



# ADVANCING BLACK LEADERS

**AFRICAN-AMERICANS ARE STILL VASTLY UNDERREPRESENTED  
IN MANY U.S. ORGANIZATIONS. HERE'S A ROAD MAP FOR  
CHANGE. BY LAURA MORGAN ROBERTS AND ANTHONY J. MAYO**

# TOWARD A RACIALLY JUST WORKPLACE

**DIVERSITY EFFORTS ARE FAILING BLACK EMPLOYEES. HERE'S A BETTER APPROACH.**

*“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.

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.

### 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.

### THE AUTHORS

## LAURA MORGAN ROBERTS AND ANTHONY 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."

**Laura Morgan Roberts** is a professor of practice at the University of Virginia's Darden School of Business. She began her teaching career at Harvard Business School and has served on the faculties of Georgetown University's McDonough School of Business and Antioch University's Graduate School of Leadership and Change. Her research on how leaders cultivate positive identities in diverse work organizations formed the basis for her study of the influence of African-American business leaders. With Mayo and Morehouse College President David A. Thomas, she edited [Race, Work, and Leadership: New Perspectives on the Black Experience](#), an exploration of the resources and actions needed for organizations to eliminate systemic racism.

**Tony Mayo** is the Thomas S. Murphy Senior Lecturer of Business Administration in the Organizational Behavior Unit at Harvard Business School. He undertook the research with Morgan Roberts and Thomas to understand the extent to which opportunities for leadership access and progression for black professionals have changed (or not). Mayo teaches leadership and organizational behavior and authentic leader development in the MBA program and recently co-created the HBS online course [Leadership Principles](#), designed to help new and aspiring leaders unleash their own and others' potential. He was previously the course head of Field Immersion Experiences for Leadership Development, a required first-year MBA course focused on leadership, globalization, and integration.

"I have always had an admittedly naive belief in the hope and promise of meritocracy, and it's discouraging to see the entrenched structural and systemic challenges faced by underrepresented individuals in the workforce," Mayo says. "These challenges exist even for graduates of elite institutions like HBS. To encourage real change, we need to share the burden that has historically been borne by underrepresented individuals. It's important for people like me, who are in the majority, to play an active and committed role in fostering real conversations and real change."

**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





ARTWORK: RICO GATSON, "WATTS KIDS," 2015. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND RONALD FELDMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK.

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



ARTWORK: RICO GATSON, "THREE WOMEN," 2015. PHOTO: CASEY DOROBK, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND RONALD FELDMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK.

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 anti-bias 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.

**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 Melody 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 anti-bias 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 COSTS OF CODE-SWITCHING

The behavior is necessary for advancement — but it takes a psychological toll.

by Courtney L. McCluney, Kathrina Robotham, Serenity Lee, Richard Smith, and Myles Durkee

*At this point in my career, code-switching feels natural. I am not even cognizant that I do it anymore.* —30-year-old black male researcher

In 2012, a video of President Barack Obama entering the locker room of the U.S. men's Olympic basketball team went viral. In the clip, viewers can see that there's a clear difference between how Obama greets a white assistant coach and how he greets the black NBA player Kevin Durant. (See video clip on p. 12; click on the image to view.) This moment inspired a sketch on *Key & Peele* in 2014 that played off the idea that Obama “switches” how he greets people, depending on whether they're white or black.

This kind of behavioral adjustment is casually referred to as “code-switching,” which has long been a strategy for black people to successfully navigate interracial interactions and has large implications for their well-being, economic advancement, and even physical survival.

Broadly, code-switching involves adjusting one's style of speech, appearance, behavior, and expression in ways that will optimize the

comfort of others in exchange for fair treatment, quality service, and employment opportunities. Research suggests that code-switching often occurs in spaces where negative stereotypes of black people run counter to what are considered “appropriate” behaviors and norms for a specific environment. For example, research conducted in schools suggests that black students selectively code-switch between standard English in the classroom and African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) with their peers, which elevates their social standing with each intended audience. We also see examples of guidelines encouraging black people to code-switch to survive police interactions, such as “acting polite and respectful when stopped” and “avoiding running even if you are afraid.”

Based on our research and the work of others, we argue that code-switching is one of the key dilemmas that black employees face around race at work. While it is frequently seen as crucial for professional advancement, code-switching often comes at a great psychological cost. If leaders are truly seeking to promote inclusion and address social inequality, they



must begin by understanding why a segment of their workforce believes that they cannot truly be themselves in the office. Then they should address what everyone at the company needs to do to change this.

### THE UPSIDES AND DOWNSIDES OF CODE-SWITCHING

Workplace research suggests that code-switching can generate both positive and negative outcomes for black employees. In our review of the existing literature, we identified three main reasons people code-switch in the workplace:

1. For black people and other racial minorities, downplaying membership in a stigmatized racial group helps **increase perceptions of professionalism** and the **likelihood of being hired**.
2. Avoiding negative stereotypes associated with black racial identity (e.g., incompetence, laziness) **helps black employees be seen as leaders**.
3. Expressing shared interests with members of dominant groups promotes similarity with powerful organizational members, which **raises the chance of promotions** because individuals tend to affiliate with people they perceive as similar.

At the same time, we know that code-switching comes with social and psychological repercussions. Downplaying one's racial group can generate hostility from in-group members, increasing the likelihood

that those who code-switch will be **accused of "acting white."** Seeking to avoid stereotypes is hard work, **and can deplete cognitive resources and hinder performance**. Feigning commonality with coworkers also **reduces authentic self-expression and contributes to burnout**.

For our latest working paper, we investigated how and when these positive and negative outcomes occurred in our sample, how those outcomes affected black employees, and how code-switching was evaluated by others. The goal of this research was to examine how code-switching as an impression-management strategy informs black people's work experiences. We also wanted to examine the pros and cons of this behavior for their professional and psychological well-being.

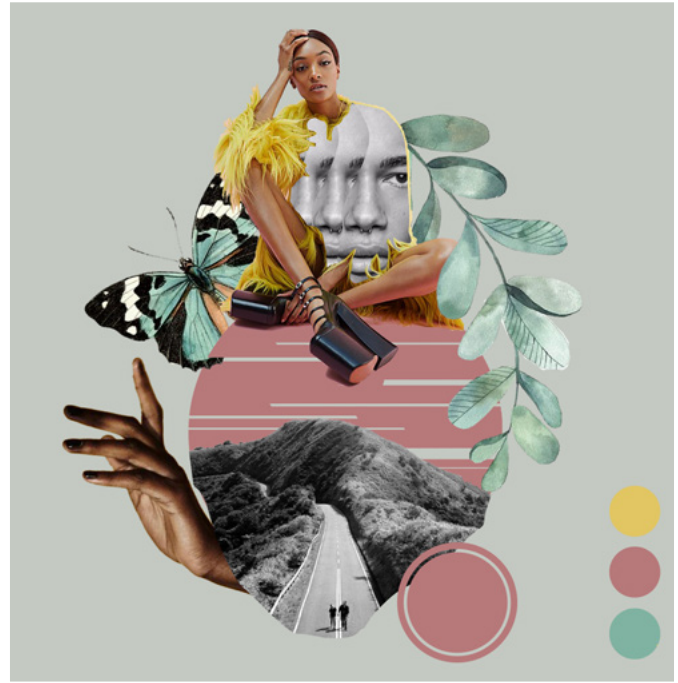
Our findings, while largely self-reported, add to the ongoing work of understanding how black professionals navigate mostly white American organizations. Creating workplaces that are inclusive of black people will

enable companies to retain a diverse workforce and bolster innovation. However, black employees who feel pressure to code-switch may perceive that they are being devalued, which in turn may reduce their commitment to the company and desire to contribute their unique insights. Our work provides an in-depth review of black employees' working lives that will allow companies to create better strategies for recruiting and retaining these workers.

### THE COMPLEXITIES AND NUANCES OF CODE-SWITCHING

To begin our research, we developed a "code-switching at work" scale to assess the extent to which black people downplayed their race (e.g., "I try not to act like other members of my racial group"), avoided stereotypes (e.g., "I avoid behaviors that would make people at work think that I am lazy"), and promoted shared interests with majority-group members (e.g., "I try to talk about topics that other people would find interesting") through adjusting their behavior and appearance. We sent an online survey to black individuals from alumni pools of two large public universities in the U.S. and a Qualtrics survey panel to assess when and how they code-switched at work. Our sample, which consisted of approximately 300 black college-educated employees in the United States, indicated the extent to which they code-switch on a 7-point scale (from strongly disagree to strongly agree). On average, across all three dimensions, participants responded at a 4, which indicates that code-switching is neither overly present nor overly absent from these employees' work lives. Clearly, there is some complexity in when and how code-switching occurs.

**DOWNPLAYING ONE'S RACIAL GROUP CAN GENERATE HOSTILITY FROM IN-GROUP MEMBERS, INCREASING THE LIKELIHOOD THAT THOSE WHO CODE-SWITCH WILL BE ACCUSED OF "ACTING WHITE."**



Through our survey, participants largely acknowledged the benefits of engaging in the three kinds of code-switching listed above. They also articulated how they view and experience these benefits, and how different situations can influence the extent to which they code-switch. We list four of these situations below.

**Leadership aspiration.** We found that black employees with high career aspirations for leadership and promotion opportunities actively avoided conforming to black stereotypes to a higher degree than those with low career aspirations. “I operate under the assumption that most people expect less of me because of my race,” said a 31-year-old black male anesthesiologist. “Under that assumption, I find it easy to modify my behavior slightly to consistently outpace expectations of my abilities.” Respondents also named specific stereotypical behaviors that they regularly avoid. “I go out of my way to make sure I don’t appear lazy, because I know the stereotypes,” said a 23-year-old black female program manager. “People talk, and if you look a certain way, you really have to work twice as hard.” A woman in her 30s who works as a senior research program coordinator told us, “In my actions and verbal communications, I try to avoid

any opportunity for someone to label me as the ‘angry black woman.’ I also carry myself in a professional manner that may seem to be a step above the somewhat casual professional environment of the office.”

**“Fit” beyond race.** Black employees who perceived that they “fit” in their organization also reported downplaying their race and promoting shared interests with dominant-group members. “I like to laugh, have fun, talk about sports, movies, and music,” said a 53-year-old black female professor. “I do these things with anyone.” Those who fell into this category perceived more career success than those who did not. Crucially, however, they also were more likely to burn out. We suspect this is because the process of trying to fit in can be exhausting and dispiriting. “I rarely engage in social gatherings with coworkers because there are few things that we have in common, and I don’t feel that they are interested in learning about things that interest me, because they are the majority. Thus, I keep limited relationships with coworkers,” said a 29-year-old black female financial professional. “I also feel as though I am in a constant battle of censoring/watering down my views, thoughts, and personality for the possibility of being looked

at differently than a nonblack man or woman in the workplace if they exhibited the same behavior. It’s exhausting navigating an all-white workplace.”

**Vigilance.** High levels of vigilant behaviors — that is, always preparing for potential discrimination and mistreatment — were also positively associated with all three dimensions of code-switching at work. One black man described his vigilance about race as “constantly being under a magnifying glass.” “Due to the questions asked by coworkers, it is clear that they view my presence as a ‘sneak peek’ into black culture,” he said. “I find myself constantly trying to be aware of my mannerisms, to ensure that I don’t portray myself or the people I represent in a negative light.” Another man, a 31-year-old financial analyst, noted that he’s more vigilant at work because the stakes are so high. “If you’re being judged by some random person, it is easier to dismiss it, because they probably had no effect in your life,” he said. “But when you’re being judged by coworkers in a place that you want to build a career in, it’s not an easy dismissal. Those perspectives hold weight because it can make or break your career here in America.” Finally, a 32-year-old black woman described vigilance as a day-

to-day coping mechanism: “It has been my specific experience that it is simply easier to anticipate the complaints, jokes, and negative comments from white people and just adapt to their discomfort and ignorance in order to maintain workplace peace.”

**Diversity environment.** We found that the racial composition of the workplace, as well as whether respondents perceived that their organization had an environment that promoted diversity, influenced the extent to which black employees code-switched.

While we know that black employees code-switch when they aren’t well represented in companies, we also uncovered evidence that they downplay their racial identity and promote shared interests with others even when they are equally represented. Why and when is this the case? We have a few theories. It is possible that the [stigma associated with black racial identity](#) affects how larger groups are perceived, especially if they are seen as (or actually are) [low performing](#). In these situations, black employees may downplay their race and try to reduce the stigma attached to it in the presence of others. Another theory is that nonblack coworkers may be more likely to promote shared interests with others outside of their own racial group when black employees are equally represented. This may increase the likelihood of black employees code-switching in return.

We were also surprised to find that black employees avoided stereotypes about black racial identity when they perceived that their organization *either* did not embrace diversity (also known as a color-blind ideology) *or* strongly embraced differences (also known as a multicultural ideology). In other words, a failure to acknowledge differences reduces the ability to recognize discrimination. Black employees might therefore seek to avoid stereotypes in color-blind organizations [to avoid differential treatment](#). In contrast, companies that actively promote a diversity-friendly work environment can make the differences between groups *more* visible. Conforming to stereotypes in these multicultural environments [may encourage the belief](#) that black people have innate and fixed behaviors. Thus,

in order to be seen as an individual, a black employee may code-switch.

All of this is, of course, complex and nuanced; indeed, it seems that no diversity environment perfectly eliminates code-switching. But that may be the point. It can be challenging for a black employee to navigate *any* organization’s racial composition and diversity climate, especially over the span of an entire career. One 32-year-old digital marketing assistant noted that the worst job he had had was at an organization where the culture was not diverse: “The strain I endured as a person of color just trying to fit in was so taxing,” he said, “that it negatively affected every other part of my life.” But even though he’s at an organization now that’s more focused on diversity, he still struggles to find coworkers to bond with because of his previous experience.

### DO EFFORTS TO CODE-SWITCH REALLY PAY OFF?

Our survey revealed the various ways and reasons black employees code-switch, as well as some of the effects. But it was unclear whether code-switching enables black employees to be accepted as “professionals” in the workplace. To answer this question, we designed an online experimental study for almost 350 black and white participants recruited on CloudResearch and living in the U.S. to determine how they evaluated code-switching behaviors.

The participants were instructed to imagine themselves as recently hired employees at a law firm in a large city. They each read an email from a colleague named either Lamar Matthew Jackson or La’Keisha Renee Jackson, both third-year associates at the firm. In the email, Lamar or La’Keisha shared advice on the “unspoken” ways to succeed at the company: whether you should “be yourself” or try to fit in; use standard English or slang; or wear your hair “naturally” or conform to more traditionally “Eurocentric” hairstyles. Participants were randomly assigned into two conditions in which Lamar/La’Keisha code-switched by altering their preferred name (e.g., “My name is Lamar/La’Keisha, but you can call me Matt/Renee at work”), speech patterns, or preferred hairstyle depending on workplace expectations.

Participants then evaluated whether Lamar/La’Keisha’s behavior was appropriate for the workplace and level of professionalism. On average, white participants evaluated code-switching behaviors positively and perceived those who engaged in these behaviors as *more* professional — particularly when black employees adjusted their hairstyle to better fit the norms of the dominant group. “You should be allowed to keep your name, but slang and nappy hair are unprofessional for the workplace,” said one respondent. Another noted, “Looking and behaving professionally are necessary when working at a place like that. Appearances matter. Her name La’Keisha sounds obviously ‘black’ and some may even think ‘ghetto,’ but Renee is more conservative.”

In contrast, black participants disparaged the fictitious black lawyers who intentionally engaged in code-switching to fit in at work, and evaluated them as *less* professional. “Nothing is wrong with ‘ethnic’ names. That is a stereotype that I don’t agree with either,” said one respondent. “My name is my name. If they can pronounce every other name they can pronounce mine.... Use of the English language is understandable, especially in her profession. But to pretty much change her whole identity for a job isn’t right.” Another espoused the belief that “when a person is able to be themselves in a professional setting, they are more productive because they are able to focus on work instead of being distracted by keeping up a specific professional façade.”

Ultimately, our research clearly shows that minorities who code-switch are likely to face a professional dilemma: Should they suppress their cultural identity for the sake of career success? Or should they sacrifice potential career advancement for the sake of bringing their whole selves to work?

This dilemma not only poses career and psychological risks for individuals, it also damages organizations, which may miss out on the distinct perspectives and contributions from racial minorities who are uncomfortable being themselves in the workplace.

### WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT IT?

In light of our research, we offer the following recommendations



for companies and racial-minority professionals about the complexities of code-switching at work. The suggestions aren't comprehensive, but will give everyone in your organization a way forward in beginning to tackle this behavior.

## Organizations

### Evaluate company culture.

Organizations must examine how their workplace culture may create pressure for minorities to code-switch. For example, even when a company encourages employees to bring their authentic selves to work, racial-minority professionals may still perceive that doing so risks appearing unprofessional. Companies should consider if they are asking their black employees to do something that they will then be punished for. Specifically, are you asking black employees to bring their whole selves to work only if they also assimilate with dominant cultural norms?

**Tackle underrepresentation at all levels.** Part of the reason black employees feel pressure to adjust their cultural-identity expression within the workplace is the chronic problem of minority [underrepresentation](#) in these environments. This makes even the slightest cultural “difference” more noticeable. Ensuring that people of color are represented at all levels of the organization will make their cultural identities — including hairstyles, interests, and speech patterns — normative and acceptable.

That said, we believe that company diversity efforts that solely seek to increase the number of black employees, without questioning the inclusivity of the environment, are bound to fail. As found in our data, code-switching also occurs when there are roughly equal numbers of black and nonblack employees, which suggests that diversifying organizations is only part of the solution.

**Consider inclusion separately from diversity.** [Research shows](#) that valuing diversity is not enough to reduce discrimination toward minorities. In addition to focusing on diversity, organizations need to [create inclusive environments](#) for employees to feel comfortable bringing their authentic selves to work. This includes collecting

information on employees who are segmented by their social identities and [collecting qualitative data](#) for underrepresented group members whose experiences may not register in a quantitative survey.

Creating [inclusive environments that work for everyone](#) is challenging, however. Our research finds that black employees demonstrate less effort to code-switch when organizations deny or overemphasize cultural differences. One way to strike this balance is for company leaders to address issues [outside](#) of their companies that affect black employees' work experiences. Inviting [these conversations](#) demonstrates

**Start with yourself.** Is there an identity that is important to you that you may be hiding or downplaying in the workplace? By bringing more of yourself to the table, you may encourage others to do the same. Recognizing [your own](#) differences can reveal which parts of you are not welcome at work, deepening your understanding of the professional dilemmas that black employees encounter when they bring their whole selves to the workplace.

**Check your biases.** It is important to both recognize difference at work and also be wary of pointing it out when it isn't warranted. If you catch yourself thinking that your black employee

# EVEN WHEN A COMPANY ENCOURAGES EMPLOYEES TO BRING THEIR AUTHENTIC SELVES TO WORK, RACIAL-MINORITY PROFESSIONALS MAY STILL PERCEIVE THAT DOING SO RISKS APPEARING UNPROFESSIONAL.

that the company values black employees beyond their individual contributions to the bottom line.

Additionally, employers can ensure that all of their employees feel included by addressing the presence of differences and need for inclusion while simultaneously [valuing fairness and meritocracy](#). Companies can explicitly state a desire to foster an inclusive workplace that both values differences [and](#) also seeks the most qualified individuals to join the company. Taking it a step further, organizations can also create policies and rules that reflect these values, such as criteria for interviewing and hiring candidates that promote differences and meritocracy.

## Leaders and coworkers

### Practice inclusive behaviors.

Inclusiveness is not just a broader organizational imperative; it's also a daily practice. Leaders can be curious and learn about cultural differences and intentionally invite black employees into their networks and actively listen to their input.

or coworker is not “like” other black people, engage in self-inquiry. Where do those thoughts come from? For example, you might like your black coworkers' hair when it is straightened compared to when it is in a natural style, but *why* do you feel that way? Engaging in this line of questioning promotes being curious about your biases rather than asking black people to explain their differences.

## Black employees

**Strategic code-switching.** Given that black participants evaluated code-switching negatively compared to white participants in our research, it is important for black employees to strategically code-switch, if necessary, in a way that maximizes professional gains and minimizes psychological and social distress. For example, [previous research](#) found that same-race mentoring provides more social and psychological support than cross-race mentoring. Black employees who strive to suppress their racial identity may miss out on these invaluable relationships.

On the other hand, high-profile careers are typically obtained through [networking with and being referred](#) by powerful organizational members, who are typically white and male. In this case, code-switching may increase access to important career opportunities. Several participants shared how they code-switch strategically at work. A 29-year-old assistant director positioning herself for advancement said, “I wear my hair naturally and also maintain my accent, but I do not use a lot of slang or do things that are not professional, regardless of race. It has been a journey to find that balance in being my true self as a black woman in a predominately white, elite space.” Another woman, a 30-year-old research nurse, emphasized the specific way she thinks about and enacts professionalism. “At work my goal is to be professional — not to assimilate,” she said. “I dress, talk, and behave in a way that I feel instills confidence in my patients and coworkers. I don’t go out of my way to make my white coworkers [more] comfortable with my presence because it’s not my job to make them comfortable.”

Given the range of career experiences racial minorities have, we recommend that they consider the following when deciding whether or not to code-switch:

**Assess your environment.** During interviews, onboarding, or joining a new team, it is important to assess when and how others are expressing themselves, and whether they believe you will fit their environment. Are employees behaving differently when senior leaders are present compared to their normal behavior? Are you encouraged to adjust your behavior and appearance depending on the context? For example, are you being asked to meet with black clients but are less visible on projects that involve nonblack clients? Use these environmental cues to make strategic code-switching decisions.

**Assess your values.** Because code-switching can be exhausting, it is important to evaluate your workplace goals and values. Are you ambitious? Do you seek advancement no matter the cost? Or is it more important for you to be your authentic self

regardless of the work environment? Are you more willing to code-switch for short-term gains but unwilling to sacrifice your authenticity for an extended time? Knowing what you value for yourself and your career is imperative for deciding if and how to code-switch.

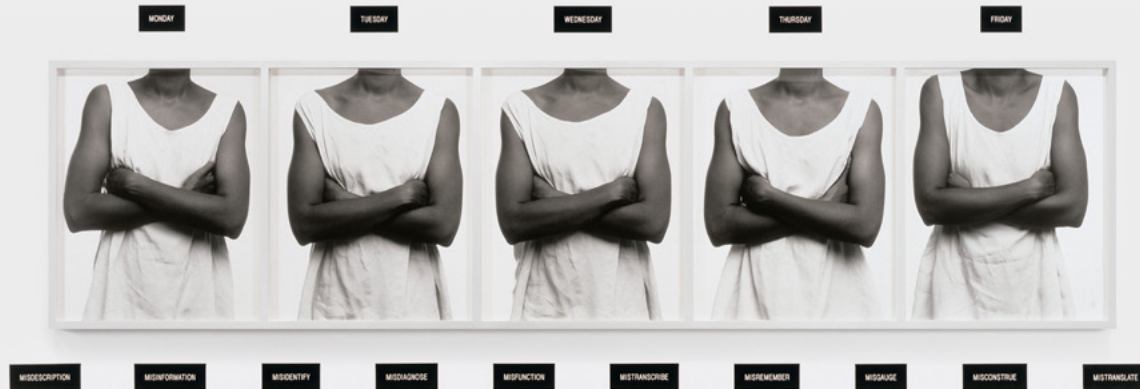
It is important to note that we are *not* suggesting that racial minorities should necessarily code-switch at work. We are highlighting the dilemmas that code-switching poses for their professional and personal lives — dilemmas that they shouldn’t have to solve on their own. Organizations can and should play a pivotal role in creating environments where code-switching is not necessary for success, particularly by cultivating spaces that value inclusion and differences. We believe that further research could capture evaluations of observable code-switching behaviors in realistic settings, which will continue this conversation. ■

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## THE DAY-TO-DAY WORK OF DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

A conversation with Airbnb's Melissa Thomas-Hunt on creating a culture in which black employees can thrive.  
by *Paige Cohen and Gretchen Gavett*

**M**ost leaders of U.S. companies know that attracting diverse employees *is good business*. In response, the prevalence of diversity and inclusion professionals *has increased* and diversity trainings *have become the norm*. Yet these efforts, at least in their current forms, aren't boosting the representation of African-Americans in organizations and in leadership *roles* (see "Toward a Racially Just Workplace," on p. 2). What needs to change to create racially inclusive workplaces? And how can managers be the catalysts?

**Dr. Melissa Thomas-Hunt** is Airbnb's head of global diversity and belonging, and has been working in the diversity and inclusion space for decades, both at organizations and in academia. She spoke with us about how diversity efforts can do a better job of addressing the needs of black workers. She emphasized that there's no quick fix:

"Big wins will come from interrogating seemingly mundane practices and processes, and holding managers and leaders accountable for progress toward your organization's aspirations."

An edited version of our conversation with Dr. Thomas-Hunt is below.

### How do you design a diversity and inclusion program for black workers to reach leadership positions — and succeed in them?

Creating a work environment in which black employees can thrive requires deliberate, sustained efforts focused primarily in three areas: data and numbers, company culture, and day-to-day people management.

We know that numbers matter because who you hire, and at what level, directly affects the overarching narrative of what is normal and accepted in your organization. For example, if the majority of your leadership roles are occupied by white workers, you are sending the message



that this group has the most potential to contribute at high levels. To change this narrative, as a first step, companies need to put more effort into increasing their pipeline of black workers.

To be clear, it's no easy feat getting black employees into an organization — and this is true globally for members of the black diaspora living in places in which they are the minority. Historical artifacts of power and privilege create all kinds of roadblocks for black people. Even when economics and levels of education are comparable, social capital — or the networks people need to gain access to opportunities — may be less available to black professionals than to their white counterparts.

So companies need to start putting more systems into place, whether through HR or recruiters, that will help them identify, attract, and hire black talent—including senior talent into critical leadership roles. But this alone is not enough. Organizations also need to make sure that the black employees they are hiring into lower-level positions are being given opportunities that set them up for success and growth. This means undergoing fundamental shifts in the cultures they create. Black employees need to enter generative work environments — ones that allow all people to grow, develop, and flourish, and ones that signal they are valued. Without these, there will be a revolving door of black talent who arrive excited, energized, and ready to contribute and leave feeling unseen and demoralized.

#### How can you make this culture change happen?

Though culture change is hard, and the path to it seems murky, we do know that managers are the front line. They're the ones with the power to make employees feel safe enough to contribute their knowledge and perspectives. Managers have the ability to build relationships across difference through their access to other team members and leaders. And managers can use their status to provide growth opportunities to black workers through committed sponsorship efforts and by communicating their value —

including their expertise, potential, and accomplishments — to others.

Real culture change will start when managers learn how to do this, and it will require a top-down approach. Companies need to make it clear that a great supervisor is someone who creates an environment in which a diverse array of people can succeed. HR professionals need to be empowered to help managers advance inclusive behaviors and eliminate those that erode inclusion, belonging, and engagement.



Resources need to be put toward training managers to understand the ways in which their own identities impact the way they engage with others. When situations arise in which black employees are experiencing microaggressions or outright discrimination, managers should know how to properly address the issues and escalate if necessary.

Organizations also need to create cultures of curiosity where people are in a constant state of discovery, learning about themselves and others. Managers can help make this happen by regularly asking their employees what they need. Holding regular check-ins with each employee is a good way for managers to demonstrate genuine interest in their team's well-being and build a foundation of trust. They should use this time to ask people if they feel supported and safe enough to contribute on a regular basis. This time will also help managers troubleshoot any issues that come

up and understand their team members and aspirations, as well as how they can help them get where they want to go.

Lastly, managers should be expected to provide specific, actionable feedback to all employees and push past any hesitations they have about how that feedback will land — a fear that often stops white managers from giving black employees critical feedback. Like everyone else, black employees need honest feedback in order to

grow and to get access to leadership opportunities down the line.

#### At some companies, talking about race consists of one formal conversation a year. How can leaders encourage more frequent discussions?

Conversations about race at work are challenging to have, or even begin, when the people involved don't have a positive relationship. That's why, at regular intervals, your employees should be encouraged to spend time with team members who appear to be different than themselves, or peers whom they do not know well. Remember that people must choose to create space for building relationships before they feel comfortable having hard conversations when racially charged situations do arise. So it's best to start building those relationships now. When opportunities for discussions surrounding race or ethnicity do come up, those participating will be more likely to assume positive intent. For the

conversation to be productive, both parties need to agree that missteps will happen, and demonstrate a genuine interest in one another's experiences and perspectives.

**How can you get leaders and managers on board with all of these suggestions?**

Organizations need to take every opportunity to communicate what is expected of their leaders. It's not the organization's job to change attitudes. But it is their job to weave their values into the processes and practices that reinforce company culture, making sure that everyone — from individual contributors to those in leadership roles — is demonstrating behaviors that align with them.

Holding people accountable is vital to doing this successfully. If senior leaders espouse a set of values but fail to keep the people who report to them accountable for their actions or inactions, middle and lower managers will have little incentive to uphold those values and will focus instead on the business goals that are being measured. We are humans, and our attitudes are imperfect. That's why providing incentives — such as measuring diversity and inclusion efforts in performance evaluations, linking them to salary increases or other forms of compensation, and giving employees who demonstrate inclusive values public recognition — will help companies establish cultures that reinforce what they stand for. If there is a misalignment between your organization's values and the behaviors your employees exhibit, then your accountability structure is likely misaligned and needs to be rethought.

**How will companies know if their diversity and inclusion programs are actually helping black employees? In what ways should they collect feedback and measure progress?**

Asking employees how things are going is a good first step. To gain deeper insights, however, companies should take the bold step of analyzing employee engagement data by race and ethnicity. This is not often done because of the fear of what might be discovered, and if organizations don't look at their data by subgroup they can easily claim that they have no

knowledge of subgroup differences. Failure to measure engagement by subgroup can be perceived by black employees, and other racial or ethnic minorities, as disinterest in truly understanding the way their lived experience may diverge from others in the organization. This data should be shared and discussed internally. Where divergences in experience exist, companies must take a deep dive to understand and resolve the source of the discrepancy.

**Where do you see the biggest disconnects between research and practice? And where have you seen the most promising connections?**

In organizations, the degree to which we promote awareness of our unconscious biases is often held up as the solution to all the challenges that accompany diversity and inclusion efforts. But in reality, research shows that awareness can actually increase the [problematic behavior](#) we are trying to change. This is because if we know that everyone is biased — which we are — we become less inclined to work against our own biases. We do what others do.

**You've been working in inclusion for a long time. What's changed since you started? What remains stubbornly the same? And what makes you the most optimistic about the future?**

More organizations recognize that they have a problem with inclusion and are committing to making changes than they were 20 years ago. I'm seeing more companies devote resources to forming diversity and inclusion programs, and hiring professionals to spearhead those efforts. There are also communities of practitioners and academics working together to identify and test best practices, whereas before, researchers and those responsible for implementing solutions rarely talked to one another, and they certainly didn't work collaboratively on challenges.

But many organizations still want quick fixes. They are impatient for better outcomes and sometimes take shortcuts. Today, certain programs still focus on "fixing" black employees as opposed to fixing organizational biases. Others showcase one-off diversity and inclusion efforts, such

as showy, expensive conferences with a diverse array of speakers, yet fail to yield sustainable gains for black employees because they don't actually examine the day-to-day practices that may undermine black employee advancement. Additionally, people remain concerned about how diversity and inclusion efforts will affect their career outcomes, and outcomes of others like themselves, if those who are historically underrepresented are given new forms of access and more developmental support.

**If you had one message for other diversity and inclusion executives, what would it be?**

Moving the needle on inclusion is hard. We are asking individuals to do things differently when they feel like they are already overwhelmed. Successful efforts require a deep commitment to sustained effort and offers of assistance to employees in changing their behaviors. Big wins will come from interrogating seemingly mundane practices and processes, and holding managers and leaders accountable for progress toward your organization's aspirations. ■

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## WHY SO MANY ORGANIZATIONS STAY WHITE

Understanding how race is historically and structurally built into the workplace  
by Victor Ray

Organizations are not race neutral. Scholars, managers, journalists, and many others routinely recognize “black capitalism,” “black banks,” and “ethnic restaurants,” yet we think of banks that are run by and serve whites simply as “banks” and white corporations simply as “businesses.” This way of thinking reinforces the fallacy that only people of color have race, and obscures the broad, everyday dynamics of white racial power within organizations. Hiring for elusive notions of “fit,” locating operations in largely white communities, mandating dress and grooming rules rooted in European beauty standards, and expecting nonwhite employees to [code-switch](#) can all subtly disadvantage nonwhite employees. By leaving white organizations racially unmarked, it becomes difficult to explain why several decades of antidiscrimination and diversity policies ostensibly aimed at equalizing opportunity have done little to alter the overall distribution of organizational power and resources. Such organizational policies, while sometimes helpful in increasing minority representation, fail to address the racial

hierarchies historically built into American organizations. Rather than asking how to bring diversity into the workplace, a better question is why so much power and organizational authority remain in white hands.

I argue that the idea of the race-neutral organization has done a great disservice to our understanding of race relations in the workplace, allowing scholars and practitioners to see racial exclusion as unfortunate aberrations or slight deviations from [otherwise color-blind ideals](#). In reality (and even though we typically do not say this out loud), many mainstream American organizations have profited from and reinforced white dominance. Many still do. Understanding this context is vital to seeing organizations for what they really are: not meritocracies, but long-standing social structures built and managed to prioritize whiteness. Only then can leaders begin thinking differently about race — not as a temporary problem to solve or a box to check, but as a fundamental part of what it means to be a company in America. Only then can they have a better understanding of [why their diversity efforts do so little](#) to attract, retain, and promote people



of color — and what they need to do to change that.

## JUST HOW WHITE ARE ORGANIZATIONS?

The simplest way to think about organizational whiteness is through statistics. For example, black representation at the top of organizational hierarchies, as measured through CEOs in Fortune 500 companies, [has decreased from six CEOs in 2012 to three today](#). Steady declines in minority representation at the helm of these businesses since their peak in the early and mid-2000s have led some scholars to claim that the “heyday” of dedicated diversity efforts has ended. [University presidents remain mostly white \(and male\)](#) despite rapidly diversifying student demographics, and academic hierarchies remain deeply stratified by race, with black men and women, respectively, making up [just 2% of full-time professors](#) above the rank of assistant. Black gains among public-sector employees — the economic sector responsible for [much of the growth of the black middle class](#) following the reforms of the civil rights era — have begun to disappear since the adoption of private-sector policies that have increased managerial discretion and loosened worker protections. A recent meta-analysis of field experiments — the gold standard for detecting discrimination, because other potentially explanatory factors are accounted for — shows that high levels of [hiring discrimination against black men have remained relatively constant](#) since the late 1980s, and discrimination against Latinos has decreased little. And despite some progress diversifying within individual firms, between-firm segregation has [increased over the past 40 years](#) and Fortune 500 boards [remain 83.9% white](#).

But our thinking must go beyond the numbers; it's the reasons *why* these numbers persist that matter. Even though discrimination has been officially outlawed and most organizations would never say they're racist, exclusion is visible in many organizational processes. These range from “race-neutral” grooming codes that

[coincidentally target black hairstyles](#) to the white normativity built into seemingly nonracial organizational expectations. For example, many [elite jobs use nebulous notions of “fit” or collegiality](#) and end up hiring new employees with similar backgrounds to the existing white workforce. That's because this seemingly race-neutral selection criteria can make whiteness a kind of unstated credential, particularly in light of historical processes of segregation and discrimination that have helped create racially homogenous workplaces. Discrimination is also built into the routine ways organizations do business. White corporations may undermine [antidiscrimination law](#) as courts see the presence of diversity policy as a good-faith effort (regardless of that policy's effectiveness). Predominantly white corporations like Airbnb may [fuel gentrification](#) by reducing access to affordable housing, and white banks may [siphon resources from black communities](#) through [discriminatory mortgage lending](#) that redistributes black wealth to white banks.

In each of these examples, maintaining the position that these negative outcomes for people of color result from neutral market forces without a racial component helps to reinforce racial segregation and inequality. Segregation is not natural. Rather, segregated outcomes result from explicit policy — or, more charitably, implicit bias. These processes are especially dangerous when we believe that an organization has nothing to do with race.

Here, then, is the question: How and why did race become embedded in the everyday — and, one could argue, the ordinary — aspects of doing business or getting a job?

## HOW SEGREGATED WORKPLACES CAME TO BE

Part of the answer has to do with what sociologists refer to as a “social structure”: a resilient distribution of resources that is bigger than any one individual and has sometimes profound implications for our daily lives. Inheritance taxes that allow the relatively nonproductive children of the rich to live a life of ease or racially

segregated and underresourced schools are both examples of legally institutionalized social structures. Social structures are powerful for at least two reasons. First, they can become taken-for-granted backgrounds that make unequal relationships seem normal and natural while shaping individual actions (think, here, of gender norms). Second, they distribute resources in ways that are designed to last (think, here, of continued residential segregation despite the absence of legal barriers to integration).

In the United States, white organizations are a kind of social structure combining ideas about race (for instance, who should manage and who should work) with organizational resources. The forming of this structure goes all the way back to the central role slavery played in the formation of the country. By limiting access to property and the material resources necessary to found and run organizations, slavery created an unequal competitive environment whose effects have yet to be fully overcome. Under slavery, black people were property, lacking protection for basic bodily integrity. Race marked the possibility of ownership, as even manumitted and free people of color often had their possessions appropriated through state-sanctioned, and therefore legal, violence. Following formal abolition, [arrangements such as convict leasing, Black Codes](#), and sharecropping allowed the continued organizational exploitation. Similar processes of expropriation were imposed on Native Americans (land seizure and broken treaties; the reservation system; attempted extermination), Mexican Americans (guest-worker programs that limited citizenship and access to the legal protections necessary to start organizations), and Asian Americans (Japanese internment; burning of businesses in Chinatowns; land seizures; laws restricting immigration; employment and labor competition). Differential protection and enforcement of law, systematic undereducation, and the appropriation of resources have been historical constants for people of color. White organizational formation was often facilitated by these often-legal

exclusions. Many dominant American organizations — [leading businesses](#) and [elite colleges](#), for example — were founded in an environment of legally sanctioned and socially accepted exclusion.

Although the interests of workers and management are often portrayed as inherently antagonistic, throughout U.S. history white workers and management sometimes have put this economic antagonism aside in favor of a shared commitment to racial exclusion. For instance, the Reconstruction-era National Labor Union, according to [W.E.B. Du Bois](#), “did not want the Negro in his unions, did not believe in him as a man...[and] asked him to organize separately.” Rejecting black workers allowed for some types of paid labor to become a white prerogative and forced non-whites into the most degraded and dangerous jobs. In this environment, management often separated workers by race and expected people of color to labor in menial positions and defer to whites. Jobs were mapped onto stereotypical hierarchies with race as an often-literal qualification, such as when the refusal to [hire black women as industrial laborers](#) contributed to their concentration as domestic workers. Racial divisions also proved financially useful to management, as black workers were paid lower wages for the same work ([a problem that remains with us today](#)). Although black workers are now overrepresented among union members, incorporation came through hard-fought struggles stretching across the 20th century. From A. Philip Randolph’s Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters to the Memphis sanitation strike that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was supporting when he was murdered, black labor struggled for inclusion.

Even predominantly nonwhite organizations can ultimately be subject to white control. For instance, in her brilliant book [The Color of Money: Black Banks and the Racial Wealth Gap](#), the legal scholar Mehrsa Baradaran shows how segregation and the very capital that black people had accrued in black banks were ultimately used against them. Under Jim Crow, black banks were reliant on customers who were disadvantaged in the labor market relative to white workers,

especially where segregation ensured that black customers could not patronize white banks. This reliance on relatively poorer customers left black banks less able to invest and accrue profits. Segregation between banks also put black organizations at a disadvantage. According to Baradaran, because banks often rely on one another for liquidity during crises, white banks’ refusal to lend to black banks set the latter up for failure. Following Jim Crow, black banks have remained relatively undercapitalized and thus more likely to fail. White banks are still able to leverage the racially unequal playing field to increase their profits at the expense of their black competitors.

And despite the [lasting mythology of American racial progress](#), these types of organizationally produced racial inequalities are by no means a thing of the past. Predatory subprime lending — [which targeted black and Latino neighborhoods](#) — similarly relied on racial segregation to generate profits. This racially unequal distribution of risk contributed to the massive destruction of wealth for black and Latino families. During the Great Recession, black families lost half of their wealth and [Latinos lost 67%](#) of theirs.

### WHAT CAN ORGANIZATIONS DO?

Many attempts to intervene in racial inequality assume that discrimination is a rare event, the intentional actions of bad (or at least unenlightened) actors. Employers choosing to [hire a white felon before a black person without a criminal record](#) or research that shows employers are [50% more likely to call back equally qualified job applicants with “white-sounding” names](#) are important examples of the individual approach. And many Americans readily acknowledge white power when it is tied to brazen spectacles like the 2018 [neo-Nazi rally in Charlottesville](#); the violence of white-supremacist events and the odiousness of the accompanying racial ideology make such displays easy to condemn.

Evidence of individual discrimination is obviously important. But these bad-actor or explicit views cannot account for the broad empirical patterns of organizational segregation

and the deeply unequal distribution of organizational resources. It is also important to think about how the normal (and legal) functions of predominately white organizations gain from and exacerbate racial inequalities. Current legal remedies for discrimination rely on the bad-actor model. Employees can potentially sue for intentional discrimination, for example, if an employer uses a racial epithet. However, these legal remedies would have little to say about discretionary promotion procedures that may favor white employees or a business choosing to locate in a [neighborhood that makes them inaccessible to people of color](#) because of residential segregation. Indeed, this latter active discrimination may become moot if poor access to public transportation and long travel times weed people of color out of hiring pools.

I encourage scholars and managers to think about how organizations create and distribute resources along racial lines in ways that may not necessarily be considered *legally* illegitimate or discriminatory but may nonetheless shape racial inequality. Hospitals that provide substandard care have contributed to the staggering statistic that [black women are 243% more likely to die in childbirth](#) than white women. Schools that provide a [substandard education for black students](#) contribute to the so-called achievement gap. And churches more dedicated to [segregated schools](#) than racial equality have contributed to the country’s growing racial polarization. In each of these cases, thinking that the organization in question has nothing to do with race may be *especially* harmful, as it assumes that only the active animus of physicians, teachers, or clergy — not the everyday tasks of providing health care or disciplining students — could produce racially unequal outcomes. Assuming race neutrality [disregards the vast historical evidence](#) of the centrality of race in shaping American organizations. Ignoring how white organizations help to perpetuate racial harms virtually guarantees that these harms will continue. It is safer, and likely more realistic, to start with the assumption that organizations are contributing to

racial inequality unless the data shows otherwise.

There are no easy answers when it comes to creating more diverse and equitable environments. And given how deeply American organizations have been shaped by racial inequality, I am not hopeful that the type of structural changes needed to make organizations more equitable will appear on the horizon anytime soon. Colleges and universities [are retreating](#) from successful affirmative action policies, [organizational segregation is persistent](#), and whiteness is a key credential for [moving up organizational hierarchies](#). At a minimum, leaders should stop thinking about discrimination and inequality as rare events and understand that racial processes often shape behavior in the absence of ill-intent. Conversations about organizational inequality need to refocus from a narrow concern with feelings and racial animus to the massive inequalities in material and psychological resources that organizations distribute between racial groups. Recent [calls for reparations](#) can provide a model, as these have forced [some organizations](#) to reckon with how their roots in slavery contribute to continued racial inequality. Leaders could also begin to examine how their decisions about location and hiring, among other choices, exacerbate inequalities. White organizations have attempted to deal with racial inequality while wielding meager tools. Organizations that are serious about changing patterns of racial inequality need to move beyond diversity and inclusion and toward reparations and restitution. ■

**About the author:** *Victor Ray* is an assistant professor of sociology and African-American studies at the University of Iowa. His academic work has been published in outlets such as *American Sociological Review* and *Sociological Theory*. He has also written for *The Washington Post*, *Boston Review*, and *Inside Higher Ed*.





## SUCCESS COMES FROM AFFIRMING YOUR POTENTIAL

How African-Americans can silence the naysayers and maximize opportunities at every career stage

by *Laura Morgan Roberts and Anthony J. Mayo*

**W**hen you see how [underrepresented](#) African-Americans are in current leadership roles, it can be easy to get discouraged about their prospects for leadership advancement. Despite [a rise](#) in the number of black college and university graduates, just [8% of managers and under 4% 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.

We, however, are not discouraged. In the course of our research, we have met myriad African-American leaders who, despite being underestimated, underappreciated, and under-resourced, have prospered and achieved incredible success. How do they do it?

[Our research](#) suggests that success in the face of systemic discrimination often begins with affirming one's own potential. When people believe in their ability to grow, they make decisions that reflect this conviction, such as investing in their potential, focusing on their unique strengths, and discovering new paths to success and fulfillment that align with their core values and leadership goals.

Here, we offer a set of self-affirmations developed from interviews and surveys we have conducted with African-American professionals, [as well as from our analysis](#) of research on black leadership and career paths. The practice of self-affirmation has [broad benefits](#), not just in helping people to develop a healthy self-identity but also to limit the detrimental effects of identity threats like negative stereotyping and overt discrimination. For this [Big Idea project](#) (see "Advancing Black Leaders," p. 1), we created self-affirmations to use as an antidote to the unique struggles too many African-Americans face in a number of situations: when they have their leadership authority or expertise questioned; when they struggle to represent their most authentic self; or when they want to clear pathways for others to make racial progress. We tested these affirmations for validity among a group of approximately 150 African-American professionals across all career stages and found that they indeed reflected people's experiences, fears, and successes. We also asked HBR readers to share which affirmations most resonate with their work experiences (a

selection of responses is captured in the video on the next page; click on the image to view).

We hope you'll draw on these affirmations as a reminder of your extraordinary potential, particularly in those moments in which you find your leadership authority challenged by others, when you've begun to doubt your ability to advance, or when you wonder whether the trade-offs have been worth it. We hope they will propel you to lead and contribute in uniquely valuable ways to your workplace, industry, and community.

## BLACK LEADERSHIP SELF-AFFIRMATIONS

Ideally, you will begin to develop your leadership vision early in your career, sometimes even before your first job. At this stage, you are responsible for building the core capabilities that will help you grow in the future. Here are some affirmations that can help.

**In the early stage of my career, I envision myself becoming a leader.**

- I build a robust sense of self that strengthens me.
- I critically question and reject negative stereotypes and society's lowered expectations of black leaders.
- I embrace my unique strengths and cultural resources. I bring new perspectives and ideas that have value and are specific to my experience.
- Like everyone else, I will fail sometimes. This is not because of my race, and my failures do not reflect

on my race as a whole. Because I understand this, I use every failure as an opportunity to learn, grow, and develop my resiliency.

- The workplace is not perfect, and neither are my colleagues. At times, I experience painful bias, but I do not let these microaggressions limit my career. Instead of shutting down or quitting, I choose to seek the support of my colleagues in making my workplace more inclusive.
- I develop the credibility, networks, and capabilities to thrive by aligning my skills and my cultural resources — my connections and my background — with strategic opportunities for my company and career.

...

The middle part of your career is important for expanding your expertise beyond your areas of specialization and gaining visibility to assume leadership roles. We hope that you have already experienced some success as an individual contributor and can shift your attention from yourself to your expanding leadership capabilities. During this stage, you may question the "why" (your purpose and desired impact), the "what" (your cultural, value, and skill-based fit), and the "how" (your tactics) for leadership development and advancement. Here are some affirmations that can help.

**In the middle stage of my career, I am positioned to grow into greater leadership roles.**

- I recognize that as my core strengths and talents increase, I

can be a stronger contributor in my organization. I draw on these attributes to position myself for increased responsibility and greater visibility and impact.

- I proactively cultivate vibrant networks — both existing and new — in which my peers and mentors support my growth. I know I can't necessarily rely on existing networks to provide me with everything I need to grow and develop; too often, marginalized people are excluded from these places. While I do participate in existing networks if possible, I also construct my own spaces where I can draw support while I learn and grow.
- Sometimes, even when I am in a position of authority, my authority is challenged or contested. I choose to not let this make me feel less secure in my leadership. I learn from feedback and others' perceptions, but I do not let them limit my leadership potential.
- When the path forward isn't obvious, I carve my own path. I have deep ingenuity and know I am capable of building inclusive and high-performing organizations in which I can flourish.
- At times I question whether I have to choose between my career success and my authentic self. I want to be able to wear my hair and clothes in a manner that I feel is professionally authentic, discuss my personal interests and commitments with my colleagues and supervisors, and honor my unique background and experiences. For the sake of my health, I make choices that promote my ability to be authentic at work — whether that is expressing myself through my appearance or my language — and I am accountable for those decisions. This is the paradox of authenticity. I embrace this with courage.

...

In the late stage of your career, you may shift your focus from personal development to developing others. You have achieved a considerable measure of success in certain areas, and these affirmations can help you consider how to maximize your impact.

**In the late stage of my career,** I use my leadership, power, and influence for good.

- I face the same challenges as other leaders when it comes to fighting biases, ethical breaches, and abuses of power. At the same time, because of my race, I am held to higher standards and face greater scrutiny. I continue to uphold my integrity by being mindful of my decisions about how I lead, and I use my powers to uplift others.
- My power and influence give me the opportunity to design and implement more inclusive leadership practices, regardless of my job title or formal responsibilities. I use this opportunity to clear the pathway to leadership for others.
- I willingly pass on experience, knowledge, and credibility to expand opportunities for the rising generation. In so doing, my legacy is strengthened.
- I seek out people on the margins of the organization and find more ways to both include them in conversations and bring their names to meetings in which they might not otherwise have been mentioned. It is my personal responsibility to make open, public commitments to developing these future leaders.

## FINDING THE SPACE TO SUPPORT YOUR GROWTH

The work outlined above is designed to help aspiring and accomplished black leaders navigate their experiences in the workplace. Many of the affirmations are about shaping the context of your career and responding strategically to bias, microaggressions, and authenticity struggles. This is hard work.

Here is our final affirmation for black leaders across all career stages.

***I find space — space to be nourished, space to explore, and space to flourish.***

Even if you have access and opportunity, you are still facing systemic challenges in the workforce. The advancement of black men and women in senior leadership positions is stagnating. Today there are only [three black CEOs of Fortune 500 companies](#), compared to the peak of

12 in 2002. And not one is a woman. It's easy to understand, then, why black MBAs are [generally less satisfied](#) in their careers than their nonblack counterparts. We say this starkly because it underlines why space is so important: There are many places where the soil for professional growth is rocky rather than fertile.

When this happens, it is important to seek physical spaces that are conducive to your growth, including at historically black colleges and universities, race-inclusive leadership development programs, black churches and civic engagement organizations, and same-race peer-mentoring programs.

These spaces may be difficult to find. But your commitment to invest in your own growth and development can help guide you to supportive opportunities to learn, fail, try again, and grow stronger.

Even in places where the soil is rocky, remember that it is not your responsibility to grow there. People of all races across your organization are responsible for improving the environment. Look for people who are forging cross-race alliances, providing significant line or general management experiences, creating opportunities for global assignments, or enabling mentorship and sponsorship that provide candid feedback and positioning.

This last affirmation is extremely important: While our model puts you — the leader — at the center, we don't want you to feel alone in the weight of what you want to accomplish. Across the country, there are millions of us working alongside you, because we, too, believe in our collective potential. ■

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NEXT IN THE BIG IDEA:

**JANUARY 2020**

## Mobilizing for Climate Change

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