

Dennis L. Powell, Antony Haynes, and Shirley Edgerton: Meaningful diversity efforts require an inclusion report card

By Dennis L. Powell, Antony Haynes, and Shirley Edgerton

It's time we talked about your diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) plan.

You've been patting yourself on the back for a job well done. You've had endless consultants and speakers educate and inform your staff and executives on best practices. Your human resources department got a gold star for cultural competency.

Yet there is still a gap. Somehow your organization has yet to transform. Your leadership is still encountering the same old DEI issues, especially around race and ethnicity. What your DEI plan might be lacking is accountability, particularly around racial inclusion. Your organization could benefit from publishing on its website a racial inclusion scorecard to hold itself accountable.

Every organization should publish its racial inclusion scorecard as part of its accountability for DEI. The scorecard would include information on recruitment and retention by race and ethnicity for entry-level workers, middle-management, and senior executives. For example, the scorecard could show the racial breakdown of attrition rates for entry-level positions, for example, attrition rates for white and Black employees.

This data would help inform your organization about whether it is meeting goals around enhancing corporate culture, being more inclusive, and providing mentoring to improve retention of historically underrepresented groups. Ultimately, publishing a racial inclusion scorecard would help your organization avoid having a DEI plan that is more of a marketing and PR tool than a driver of cultural change.

Too often, we have seen organizations "talk the talk" of DEI but fail to "walk the walk," particularly when it comes to racial justice, and especially for Black and brown workers. With great fanfare, organizations publicize the hiring of a chief diversity officer or the creation of some DEI plan or initiative, but then there is little or no concrete change around the recruitment and retention of people of color.

A basic principle of PR is to only publicize positive information and to remain silent around negative information. The silence around the data for recruiting and retaining people of color at your organization is deafening.

Actions speak louder than words. A few years ago, when the Southern Poverty Law Center confronted a workplace culture hostile to women and people of color, the organization took concrete steps, including appointing a black woman as its interim president, to change its workplace environment. In contrast, technology companies for several years have released basic data on racial and gender diversity while showing little or no increases in their percentages of Black employees.

Similarly, in the legal profession, law firms continually tout their commitment to DEI, but the percentage of African-American lawyers has not increased in more than a decade. For many organizations, DEI has become a “flavor of the month,” with little or no commitment to actual change, merely a way for organizations to market their virtue and signal their “goodness” without having to put in the hard work of dismantling systems of racial oppression.

We don't see our communities moving in the progressive direction suggested by the proliferation of DEI plans and by the adoption of new acronyms like “JEDI” (justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion) and “DEIB” (diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging). What we instead see are workplaces toxic to Black employees, criticizing their hairstyles for being “ethnic,” calling them “angry” when they object to injustice, saying they are “overqualified” or “not ready” when they're suited for a job, or firing them by email for no cause after years of exemplary work. What we see in the numerous complaints we have received from people of color is one standard being applied to white workers and a different standard being applied to Black workers.

What we do not see are DEI plans that are effective. Organizations should publish a racial inclusion scorecard to hold themselves accountable for change and to provide empirical data supporting their commitment to the racial justice aspect of DEI.

Dennis L. Powell is the president of the NAACP Berkshire County Branch. Antony Haynes is the legal redress co-chair of the NAACP Berkshire County Branch. Shirley Edgerton is the race relations co-chair of the NAACP Berkshire County Branch. They write on behalf of the branch's executive committee.