

There is a call for corporate America to be more inclusive, but how do we get there?

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A 2019 study by Korn Ferry, a Los Angeles-based global management consulting firm, revealed that African American executives and VPs at Fortune 500 companies are some of the highest performing in America. Yet, there have only been 15 black Fortune 500 CEOs since 1955.

The Black Lives Matter movement has had a clear effect on social culture, but will change find its way into boardrooms and office suites as well?

Studies like Korn Ferry's present straightforward evidence that African American officers perform well, and diverse offices perform even better. So what needs to change to ensure that corporate America is a place where people of all colors are not just welcome, but included in leadership roles and decision making?

The first step is to recognize the problem, according to Dr. Meghna Sabharwal, director of public and non-profit management programs at the University of Texas at Dallas. Sabharwal specializes in human resources management specifically related to workplace diversity.

"Often corporations don't even realize that there is a problem," she said. "You have to see the lack of racial inclusivity and then you can get to the bottom of it. Treat the cause of the disease, not the symptoms."

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Softway

Once a business recognizes that people of color are underrepresented in the office and in leadership, the process of recruiting a more diverse workforce should begin, said Sabharwal. One way to hire a more diverse workforce is to advertise in the right places, including going into minority serving-institutions, like colleges that have a racially-inclusive population.

William D. Brown, CEO, co-founder and director of diversity, equity and inclusion at FIA NYC Employment Services, an Allentown-based staffing firm, believes change comes from leadership down. If a company is led by a diverse team that is able to see people of color as human beings and not just a means to fill a diversity check box, the entire staff will follow suit.

"The tone is set by leadership," Brown said, "if that's not dealt with then nothing will change."

Once leadership accepts people of color as just people, the tide will turn. I don't like diversity departments that leadership is not involved in. Acceptance and support of people of color has to be ingrained in the culture of the workplace and that comes from the top down."

Brown is quick to add that change needs to start in our homes. "If you don't see people of color as human beings in your own interpersonal relationships outside of work, how can things change in the workplace?"

Murtaza Jaffer, founder and co-owner of EBC Printing, a printing and sign company in Allentown, made deliberate efforts to employ a diverse and inclusive staff, not just in terms of race, but also of gender and religion and other cultural backgrounds.



Murtaza (left) and Mustafa Jaffer own Express Business Center in Trexlertown, where products are designed, printed, finished, packaged and mailed from one location. PHOTO/PROVIDED

"My brother, Mustafa, and I are partners and immigrants from Tanzania in East Africa," he said. "We are from East Africa but of Indian descent. Diversity is within us. Diversity was an important value when we launched the business."

Jaffer, who is Muslim, said his company flourishes because the staff is diverse. It provides a space for prayer in the EBC workplace for Muslim and other faiths. He also keeps a Bible available for his Christian employees, and a Torah for Jewish employees.

"Our mixed backgrounds help our business stand out and deliver better results to our customers," he said.

Seeing the person

The University of Texas' Sabharwal asserts that looking past people's differences to their human-ness, like Jaffer does, is key.

"It is important to train those who do the hiring to recognize their own biases. There are biases at every step," she added. "At U.T. Dallas, we started a training program to address this. We ALL have our biases. It's important to educate those who are doing the interviewing so that people are more cognitive, and can really see the human in front of them instead of their biases about that person."

For example, if someone is shy, Sabharwal said, that does not necessarily mean that they will not be a good employee.

"People are quick to judge," she said, "and extrovert or introvert always come into play. An extrovert is always assumed to be a better choice, and that may be true in certain jobs, but not all. Introverts may outshine extroverts as employees when given a chance."

Elitism comes into play as well, Sabharwal said. Hiring managers are quick to jump to the conclusion that someone who graduated from an elite school is more qualified than someone who graduated from the local community college. And that bias can affect minorities the most, she said. A minority candidate might not be coming from the top school, but may be the first in her family to graduate from college, and be very ambitious and qualified.

The work doesn't stop once a company has hired a diverse workforce either. Diversity and inclusion don't always go hand in hand, according to Sabharwal.

"Don't think that just because you've hired people of color, that you have done your job," she said. "You have to take the time to make sure you are including them in the decision-making. It takes commitment from top leadership in order to create a fair and balanced work environment."

According to FIA NYC's Brown, there is a stigma attached to those who are hired to fill a quota. "I become known as the black person you hired to fill the quota," he said, "not the qualified individual for the job."

Qiana Cressman, executive director of donor operations at Allentown-based Miller-Keystone Blood Center, says, like ABC's Jaffer, that embracing diversity isn't just the right way to operate, but makes good business sense. "For any business to flourish in this day and age, it must be diverse in order to engage customer loyalty and a diverse customer base," she said.



Qiana Cressman PHOTO/PROVIDED

To be inclusive, company/leadership must also be diverse, in terms of race, gender and cultural backgrounds. "Without a diverse leadership, you can't weed out our unconscious biases."

Turning the ship

What can be done then to ensure that minorities are active in leadership and decision-making at work? Existing leadership has to be held accountable, the University of Texas' Sabharwal said. Discrepancies in salaries need to be recognized and called out.

"If you are an employee of color who sees racial inequity happening at work, address with your supervisor your concerns," she said. "Bring them to human resources. Put it in writing. Have documented email trails. It is better to get things in writing than to get verbal confirmation. Sometimes just not getting a response, the act of a company being non-responsive, says a lot. Bring this all to HR."



William D. Brown PHOTO/PROVIDED

Unfortunately, not everyone wants to be a trailblazer, said FIA-NYC's Brown. Some employees of color may be afraid to lose their job if they call out poor treatment. "It's a lot to expect people to take on the role of trailblazer," he said. "Colin Kapernick took a knee. Look what happened to him." That's why Brown advocates for company leadership to take on the change-making role, rather than expect employees to make all the change from the bottom up.

One way company leaders can push for racial inclusivity is by putting employee training programs in place that can help their organizations learn how to include and support people of color in the workplace, according to Sabharwal. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 crisis has put a stop to most on-site training.

But as businesses slowly reopen and employees get back to work, just attending a training for a few hours, either online or in person, isn't enough, she said. Organizations have started to think of training as just another check box to fill, according to Sabharwal, with employees seeing them as one more thing to get through and be done with. But if done right, she said, it can make a difference. Training that is ongoing and that happens several times a year can have a long term impact.

Miller Keystone's Cressman encourages business leaders to put "mobility measures" in place that will track the progress of diversity and inclusion efforts. "Keep records of how and who you promote from within the organization; how many minorities, how many women?" she said. "We don't know how we are doing if we don't measure it. We can't conquer what we don't confront. And we can't confront what we don't identify."

Cressman urges the public not to forget about diversity when this period of national unrest passes. "To make long-term change, you need long-term commitment," she said.

FIA NYC's Brown is encouraged by the discussions of inclusivity.

"I have not seen that in my lifetime before," he said. "I have, however, seen so many George Floyd's happen before. What was different this time that made people call for change? People heard George cry out for his mother... they saw him as a human being, they saw their child in him. Something inside us said, 'This is not right, it's wrong.'"

"We need to see people of color as human," he said.

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