

Adopting Disruption:

Why do many corporate diversity, equity and inclusion programs fail?

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After the murder of George Floyd more than a year ago, many companies started internal dialogues around the experience of Black Americans. There were raw conversations around racial profiling, injustice and police brutality. For a moment, it felt like the nation was at least trying to understand life in America dressed in a black body. Parts of society pushed for meaningful actions targeting police reform and political inclusion. Many insisted that board rooms, conference rooms and factory floors should resemble their community demographics. Employers responded with added focus on diversity and bias training. Led by human resources and the office of diversity and inclusion, employers held webinars, recommended books and brought in consultants. African American employees tried to steer the focus of their *often* white-female HR and D&I leaders towards black representation. After all, if the conversations started as a result of Floyd's murder, then why shouldn't the need for more black leaders and the retention of black hires be the primary agenda? But D&I's leaders viewed their charter as broader than African American inclusion. To them, it was about women and people of color as a *collective*. So, they focused on general diversity, gender and orientation. They resisted the idea that any action plan would specifically target the plight of black employees. The focus on racial profiling and police brutality quickly faded. Terms like microaggressions, tone policing and *diversity of thought* became prevalent in the U.S. lexicon. Consultants who could simply spell 'diversity' popped up everywhere. And all the while, the killings continued with Rayshard Brooks, Michael Ramos, Breonna Taylor, Sean Reed and others. Now a year later, many blacks see little change in their work and local experience and most can tell you why?

Society's first reaction to Floyd's murder was a demand for action. Some mayors considered police reform. Many CEOs looked to hire a new Chief Diversity Officer.¹ In July of 2020, LinkedIn noted that CDO, CIDO and Chief of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion was the highest posted job. Everywhere you turned, CDO's were leading their employees through conversations about the murder. Murders! The general response was shock and disbelief. A jolt to American sensibilities. "Surely this didn't happen in our nation," they said. And then black employees explained that it happens all the time. "Indeed, that

¹ *Demand for Chief Diversity Officers is High. So Is Turnover*, Cutter and Weber; Wall Street Journal; July 13, 2020

black colleague sitting next to you was stopped on the subway just last night, because he looked like someone; dressed like someone; was in someone else's car!" Many asked, "Why is this happening? How do we move forward?"

That same week, we learned of Amy Cooper. A white female who made the conscious decision to escalate a request to leash her dog into a potential assault on a black body. Many of us thought, surely, she works in a board room or conference room or a factory floor. Does she not see her victim in the body of a coworker or neighbor? Possibly not. Possibly there were no African American coworkers available to enlighten her life experience. But again, CDO's shared their outrage by conducting trainings and tutorials on tone policing, external versus internal diversity, micro versus macroaggressions. African Americans were left sitting on training Zooms wondering what tone policing had to do with fraudulently calling the police?

This corporate American response is really no surprise. Historically, most national diversity dialogues start after an assault on African Americans. We were in this same place after Selma (1965). We were here after Rodney King (1992). We were here again after Ferguson (2014). And of course, now, George Floyd. It's a sixty-year pattern: employers orchestrate heartfelt conversations where black employees bare their souls, followed by minimally funded programs to revisit fundamentals facts we were taught as children; 'all races should be treated equally!' I remember telling colleagues it will happen again and we'll be back in the same place. "No," they responded. They swore it was different this time. "This time, we have a CDO. This time, we understand racism. This time, it's systemic!"

So, we shared more books and articles.

Writers wrote new books and articles.

We formed committees.

Committees formed subcommittees.

Speakers spoke.

Those minimally funded programs now include sharing of internal metrics. Some firms started making the data on racial and gender populations available to their employees. Some even created bonus plans tied to the improvement of these metrics. Valiant efforts for sure! But for most African American employees, this will make no difference. I contend that these efforts will fail to significantly

change the ratios of black employees in management² or at any decision-making level. Recent years have actually shown slight decreases in black management.³ Current D&I efforts will do little to change Ms. Coopers' view of black men in the park or in the office. It will do little to change Mr. Chauvin's image of black shoppers in the grocery store or the liquor store. If corporate America really wanted to solve their black representation dilemma they could! The sixty-year pattern of murders, beatings and exclusions of African Americans isn't solved by training on tone, *diversity* or micro-anything. It's a macro problem. And in 2021, the question is no longer, what leads to bias against black Americans? We've been *shown* the answer over and over, for 250 years.

Possibly, we should stop asking the question that doesn't need to be answered. The question isn't why don't we have better *diversity* metrics? It's why don't we have better African American representation? As long as we keep turning the African American exclusion question into one of general *diversity*, we'll never hit any mark. I truly believe that the root of the American dilemma is stolen lives and stolen property. The plight of Indigenous and African people in America. Solve those first and then you can talk about microaggressions and tone policing. We have often said, these are America's original sins. They are the root of all our -ism's; racism, sexism, homophobia.

One thing I discovered after 30+ years of working in mostly Fortune 100's; when the corporation truly wants an initiative to succeed, very little stops them. Innovation and new ideas can run rampant when the CEO puts his/her best minds to the task. I've heard the amazing success story of Apple crushing Blackberry. Or the rise of electric cars against the stronghold of oil and gas. When corporate America wants a change, it happens. And so, I have to ask why the sixty-year trend hasn't been broken?

Our recent move towards the term 'diversity' is predictable. It allows us to broaden our response. After all, diversity can be defined by anyone "*not* straight-white-male." That would include nearly 70% of the US population⁴. Anti-racism is just as broad. There are 6 -7 distinct races on the planet. And then there's multi-racial. Under that guise, achieving diversity should be a piece of cake. The majority of the planet is diverse! So why do we still struggle?

² *Why so many black business professionals are missing from the C-suite*; CBSNews.com, Dec 10, 2019

³ *After years of talking about diversity, the number of black leaders at US companies is still dismal*; CNN Business; June 2, 2020

⁴ *White men are 31 percent of American population. They hold 65 percent of all elected offices*; Nia-Malika Henderson; Washington Post, Oct 8, 2014

The term “diversity” is easier to talk about. Abuse of black men and women is a difficult topic. The stolen lands of Indigenous people are not easy discussions for HR training sessions. The unlawful imprisonment of Japanese Americans or the neglect of citizens in Puerto Rico, Guam and Virgin Islands are all difficult topics. And each of those groups have a very unique struggle. *Diversity* is simply an easier phrase. It allows us *not* to discuss specific abuses. Make not mistake, I am absolutely enamored with the phrase ‘People of Color.’ I love the unity that it symbolizes and the acknowledgement of our shared experiences. But every group within the term BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) deserve specific initiatives focused on their unique struggle. I believe *diversity training* in its’ current form is a bait and switch to make us forget our unique challenges and accept generalities that lead to no unique solutions.

I make no apology that addressing specific populations with specific initiatives would be a hard task. It should be. We’ve spent centuries ignoring their struggles and excluding them from structural participation. But the band aid generality of *diversity* will ensure that we continue to avoid truth and solve nothing more than temporary guilt.

This is a conversation about approach. If our current approach isn’t working, then perhaps a disruptive approach is needed. Adopt Disruption. Much like businesses do when they get into new markets. In business theory, a disruptive innovation is an approach that creates a new value network by displacing established products, processes and alliances. It is an abrupt change that challenges existing supply chains. What would happen if employers made abrupt decisions and swapped out leaders? If they ignored incumbency, sponsorship and succession plans and decided that 14% of the leaders had to be African American by 5pm on Friday? Or if 16% had to be Latino? What if their board of directors ‘bussed’ in these new leaders and required that existing leaders integrate them into the organization and that their success was *mandatory*? Much like hiring black interns and college graduates and *not* leaving them to fend for themselves. What if their success was a corporate strategy?

When I first started this article, friends and family pointed out a key point that I had missed. When corporate America really wants to accomplish something, they usually do. They can rally whole teams around the transformation from disc delivery to downloadables. An entire corporation once known for its’ premier development of large computer systems, now sells consultancy. And they didn’t worry about the organizations ability to work through the disruption. They relied on one of humanity’s most artful skills; adaptability. But when it comes to transforming their management levels away from a

majority white-male structure, they are incapable of accomplishing anything meaningful in sixty years.⁵ Instead of innovation or disruption, they opt for the gradual learning and training of employees, in the hope they will eventually drop their biases and -isms (sexism, racism and homophobia). Einstein's clue to humanity; the definition of our insanity is trying the same thing over and over and expecting a different result.

In a recent class, I learned the power of questions. It's not about the answers you may have, but the questions you ask. Vogt, Brown & Isaacs⁶ said, that western cultures, in particular the U.S., focus on having the right answer rather than discovering the right question. So, I've been wondering, what are the real questions for corporate America?

Why isn't increasing the number of African Americans in executive leadership a funded imperative for your business? It's time we asked the powerful questions. If we do, we will develop powerful solutions. It's time we got started.

⁵ *White Men Account for 72% of Corporate Leadership*; Stacy Jones; Fortune.com, June 9, 2017

⁶ *The Art of Powerful Questions, Catalyzing Insight, Innovation and Action*; Eric Vogt, Juanita Brown and David Isaacs; 2003