

BY LAURA MORGAN ROBERTS AND ANTHONY J. MAYO

TOWARD A RACIALLY JUST WORKPLACE

Diversity efforts are failing black employees.
Here's a better approach.

"The best antidote to the current problem is not more diversity, but inclusion that works"

“Success is to be measured not so much by the position that one has reached in life as by the obstacles which [one] has overcome while trying to succeed.”

Booker T. Washington, the educator, author, activist, and presidential adviser, wrote those words more than a century ago as a way of encouraging his African-American compatriots – many of them recently emancipated from slavery – to persist in the fight for equal rights and economic opportunities. He was proud of what he and his peers had achieved. He surely believed there was satisfaction in struggling against and surmounting bad odds. And yet we must also assume that he, along with millions of other freedom fighters, wanted future generations of black Americans to suffer fewer hardships. He hoped today’s black leaders would find easier paths to success.

Has that dream been realized? Having spent the past 20 years conducting and reviewing research on African-Americans’ advancement, particularly in the workplace, and having collected our work and others’ into a book, we must report that the answer is partly yes but mostly no.

THE AUTHORS

LAURA MORGAN ROBERTS AND ANTHONY J. MAYO



Harvard Business School's African American Student Union marked its 50th anniversary in 2018. To honor the occasion, Laura Morgan Roberts and Tony Mayo took an in-depth look at how African-Americans are faring in today's workplace. The results, Morgan Roberts says, are both humbling and sobering. "When you see how African-Americans are emerging as leaders, even when they may be underestimated and underresourced, their journeys are remarkable," she says. "There are incredible stories of leading change. We need to hold those stories up and shine light on them. But there's also a heaviness that comes from seeing how long this fight has been going on and knowing that in many ways, it's getting harder. Over time there has been less and less support for diversity both legislatively and judicially and a lessening sense of urgency about rectifying inequality, even as it increases."



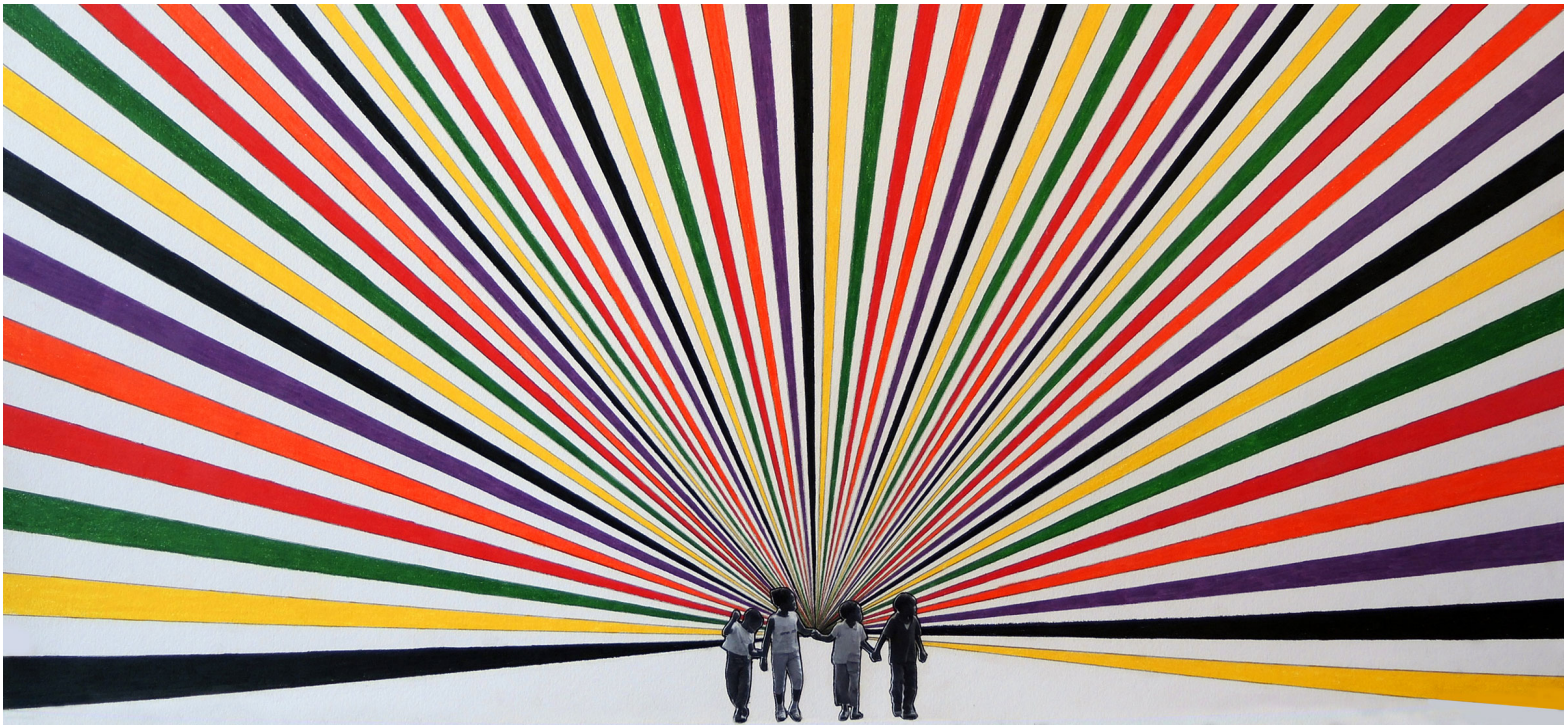
No doubt, there has been progress. Civil rights laws have been passed and affirmed. Companies are committing to and investing heavily in diversity, because more corporate leaders acknowledge that it makes good business sense. And several black billionaires and CEOs sit on the respective ranking lists.

However, according to both quantitative and qualitative data, working African-Americans – from those laboring in factories and on shop floors to those setting C-suite strategy – still face obstacles to advancement that other minorities and white women don't. They are less likely than their white peers to be hired, developed, and promoted. And their lived experience at work is demonstrably worse even than that of other people of color.

These challenges might, as Washington said, make success sweeter for the few who overcome them. But a huge gap remains between what organizations are saying and doing to promote inclusion and the outcomes we're seeing for many black workers and managers. If leaders want to walk their talk, they must spearhead much more meaningful change. Instead of undervaluing and squandering black talent, they must recognize the resilience, robust sense of self, and growth mindset that, studies show, African-American people – as one of the most historically oppressed groups in the United States – bring to the table. They should work even harder to seek out and support them, from entry-level recruitment to CEO succession.

We have not identified any major company that is doing this well on a broad scale. But research and lessons gleaned from other contexts can point the way forward. In our work with leading management thinkers and practitioners across the country, we have arrived at a four-step strategy to help companies move toward greater and better representation for black leaders. It involves shifting from an exclusive focus on the business case for racial diversity to embracing the moral one, promoting real conversations about race, revamping diversity and inclusion programs, and better managing career development at every stage. Given the increasing importance of purpose and social impact to employees, customers, and other stakeholders, we believe there's no better time to make this transformation. We also believe our framework can be adapted for other marginalized groups in the United States and around the world.

Taking these steps won't be easy; executives will need to think deeply about their ethics and corporate culture and exert extra effort for a cause they may not consider central to their business. But the reward will be great: maximizing the human potential of everyone in the workplace.



ARTWORK: Rico Gatson, "Watts Kids," 2015. Courtesy of the artist and Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York.

UNDERREPRESENTED, UNSUPPORTED, UNFULFILLED

At most large U.S. and multinational organizations, diversity and inclusion (D&I) has become an imperative. Companies are pushing for minority recruitment, paying for antibias training, and sponsoring nonwhite employees for high-potential leadership-development programs. Research has shown, and a great many executives now understand, that a heterogeneous workforce yields more innovation and better performance than a homogeneous one does.

And yet 55 years after the passage of the Civil Rights Act and decades into these corporate D&I efforts, African-Americans' progress toward top management roles and greater economic well-being and influence remains slow to nonexistent. Let's look first at the demographics.

What the numbers say. Yes, we can point to the rise of several prominent black leaders, from media figures Oprah Winfrey, Robert Johnson, and Jay-Z to financiers Ken Chenault and Robert Smith and sports-stars-turned-businesspeople Serena Williams, Michael Jordan, and LeBron James. Most notably, America elected its first African-descended President, Barack Obama, in 2008 and reelected him in 2012. The number of African-Americans earning bachelor's and graduate degrees continues to increase. And black people account for 12% of the U.S. workforce, close to their 13.4% representation in the general population.

However, in the words of leaders from the Toigo Foundation, a career advancement organization for underrepresented groups, such evidence merely gives us “the illusion of inclusion.” In fact, research shows that in the United States, the wealth gap between blacks and others continues to widen; experts predict that black families’ median wealth will decrease to \$0 by 2050, while that of white families will exceed \$100,000. Just 8% of managers and 3.8% of CEOs are black. In the Fortune 500 companies, there are currently only three black chief executives, down from a high of 12 in 2002. And at the 16 Fortune 500 companies that report detailed demographic data on senior executives and board members, white men account for 85% of those roles.

Black leaders have struggled to make inroads in a variety of influential industries and sectors. At U.S. finance companies, only 2.4% of executive committee members, 1.4% of managing directors, and 1.4% of senior portfolio managers are black. A mere 1.9% of tech executives and 5.3% of tech professionals are African-American. Black representatives and senators account for 9% of the U.S. Congress. The average black partnership rate at U.S. law firms from 2005 to 2016 was 1.8%. Only 7% of U.S. higher education administrators and 8% of nonprofit leaders are black. And just 10% of U.S. businesses are owned by black men and women. As the Toigo Foundation points out, all this has a cascading impact on economic development, housing, jobs, quality of schools and other services, access to education, infrastructure spending, consumer credit, retirement savings, and more.

What it’s like at work. Underrepresentation is bad enough. But even worse, according to extensive research, is the lived experience of black employees and managers in the U.S. workplace. African-Americans continue to face both explicit racism – stoked by the rise of white nationalism in the past few years – and subtle racism on the job. In the latter category, University of Utah professor emeritus Arthur Brief points to “aversive” racism (when people avoid those of different races or change their behavior around them) along with “modern” racism (when people believe that because blacks can now compete in the marketplace, they no longer face discrimination). Microaggressions – for example, when a white male visitor to an office assumes that a black female executive is a secretary – are also common.

Although companies claim they want to overcome these explicit and implicit biases and hire and promote diverse candidates, they rarely do so in effective ways. When Harvard Business School’s emeriti professors David A. Thomas and John Gabarro conducted an in-depth six-year study of leaders in three companies, they found that people of color had to manage their

careers more strategically than their white peers did and to prove greater competence before winning promotions. And research by Lynn Perry Wooten, the dean of Cornell University's Dyson School, and Erika Hayes James, the dean of Emory University's Goizueta Business School, shows that black leaders who do rise to the top are disproportionately handed "glass cliff" assignments, which offer nice rewards but carry a greater risk of failure. Other research, such as Duke University professor Ashleigh Rosette's studies of black leaders, has shown widespread racial differences in hiring, performance ratings, promotions, and other outcomes.

There is also an emotional tax associated with being black in the American workplace. Research by the University of Virginia's Courtney McCluney and Catalyst's Dnika Travis and Jennifer Thorpe-Moscon shows that because black employees feel a heightened sense of difference among their mostly white peers, their ability to contribute is diminished. "The sense of isolation, of solitude, can take a toll," one leader told them. "It's like facing each day with a core of uncertainty...wondering...if the floor you're standing on is concrete or dirt...solid or not."

Many black professionals have reported to Toigo that they are expected to be "cultural ambassadors" who address the needs of other black employees, which leaves them doing two jobs: "the official one the person was hired to do, and a second one as champion for members of the person's minority group," as one put it. Across industries, sectors, and functions, they also experience the "diversity fatigue" that arises from constantly engaging in task forces, trainings, and conversations about race as they are tapped to represent their demographic.

And black leaders in particular struggle with feeling inauthentic at work. Research by McGill University's Patricia Faison Hewlin shows that many minorities feel pressured to create "facades of conformity," suppressing their personal values, views, and attributes to fit in with organizational ones. But as Hewlin and her colleague Anna-Maria Broomes found in a survey of 2,226 workers in various industries and corporate settings, African-Americans create these facades more frequently than other minority groups do and feel the inauthenticity more deeply. They might chemically relax (straighten) their hair, conform with coworkers' behavior, "whitewash" their resumes by deleting ethnic-sounding names or companies, hide minority beliefs, and suppress emotions related to workplace racism.

As a result of all the above, black workers feel less supported, engaged, and committed to their jobs than their nonblack peers do, as research from Georgetown University's Ella Washington, Gallup's Ellyn Maese and Shane McFeely, and others has documented. Black managers report

receiving less psychosocial support than their white counterparts do. Black employees are less likely than whites or Hispanics to say that their company's mission or purpose makes them feel their job is important, that their coworkers will do quality work, and that they have opportunities to learn and grow. Black leaders are more likely than white ones to leave their organizations. It's clear that the norms and cultural defaults of leadership in most organizations create an inhospitable environment that leaves even those black employees who have advanced feeling like outsiders – and in some cases pushes them out the door.

Relatively high pay and impressive pedigrees don't help much: According to a survey of diverse professionals with bachelor's or graduate degrees and average annual incomes of \$100,000 or more that one of us (Laura) conducted with colleagues at the Partnership, a nonprofit organization specializing in diversity and leadership development, African-Americans report the lowest levels of both manager and coworker support, commitment, and job fit and the highest levels of feeling inauthentic and wanting to leave their jobs. Studies of black Harvard Business School and Harvard Law School graduates have similarly found that matriculating from highly respected institutions does not shield one from obstacles. When surveyed years and even decades after graduating, black Harvard MBAs expressed less satisfaction than their white counterparts with opportunities to do meaningful work, to realize professional accomplishments, and to combine career with personal and family life. "Perhaps it sounds naive, but [coming out of HBS] I did not expect race to have any bearing in my career," one told us. "I was wrong."

LEADING CHANGE

As we said earlier, diversity and inclusion efforts have been gaining traction, and workforces are becoming increasingly multiracial. But given the dearth of black leaders, we would like to see companies jump-start their efforts in four ways.

First, move away from the business case and toward a moral one. The dozens of D&I executives we talked to in the course of our research tell us they sometimes feel they've taken the business case for diversity as far as it can go. When Weber Shandwick surveyed 500 chief diversity officers at companies with revenue of \$500 million or more, results confirmed that proving that ROI – showing that inclusive teams yield more-creative ideas that appeal to broader customer bases, open new markets, and ultimately drive better performance – is one of the biggest challenges.

The research on this is clear. A 2015 McKinsey report on 366 public companies found that those in the top quartile for ethnic and racial diversity in management were 35% more likely than others to have financial returns above the industry mean. Various studies have shown that teams composed of both white and black people are more likely to focus on facts, carefully process information, and spur innovation when the organizational culture and leadership support learning across differences.

With the right knowledge, skills, and experience, African-American employees and managers can add as much business value as anyone else. They may have greater insights about creating and selling offerings for minority consumer groups that end up appealing to white consumers as well. As one of us (Tony) showed in research with Nitin Nohria, now the dean of Harvard Business School, and Eckerd College's Laura Singleton, some of the most successful black entrepreneurs are those who – in some cases *because* they were marginalized – built companies to serve their same-race peers, particularly in the personal care, media, and fashion arenas. Examples include the 19th-century black-hair-care trailblazer Madam C.J. Walker, Black Entertainment Television's Robert and Sheila Johnson, and Daymond John, who launched the FUBU clothing line.

So, experts agree that diversity enhances business outcomes when managed well. But given the limited progress African-Americans have made in most of corporate America, it seems clear that the sound business arguments for inclusion are not enough. At many companies, D&I executives still struggle for airtime in the C-suite and for resources that can move their organizations beyond the tokenism of, say, one black executive in the senior ranks. Their business cases don't appear to have been as persuasive as those presented by their marketing, operations, and accounting colleagues, which have a more direct effect on the bottom line.

And in more-progressive companies – ones truly committed to inclusion – a different kind of pushback sometimes occurs: If a team incorporates women, Asians, Latinos, and representatives of the LGBTQ community alongside white men, if it has data geeks and creative types, extroverts and introverts, Harvard MBAs and college dropouts, able-bodied and physically challenged members, isn't it diverse enough? Our answer: Not when teams, especially those at the highest levels, leave out the most marginalized group in the United States.

Thus we turn to the moral case. Many in the U.S. business community have begun to push for a more purpose-driven capitalism that focuses not just on shareholder value but also on shared value – benefits that extend to employees, customers, suppliers, and communities. This movement, toward what the University of Toronto’s Sarah Kaplan calls the 360° Corporation, wants corporate leaders to consider both the financial and the ethical implications of all their decisions. We believe that one of its pillars should be proportionate representation and wages for black Americans.

Why this group in particular? As the New York Times’ excellent 1619 Project highlighted, we are exactly four centuries away from the start of slavery – the kidnapping, forced labor, mistreatment, and often murder of African people – in the United States. And we are just 154 years away from its end. Although discrimination based on race and other factors was outlawed by the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the effects of slavery and the decades of discrimination and disenfranchisement that followed it continue to hold back many descendants of enslaved people (and those from different circumstances who have the same skin color). Alarming, racism and racist incidents are on the rise: According to the FBI, the number of hate crimes committed in the United States rose by 17% from 2016 to 2017, marking the third consecutive year of increases.

We also can’t forget that a compelling business case can be – and has been – made for all the atrocities listed above. Indeed, when invoked absent humanistic and ethical principles, a “business case” has legitimated exploitative actions throughout history. White landowners argued that the economic welfare of the colonies and the health of a young country depended on keeping black people in chains. White business owners in the Jim Crow South and segregated neighborhoods across the country claimed that sales would suffer if black customers and residents – who in the absence of land and good jobs had amassed little wealth – were allowed in, because that would turn rich white customers away. And white executives have long benefited because people of color with less access to high-quality education and high-wage employment were forced into low-paying commercial and household jobs, from coal mining and call center work to cleaning, cooking, and caregiving.

So the case for racial diversity and the advancement of African-Americans can’t be solely about increasing innovation or providing access to and legitimacy in minority markets to maximize revenue and profits. We can’t simply ask, “What’s the most lucrative thing to do?” We must also ask, “What’s the right thing to do?” The imperative should be creating a context in which people of all colors, but especially those who have historically been oppressed, can realize their full

potential. This will involve exploring and understanding the racist history that has shaped various groups' access to resources and opportunities and that undergirds contemporary bias. It means emphasizing equity and justice.

How might this work? Starbucks has made some attempts. In the wake of protests following the 2014 fatal shooting of Michael Brown by police in Ferguson, Missouri, the coffee chain announced RaceTogether, which aimed to spark a national conversation about race relations by having baristas write that phrase on customers' cups. The campaign fell flat because it was perceived more as a profit-minded marketing stunt than as a good-faith effort to change the status quo. Subsequent initiatives, perhaps designed with ethics more squarely in mind, have garnered a more positive response. In 2015 Starbucks launched a hiring program to recruit disadvantaged youths, including African-Americans; in 2017 it expanded that program and added one to recruit refugees; and after a racially charged incident at one of its cafés in 2018, it closed all its U.S. cafés for a day of employee antibias training. Consider, too, Nike's decision to launch a marketing campaign headlined by Colin Kaepernick, the NFL quarterback who failed to get picked up by a team after he began kneeling during the national anthem to protest the unfair treatment of African-Americans. The campaign created a backlash among anti-Kaepernick consumers and a #BoycottNike hashtag, but the sports apparel brand stood by its tagline: "Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything." We applaud these steps and hope organizations will go even further in learning how to practice racial inclusion in their workplaces.

Some organizations have invoked the moral case for action in other contexts. Think of how Patagonia supports environmental protections by committing to donate either 1% of sales or 10% of profits (whichever is larger) to advocacy groups. And recall that Dick's Sporting Goods pulled assault weapons and high-capacity magazines from its stores following the Parkland, Florida, school shooting, even though it projected – accurately – that the move would mean a \$250 million hit to sales. (It's important to note that over the long term, none of those companies suffered from their choices.)

Such stances take courage. But by combining the business case and the moral one, leaders can make a more powerful argument for supporting black advancement.



ARTWORK: Rico Gatson, "Three Women," 2015. Photo: Casey Dorobek. Courtesy of the artist and Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York.

Second, encourage open conversations about race. As Dartmouth College's Ella Bell and the University of Pretoria's Stella Nkomo note in the introduction to our book, "organizations are *in* society, not apart from it." And although President Obama's election brought some talk of a post-racial era in the United States, the stories and statistics that have come out in the past few years show that racism still exists, which means that race still matters and needs to be discussed, candidly and frequently, in the workplace.

Those conversations will not immediately feel comfortable. Research shows that although many people are happy to talk about "diversity" or "inclusion," their enthusiasm drops significantly when the subject is "race." Most of us don't like to think very hard about where minorities sit and what power they wield (or don't) within our organizations – much less discuss it. When we examine who has been excluded in what ways over what period of time, the concept of white privilege might come up. And majority-group employees might express concerns about reverse discrimination. (According to an Ernst & Young study of 1,000 U.S. workers, one-third of respondents said that a corporate focus on diversity has overlooked white men.) Charged topics like these can provoke resentment, anger, and shame. But we need real exchanges about them if we want to dispel the notion that corporations are pure meritocracies and to ensure that everyone feels heard, supported, and authentic at work.

Senior leaders – most of whom are white men – must set the tone. Why? In one survey, nearly 40% of black employees said they feel it is *never* acceptable to speak out about experiences of bias – a silence that can become corrosive. Another study showed that among black professionals who aspire to senior leadership positions, the most frequently adopted strategy is to avoid talking about race or other issues of inequality, for fear of being labeled an agitator. Other research has indicated that the only CEOs and lower-level managers not penalized for championing diversity are white men.

To create a culture of psychological safety and pave the way for open communication will require a top-down directive and modeling through informal and formal discussions in which people are asked to share ideas, ask questions, and address issues without fear of reprisal. Managers down the line will need training in encouraging and guiding such exchanges, including inviting black employees and leaders to share their experiences – the good, the bad, and the ugly. Participants should be trained to prepare for such conversations by reflecting on their own identities and the comments and situations that trigger strong emotions in them. As detailed by Columbia University's Valerie Purdie-Greenaway and the University of Virginia's Martin Davidson, the goal is to shift the entire organization to a racial-learning orientation.

Again, a movement from another context – #MeToo – sheds light on how to do so. Revelations of abuse and harassment and the outpouring of women's stories that followed, many about incidents that happened in the workplace, forced corporate leaders to focus on those issues. Bad actors were fired, women felt empowered to speak up, and awareness of gender discrimination increased. Although #BlackLivesMatter has had similar success highlighting and sparking discussions around police brutality, there is no #BlackLivesAtWork. There should be.

We see some positive signs on this front. Over the past few years several prominent leaders, including PwC's Tim Ryan, Interpublic Group's Michael Roth, Kaiser Permanente's Bernard Tyson, and AT&T's Randall Stephenson, have initiated companywide discussions of race. For example, PwC brought in Mellody Hobson, president and co-CEO of Ariel Investments and a prominent African-American leader, to talk to employees about being "color-brave" instead of "color-blind" at work, and it has offered guides for continuing the discussion. At Morgan Stanley, global head of D&I Susan Reid has promoted intimate conversations about race in networking groups and an hour-long forum on race in the current social climate. The latter was moderated by the company's vice chairman and featured its chief marketing officer, its head of prime brokerage, and a Fortune reporter who covers racial issues; it was attended by 1,500

employees, and videos of the event were shared across the firm. Greenaway and Davidson also point to a mostly white male financial services firm that instituted Know Us, a program of small-group cross-race dialogues on racially relevant topics.

Over time these conversations will start to happen informally and organically in groups and among individuals at all levels of an organization, deepening interpersonal cross-race relationships. In one consulting company cited by Greenaway and Davidson, nonblack employees started a book club open to all but focused on black writers; the group has visited African-American museums and historical sites. One-on-one interactions can be even more meaningful, as the psychologist colleagues Karen Samuels (who is white) and Kathryn Fraser (who is black) describe. “It was important to name our racial and cultural differences and to examine how my perspective was naive regarding her reality,” Samuels explains.

Third, revamp D&I programs. Any corporate diversity and inclusion program is better than none, but most that exist today are not designed to sustain a focus on racial equity. Many are siloed within the HR department, lack C-suite support, or are given to women or people of color to manage in addition to their day jobs. Some are more show than go, resting on philosophical statements about inclusion rather than outlining concrete steps for advancing nonwhites. Others limit their efforts to antibias and cultural competence training – preempting problems but, again, not propelling anyone forward. Most take a broad-brush approach to diversity, attempting to serve all minorities plus white women, LGBTQ employees, and those who are neurodiverse or disabled and offering uniform training and leadership development that ignore historical patterns of exclusion, marginality, and disadvantage for each group. They might focus too heavily on recruitment and retention – filling the pipeline and high-potential groups with black employees but failing to support them past middle-management roles. Most troubling, as Courtney McCluney and San Francisco State University’s Verónica Rabelo have shown, a significant portion of D&I programs try to “manage blackness” – that is, impose “desirable” and “professional” (read: white) norms and expectations on rising African-American stars, thus preserving rather than shifting the status quo. They train black executives to fit into the existing organizational culture rather than encourage them to broaden it by bringing their true and most productive selves to work.

How can we improve such programs? By tackling their shortcomings one by one. Here are several steps organizations can take.

- Give D&I sustained C-suite support and recognize and reward the people who contribute to its initiatives – for example, by having your chief diversity officer report directly to the CEO and tracking inclusion initiative participation in performance reviews and promotion and pay raise discussions.
- Equip and invite white men to take up the mantle – say, by bringing them into D&I programs and assigning some of them to leadership roles.
- Challenge those running D&I efforts to set clear goals for how representation, organizational networks, and access to resources should change across functions and levels over time and how black employees' perceptions, engagement, and well-being should improve, and then measure the efforts' effectiveness with data analysis and qualitative surveys.
- Shift from preventative measures, such as antibias training, to proactive ones, such as upping the number of black candidates considered for open positions and stretch roles.
- Abandon one-size-fits-all and color-blind leadership-development practices in favor of courses and coaching tailored to specific groups – or better yet, adopt personalized plans that recognize the multifaceted nature of each individual.
- Help black employees and rising leaders throughout their careers, including teaching managers the skills they need to support D&I efforts.
- Stop asking black employees to blend in; instead, emphasize the value of a workplace that embraces all styles and behaviors.

In sum, D&I needs to be an ethos that permeates the entire organization, championed not just by the HR department but by everyone, and especially managers, so that its importance is clear. The Toigo Foundation's leaders draw a parallel between this idea and the total quality management movement of the 1980s, which, with top-down support and the establishment of key performance indicators, became a pervasive way of working and thinking that filtered down to every function and level.

Few companies to date have taken diversity and inclusion that far. But some are moving in the right direction, including JPMorgan Chase, which in 2016 launched a board- and CEO-supported Advancing Black Leaders strategy – staffed and managed separately from other D&I initiatives – focused on filling the firm's pipeline with black talent and retaining and promoting those workers. SAP's Black Employee Network helped launch its partnership with Delaware State University through Project Propel, which offers tech training and skills development to students from historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), with the goal of building an employee pipeline. The Network also encouraged SAP to sponsor Silicon Valley's Culture Shifting Weekend, which brings together more than 200 African-American and Hispanic

executives, entrepreneurs, innovators, and social impact leaders to discuss diversifying the tech industry. Pfizer tracks numerous D&I metrics and notes that 21% of its workforce – 21,000 people – are actively involved in its D&I efforts.

Finally, manage career development across all life stages. African-Americans today are securing good university educations in record numbers. HBCUs, in particular, create a sizable pipeline of young talent for organizations to tap into. Companies can, of course, step up their campus recruiting efforts, but efforts to advance black leaders must extend far beyond that.

If more African-Americans are to rise through the ranks, robust – and careful – investment in retention and development is required. Research by the University of Georgia’s Kecia Thomas and colleagues has shown that many black women get this kind of support early in their careers, but it comes with a price: They are treated like “pets” whom white leaders are happy to groom, but the further they progress, the more that favored status begins to undermine them. Those who reject the pet identity, meanwhile, are perceived as threatening and face hostility and distancing from coworkers.

Mentoring is useful, and our study of black HBS graduates shows that they were more likely than their white peers to have been formally assigned to mentors. But they derived less value from the relationship and said that informal mentorship – having senior executives (white or minority) connect with them naturally through work groups or common interests – was more effective. “A mentor helps you navigate the power structure of the firm, especially when there is no one in senior management who looks like you,” one study participant told us.

Early in their careers, black employees need safe spaces to grow and develop and to experience authentic failures and successes without being subsumed in narratives of racial limitation. Managers and mentors can provide the necessary cover. We found that the black Harvard MBAs who did reach top management positions (13% of women, 19% of men) had been bolstered by networks of supporters.

Sponsorship – that is, recommending black employees for promotions and stretch assignments – is even more important. Other key factors that have propelled black Harvard MBAs into senior executive roles are line or general management experience and global assignments. With many

qualified and ambitious people vying for such opportunities, politics often plays a role. So African-Americans need more influential people in their corners, pressing their cases to decision-makers.

Candid feedback early on is also critical. This doesn't mean pushing protégés to assimilate (to look and act "more white"); as we've shown, that's counterproductive. It should focus on identifying and enhancing their unique strengths, overcoming skill or knowledge weaknesses, and positioning them to realize their full potential.

At later stages of their careers, black executives should be seriously considered for high-stakes and high-profile positions and supported in the pursuit of outside interests, such as board seats, that enhance visibility. And while taking care not to tokenize but rather to create opportunities for multiple candidates, organizations can highlight those executives as role models who redefine norms of leadership and can encourage them to pass that baton by transferring connections and endorsements, sharing wisdom through storytelling, and creating opportunities for the next generation to assume senior roles. Needs differ by career stage, a fact that most published models of diversity and inclusion do not address but that is embedded in impactful programs such as the Toigo Foundation, [the Partnership](#), and the [Executive Leadership Council](#).

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Despite antidiscrimination laws and increasing corporate investment in diversity efforts, race continues to be a major barrier to advancement in the U.S. workplace. We are far from realizing the principles of equal opportunity and meritocracy. Rather than looking to the few black leaders who have succeeded as exemplars of exceptionalism who have beaten almost insurmountable odds, we must learn from their insights and experiences along with the experiences of those who didn't make it to the top. Perhaps more important, we need to understand why existing inclusion initiatives have made so little difference. If organizations really want a representative workforce that includes more than one or two black leaders, their approach must change.

Our hope is that once companies understand the reality of the black experience, they will embrace and champion policies and programs that actually help to level the playing field – and that where there aren't yet best practices, they will begin the conversations and experiments

that will lead to them. This will be hard and often uncomfortable work. But we believe it's worth it, not only for African-Americans but also for the many other underrepresented or marginalized groups. Now more than ever before, organizations and society should strive to benefit from the experiences, knowledge, and skills of all, not just a few. And while government policies can help, we believe that corporate leaders can have a much more powerful and immediate impact. As then-Senator Obama said in 2008, *“Change will not come if we wait for some other person or if we wait for some other time. We are the ones we’ve been waiting for. We are the change that we seek.”* | **THE BIG IDEA**