify which leaders are effectively modeling those ethical behaviors and conduct, and have been previously recommended as useful leader development tools (Alimo-Metcalfe, 1998; Hazucha et al., 1993).

Employee Well-Being and Performance

We believe that it is critically important that the workplace is equipped to create an environment that not only incorporates inclusivity but promotes a healthy workplace culture as well. Throughout the global pandemic, we have witnessed collectively and experienced first hand the direct relationship between mental health and employee well-being, as well as that between mental health and workplace performance. In recent publications, it has been reported that employees who are being asked to return to the office due to COVID restrictions would prefer to quit their jobs due to the toxic environment in which they worked (Greedy, 2021). It has been documented that traumatic work experiences cause psychological harm that is usually unseen and untold (Williams et al., 2018). Often, Black employees refrain from showing up authentically in the workplace, typically out of racial battle fatigue, a fear of job loss, and/or judgment by peers and supervisors. This perceived need for identity restriction may manifest through code switching—modifying one's speech patterns or content (Nilep, 2017) or other psychologically draining behaviors. This experience tends to prevent Black employees from being able to perform at their optimal levels. Lack of attention to employee mental health, especially in the case of Black employees, can cause a myriad of issues such as absenteeism, low performance, and missed opportunities for growth (Chien-Hung et al., 2017). Leveraging opportunities to check in with your employees and their mental health can consist of collecting qualitative data through focus groups and/or listening sessions. Senior leadership should closely examine key barriers to their well-being approaches. Resources and solutions offered from both the individual and organizational levels can contribute to building a restorative (rather than depleting) experience at work for all employees.

The large number of suggestions in this content-rich paper may seem overwhelming when considered collectively. However, we are not recommending that organizations transform overnight; rather, we expect leadership to pick one of the many avenues towards improving workplace inclusion listed above and begin there. Overcommitment and overextension of organizational resources are antithetical to the goals discussed herein. Naturally, each organization will be beginning from a different point in their respective DEI journey--as such, careful consideration of what progress has already been made in one's organization is a key part of focusing future efforts.

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Next Steps

As our society enters into an era in which diversity, equity, and inclusion are no longer tools for image management or incentives for "nontraditional" workers but rather moral imperatives in their own rights, organizations must make the conscious decision to establish DEI as a central pillar of company culture and commit to the actions that must follow (Boykin et al., 2020). The so-called "business case" for diversity (Ely & Thomas, 2020), although valid, should no longer be the primary focus—the case for diversity is a moral one, and it is more than sufficient to call for tangible action.

We have stated in this paper that measurement is the rightful starting point for any initiative, DEI-related or otherwise. That being said, should this measurement reveal unknown and/or unexpected biases within an organization's systems or practices, keep in mind that transparency is key—both in informing shareholders and the affected employees that these issues have been found and explaining fully what actions are being taken to rectify them. As a final takeaway, we would like to remind all individuals undertaking this work to frequently and thoroughly check for their own biases—from which none of us are free—to ensure that the work being done is as effectually as possible.

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