

THE DAY-TO-DAY WORK OF DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

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NOVEMBER 18, 2019

ARTWORK: Lorna Simpson, "Five Day Forecast," 1988. © Lorna Simpson. Courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth.

Most 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. 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.

Dr. Melissa Thomas-Hunt photographed by Joe Howell/Vanderbilt

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. | **THE BIG IDEA**

Dr. Melissa Thomas-Hunt holds a faculty appointment at Stanford Graduate School of Business and has worked in professorial roles for more than 20 years at schools such as Vanderbilt, University of Virginia, Cornell University, and Washington University in St. Louis. Her research and teaching has focused on organizational behavior and the factors that unleash, leverage, and amplify the talents and contributions made by women and underrepresented individuals. In May 2019, Dr. Thomas-Hunt joined Airbnb as head of global diversity and belonging. She serves on the company's executive team and leads the strategy and execution of the global internal diversity, inclusion, equity, and belonging programs.

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