

Jun 29, 2020, 09:44am EDT | 8,336 views

Why Diversity And Inclusion Efforts Fail To Deliver And How To Change That



Nihar Chhaya Contributor ⓘ ⊕

Leadership Strategy

I write to help leaders navigate interpersonal dynamics in business

Over the past decade, more companies have tried to demonstrate a commitment to diversity and inclusion in recruiting, engaging, developing, and promoting employees. But in most cases, the experience of those from marginalized backgrounds **has not changed enough**.



PHOTO BY CHRISTINA AT WOCINTECHCHAT ON
UNSPLASH

As a result, appointments of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) executives to top roles seem cosmetic, allowing boards and CEOs to say they're doing something about the inequities in their workplace but not resulting in much noticeable change.

Furthermore, the burden of increasing awareness about the issues that diverse employees face continues to fall on the shoulders of the excluded group, rather than placing the onus on those in power to recognize their privilege and drive change.

In recent days, as the world witnesses examples of racial bias at the hands of law enforcement or disparities in privilege through viral social media videos, companies recognize they cannot quietly sit idle and remain silent.

Whether their words and support of movements like Black Lives Matter or gender equity in the workplace will make a difference remains to be seen, but the obligation to do something and say something is getting stronger.

MORE FOR YOU

Death Of A City: The Portland Story?

The Story Of How Trump Officials Tried To End H-1B Visas

3 Communication Strategies That Make The Bill And Melinda Gates 2021 Letter So Compelling

I wanted to learn more about what leaders need to do, to harness this momentum in a meaningful way, rather than provide the same lip service and empty platitudes of the past.

So I sat down with an expert in the DEI space, Dr. Stefanie Johnson, a professor at the Leeds School of Business at the University of Colorado-Boulder and the author of the recent Wall Street Journal bestseller, *Inclusify*.

Stefanie's work helps explain why current approaches to achieving diversity in companies often fall flat and what managers and employees can do to change that.

As an [executive coach](#) and consultant to large corporations on the development and succession of leaders, I was curious about Stefanie's ideas as they apply to the "employee lifecycle" from recruiting to executive advancement. We also had a recent [LinkedIn Live conversation](#) to dig deeper into this topic, which is accessible online.

This lifecycle starts with the hiring of talent at companies, continues onto the engagement and development of them through teams, and then moves to the potential promotion of diverse employees into higher leadership roles.

Here are some approaches companies need to consider across those three stages, to help rather than hinder diversity and inclusion.

Recruiting Employees: Shift Process to Minimize Bias

In 2003, the National Football League (NFL) established a policy called the [Rooney Rule](#), mandating league teams to include at least one candidate who is a person of color on the slate of interviews for every head coaching position. For a league with its majority of players as people of color, yet very few in head coaching positions, this rule intended to introduce more diversity in the hiring process.

In time many companies in other industries began to look to the Rooney Rule as a way of diversifying their boards. Even President Obama [endorsed it in 2015](#) to transform HR practices in technology companies.

But as Stefanie shared with me, her research revealed an essential flaw in the Rooney Rule, which she demonstrated in a [2016 article](#) for Harvard Business Review.



Dr. Stefanie K. Johnson STEFANIE JOHNSON

When the league (or any company) forces hiring managers to include one person of color in the shortlist of interviewees, that candidate's chances of getting the job are much lower.

Stefanie told me, "When you interview one person, you're treating them like a token. You're thinking, I better interview this candidate, otherwise the NFL is going to fine us."

But add just one other candidate of color on the interview list, Stefanie found in her research, and the results dramatically change. The chances of

selecting a minority candidate among the interviewees, massively improved simply by having more than one included in the process. "It was virtually a hundred times more likely a person of color would be hired," Stefanie emphasized.

Her research found a similar impact on hiring women when there is only one woman candidate versus having more than one. Stefanie's work caught on, and through further writing on the subject, she found that aside for one case, whenever the NFL hired a black coach in recent years, there always was more than one black candidate.

In validation of research like Stefanie's, the NFL expanded the Rooney Rule to include more than one person of color in their candidate roster for head coaches. And other companies look to be following suit, recognizing the merit of this one overlooked, yet meaningful adjustment to the process.

Another way of minimizing bias in recruiting is through the anonymization of resumes. Stefanie's [research on the application process](#) for time on NASA's Hubble Space Telescope found that when you eliminate almost all personal information about the male and female candidates, you can virtually eradicate gender bias.

Evidence showed that male reviewers were rating female scientists' proposals significantly worse than male-led proposals. But after they experimented with ways to anonymize the application, they noticed a dramatic change in how reviewers rated proposals.

First, they took the scientists' first names off the proposals, using only initials and laying out scientists in alphabetical order to mask the head scientist. But also, to create "dual anonymization," applicants were told to write proposals in ways that made it difficult to know who wrote it. After the use of anonymization, the results showed female candidates performed much better in the process.

As a result of these findings, NASA is now going to use dual anonymization for all of the programs. In the week we discussed this example, Stefanie also found out she will be receiving the NASA Group Achievement Award based on that work.

Both the NFL and NASA examples illuminate how companies can introduce more diversity in their staff, without sacrificing the caliber and competence, which tends to be the standard excuse for not doing it.

Engaging Employees: Enable Both Belongingness and Uniqueness

The next stage in the life of an employee after being hired is excelling in their given role and collaborating effectively across their various stakeholder teams. Diversity and inclusion at this stage cover all the issues employees face around fairness and equitable access to learning, fair compensation, networks, respect from their bosses, and many others.

This part of the lifecycle is also the stage when companies assess employees' potential for promotion to leadership, based on their capabilities and how they collaborate. It's the fertile ground where real changes in the diversity of senior leadership in a company begin. Engaging and developing employees at this step are essential so that they can see themselves as future leaders.

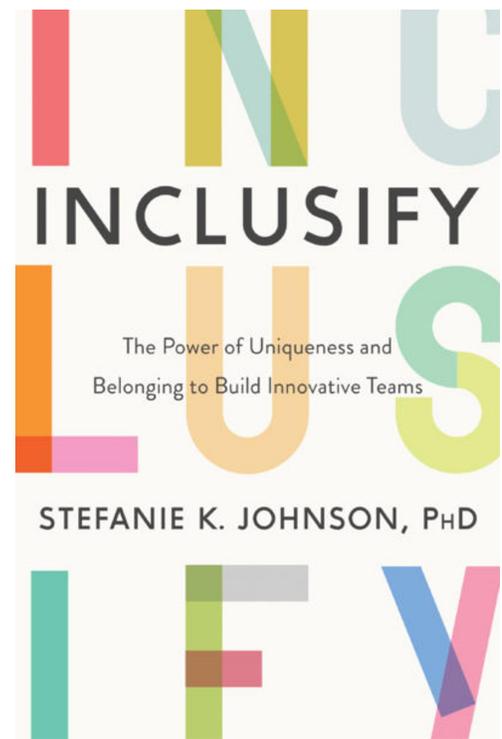
Stefanie points out that there are two human drivers that all employees (and leaders for their teams) struggle to balance in an organizational setting: the desire to belong and the desire to be unique.

As she writes, people want "to stand out and to fit in." And this tension is, in many ways, the reason why diversity and inclusion efforts fail to succeed.

One way of note that D&I efforts don't meet their potential for impact is that even the best-intentioned leaders over-index on one extreme or the other.

For instance, they may champion very diverse groups but do nothing to enable more profound understanding and cooperation among different teammates. On the other extreme, leaders may create such cohesive teams through deliberate inclusion, but ultimately crowd out individuality and resort to groupthink.

Stefanie's advice is for leaders to "inclusify." Inclusifiers are leaders who make a personal commitment to encourage uniqueness while also promoting belongingness.



STEFANIE JOHNSON

To encourage *uniqueness*, Stefanie recommends an easy acronym to follow: SELF, which stands for (S)upport, (E)mpathize, (L)earn and Be (Fair). Her book dives into each in greater depth on each component, but one lesson that threads through each is that it's essential to do them with intention and transparency. For instance, (S)upport diversity publicly, not just privately.

Then to encourage *belongingness*, Stefanie uses the acronym, TEAM, which stands for Be (T)ransparent, (E)mpower, (A)lign and (M)otivate.

The difference between having great intentions in enabling diversity and inclusion and achieving great results is being honest about existing blind spots and showing the courage to put a stake in the ground on measurable goals.

It's a high intention to say, we want to see more black, Hispanic, and women executives at the VP and up levels in our company. But it's far more effective to publicly say "we will have X percent of executives in each group by 2025, and the way we will do that is [define criteria for how leaders will execute on the SELF and TEAM acronyms]."

Promoting Employees: Shatter Myths About Meritocracy

If you had an adverse reaction to the last sentence above about having a specific percentage of leaders in executive roles by 2025, it's not your fault. Most companies and leaders struggle to achieve such goals because of the long-debated issue of "meritocracy" in leadership advancement.

This idea brings us to the third stage of the employee lifecycle: the succession process of talent at a company. In other words, who gets promoted to the next level of leadership and when?

At this stage, problems with diversity and inclusion exist just as much, which Stefanie and I discussed.

How often have you heard someone say about this topic: "why should [race or gender] matter? It should be about who is the best person for the job."

This common refrain is the core of the argument for companies and leaders proud to say they believe in meritocracy.

But as Stefanie has researched, there are many problems with the so-called "meritocratic manager." For one thing, these managers bake in many inaccurate assumptions about who the "best" person for a role is, and why certain people don't make the cut for promotion.

Look no further to the evidence that **40% of newly promoted leaders derail** within the first 18 months of a promotion, to see that even those making promotion decisions can't be sure their pick is "the best one."

Also, based on my executive coaching experience, I would say that most leaders promoted to higher roles are "good enough" and with potential, but to say they are "the best" is a reach. To validate whether they are the best fit for a role requires a much more in-depth assessment that fast-moving companies have no interest in or reason to do.

But the more critical point is that there are excellent candidates, who, by being part of a traditionally excluded group, don't even get a shot at promotions.

Consider Stefanie's work on uniqueness and belongingness to see that many minority employees struggle with being unique enough to stand out, but not so much that they look like they're not a team player.

Also, many minority employees start with certain disadvantages in networks, sponsorship, and influence when few leaders in their companies look like them or share their experiences.

Stefanie's advice for companies is to recognize that everyone has blind spots, even the best-intentioned ones. Meritocratic managers are an asset to an organization and their teams to the extent that they coach and actively develop others around specific criteria that is valuable to the company.

But they also limit the fair advancement of certain under-represented groups by holding onto the status quo and not being willing to see the underlying disparities in access or privilege that some employees have in the contest relative to others.

Change Requires More Than Optimism

Among the many excellent cases in Stefanie's book, she highlights various archetypes of leaders who mean well when it comes to diversity and inclusion but still get in the way.

One such archetype is the "Optimist." He or she is the leader who says all the right things about equity and fairness and even wants change, but glosses over what is truly necessary for executing change.

We see many optimists these days, and relatively speaking, it's encouraging to see more people championing diverse, fair, and inclusive workplaces with a positive outlook.

But looking at the issue with rose-colored glasses can be just as damaging as being neutral. Stefanie advises that optimists "take more specific, measurable actions" to complement their positive intentions.

For instance, she told me, "It's not about, 'hey let's do another mentoring program,' or 'let's have another employee resource group (ERG)."

"Those are good, but you have to consider the way structures are designed because they're made in a way that maintains the status quo.

"It's when you change the structures that you can change everything."

She added, "The good news is this is the perfect time to do it because many structures are toppling. So when we rebuild things, we can do it more equitably."

Giving feedback to your managers is a challenging, yet essential exercise for effective leadership. Access Nihar's handy list of phrases to use that enable tension-free feedback [here](#).

Follow Nihar on [LinkedIn here](#).

Get Essential CEO Briefings

Sign up for biweekly briefings with creative strategies and market-shaping moves for the CEO of the future.

<input type="text" value="Title"/>	▼
<input type="text" value="Enter e-mail address"/>	<input type="button" value="Sign up"/>

You may opt out any time. [Terms and Conditions](#) and [Privacy Policy](#)

Check out my [website](#).



Nihar Chhava



Author Name

I am an executive coach to the C-suite and leaders at global companies, including American Airlines, Coca-Cola, GE, Dell, Cigna, Cox Enterprises and more. As a former...

Read More

Reprints & Permissions

ADVERTISEMENT
