

How Companies Can Commit to Diversity and Inclusion Holistically

Cultural Competence

Employment and Labor





Already grieving the thousands of lives lost from the historic COVID-19 pandemic, the world was outraged to see George Floyd, a 56-year-old Black man, allegedly killed as the result of police brutality in Minneapolis, Minnesota. His death galvanized Black Lives Matter protests in hundreds of

cities worldwide, all demanding justice for Floyd and police reform.

In response, many organizations have made public statements supporting the Black Lives Matter movement and have committed to implementing more robust diversity and inclusion efforts. But effecting change doesn't happen overnight — it requires listening, learning, and action.

ACC collaborated with the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) to cover these strategies in the hour-long webcast "A New Understanding of Workplace Diversity and Inclusion." The webcast featured a panel of in-house counsel and HR experts, who delved into how companies can foster and elevate the careers of Black employees. There were four live sessions of the webcast on Thursday, June 18.

ACC President and CEO Veta T. Richardson moderated the discussion. Panelists included John Page, senior corporate vice president and chief corporate social responsibility and legal officer at Golden State Foods; April Miller Boise, general counsel at Eaton; Michelle Nettles, chief people and culture officer at ManPower Group; and Steve Pemberton, chief human resources officer at Workhuman.

Below are some of the webcast's key takeaways that in-house counsel can use in their organizations to improve diversity and inclusion (D&I) programs.

Listen

Before deciding how to improve D&I programs, companies should facilitate workplace conversations about race relations. "Focus on the individual ownership first," Pemberton recommends.

For example, Nettles says ManPower Group, her employer, immediately held active listening sessions for the staff after the George Floyd protests began. These dialogues gave employees a safe space to discuss their perspectives of the events, address any concerns, and request additional resources.

However, in-house counsel must also address this concern on an organization-wide level. Companies should listen to what Black employees want and need from their employer to feel comfortable at work and to grow in their careers.

How will your company hire, retain, and promote more Black employees? What resources will you provide to help these employees excel? What are you willing to change?

These conversations must be "honest and authentic," Page says. They might be uncomfortable, but they need to happen to ensure the United States achieves racial equity. "We wouldn't have progress if we didn't have these conversations," Page observes.

Empathize

Empathy is essential to preventing racial biases and treating each other fairly. Reflecting on the times when you've been treated differently helps you gain perspective on what African Americans have and continue to endure.

Growing up, Pemberton heard stories from his Irish grandfather seeing signs that said, "No Irish, No

Dogs Need Apply." This employment discrimination sounded jarringly similar to those of his Black relatives.

In fact, most everyone can relate to a time where their otherness made them feel like an outcast, mistreated, or overlooked. Perhaps we've witnessed this happen to others. The panelists acknowledged that while it can be easy to avoid conflict and say nothing, it's important to speak up when you witness discrimination in any form. You might not be able to change someone's mind by speaking up, but you are telling them that you don't co-sign their hateful rhetoric.

Learn

When the George Floyd protests began, Pemberton received several questions from non-Black friends and colleagues about what they can do to help the Black community. He saw this as an opportunity to help them better understand the plight that Black colleagues, friends, and family members face.

He also pointed out that Black people are not a monolith, and that not everyone is comfortable relieving traumatic experiences. The onus lies with the individual as there are many resources available, like Robin D'Angelo's currently sold out book White Fragility or Ava DuVernay's Academy Award nominated documentary "13th."

The panelists agreed that while it's essential to learn about the pain that culminated in the protests, it's also vital to step out of your comfort zone and find out more about other cultures.

Experience is the best teacher, so socialize with people who aren't like you to learn about their history and customs. And if you don't have any friends or colleagues who don't look like you, perhaps ask yourself why that is and what you can do to fix it.

Pemberton recommends visiting Black churches or learning about traditionally Black fraternities and sororities to see how they dedicate their time to improving the community. Be sure to ask how you can volunteer or help. When Martin Luther King Jr. Day rolls around, commit to a day of service to improve your community. Only by working together can we dismantle systemic racism.

Teach

Once you've educated yourself, you should also share this knowledge with younger family members. "It starts with the next generation," Richardson notes. Fostering these skills early is critical to prevent racism in our youth. In fact, children as young as six months begin noticing differences in race and forming racial biases at age four.

That's why Pemberton stresses that you must teach your kids of all ages that racism is hurtful and diversity is beautiful. The earlier you teach them these values, the less unconscious bias they'll have to unlearn later.

Plan

"What's your Black strategy?" Page asks.

Recruiting diverse talent begins before open job is posted. Richardson stresses "the importance of

being active and visible in diverse communities," so that that the candidates will know about your organization and want to apply there.

While diversity efforts at the workplace have been expanding greatly, Boise notes that corporate American hasn't "been focused on promoting Black people and they've been left behind in this movement." Corporate leaders must reassess every aspect of their company, especially hiring efforts, to see if they match their D&I values. She continues:

> *"In order to serve our shareholders and to ensure that they have the kinds of returns that they expect, we really need to be taking care of our other stakeholders — our employees and our communities. So when we think about the role of the corporation and the role of the organization from that perspective, it's very clear why this is something that everyone from the C-suite, boardroom, and beyond should say and acknowledge 'This is a very important issue not just for me personally but also for my organization.'"*

Further, Page recommends that in-house counsel and chief human resource officers reassess their company's corporate social responsibility (CRS) program to ensure they're not unwittingly promoting racism.

Act

Reading countless headlines of police brutality and hearing Black colleague's personal stories with law enforcement can be simultaneously infuriating and emotionally draining. But don't give up hope. That's when you need to "channel the anger and frustration into action," Boise says.

As trusted members of your company's leadership, you have the influence to effect change in companies for the Black community, starting with who you hire. "Our actions have to be intentional about the teams we're putting together and actions we're taking," Boise says.

The tone at the top needs to be abundantly clear: D&I is incorporated in every level at your company. To illustrate this point, Page quoted Booker T. Washington:

> *"There are two ways of exerting one's strength: One is pushing down, the other is pulling up."*

Translated in today's work environment, how are you exerting that power as a corporate leader? How is that reflected in the company and the C-suite? Who are you pulling up to join a seat at the table?

Those D&I standards should apply both internally and externally. "Who you partner with is just as important as who you hire," says Page. "Are your third parties living up to your company's standards?" Audit your vendors to see if their mission statements match yours. If they don't, find a vendor whose values and actions do.

Commit

Advocating for Black rights is a daily effort, long after the headlines fade and the protesters dwindle.

To see change within companies, Page suggests that leadership must hold people accountable from all levels across the organization. Your actions must match your words.

Page goes on to warn about the possibility of backlash from some employees or stakeholders. “Some will feel uncomfortable, as there’s a change to the status quo,” he says. That said, he stressed the importance of not giving into quiet resistance, or regressing back to old standards.

Committing to progress will help make gradual changes across the company, community, and country. This is how we can turn this moment into a movement.

If you couldn’t attend one of the live sessions, the webcast is free to watch and is available through December 2020. For more webcasts on achieving racial equity in the workplace, as well as additional and frequently updated D&I resources and content, visit the ACC I.D.E.A.L. Foundation page.

Below are the additional resources that the panel discussed during the webcast:

- Frederick Douglass: “The Meaning of the Fourth of July for the Negro” (1852)
- The 1691 Project (The New York Times)
- Teaching Tolerance (tolerance.org)

Karmen Fox



Web Content Editor

ACC