

Chapter 6

Of Protest and Paradox: Leading DEI in Minnesota

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ABSTRACT

This chapter glances into the experience of leading diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work while living in Minneapolis before, during, and after the murder of George Floyd, the subsequent uprisings, and racial reckoning of 2020. Ironically, the progressive state of Minnesota has been the site of multiple state-involved murders while also consistently voting Democrats into the White House and U.S. congress. This Minnesota paradox creates a unique place for DEI work. The author explores theories of white guilt and white saviorism, provides context about the racial and social environment of Minnesota, and provides recommendations for Black women DEI practitioners and those that employ them.

INTRODUCTION

The events of summer 2020 changed significantly for the diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) field and those who work in it. In this chapter, I revisit the murder of George Floyd and the subsequent events. In recalling my experiences since moving to Minnesota, I introduce important contextual information about the Twin Cities and Minnesota that have contributed to today's sociopolitical environment. This chapter will explore tenets of whiteness that make DEI work uniquely difficult in liberal communities and ways that I have worked with and against those norms. I talk about my challenges as a Black woman, how I have grown, and how I have seen the industry change since 2020. Finally, I offer recommendations for Black women who work in DEI as well as the organizations that employ them. While my work is within the higher education setting, many of these lessons are widely applicable to different types of organizations. This is a critical chapter for people trying to make sense of the last couple of years and how they can move forward with a more grounded approach to racial and social justice work.

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BACKGROUND

On May 25th, 2020, police were dispatched to Cup Foods, a convenience store on Minneapolis' south side, regarding a counterfeit \$20 bill. At the scene, police apprehended and handcuffed George Floyd, a 46-year-old Black man who had moved to Minnesota in 2014. While Floyd was handcuffed, face down on the ground, Derek Chauvin, a 19-year veteran officer, forced his knee into Floyd's neck and kept it there for over nine minutes. Floyd repeatedly yelled that he was not able to breathe and was in pain. An ambulance would eventually respond, but Chauvin kept his knee in Floyd's neck a whole minute after they arrived. Floyd had lost consciousness and would be pronounced dead approximately one hour later (BBC, 2020).

If not for a number of key circumstances, the incident may not have been more than a blip on the radar. First, the time of year meant that there was enough light to see at night and warm enough that people could watch and, later, protest. Second, the pandemic meant that many people were at or near home while on lockdown. Third, it was the latest in a string of racist incidents that year that ended with innocent Black people dying. In February 2020, Ahmaud Arbery was jogging in a neighborhood in Glynn County, Georgia. Three white men would later be convicted of his murder, largely because it was caught on video. The following month, Breonna Taylor was fatally shot in her own apartment in a botched police raid in Louisville, KY. No charges were initially filed against the officer, causing unrest and anger across the world. By the time George Floyd was murdered, everything seemed to come to a head. By May 26, 2020, local protestors were already in the streets. Their anger was further provoked by the militarized police presence. Journalists and civilians were injured in the chaos. Many businesses and some residences were damaged or burned to the ground. The protests would spread across the world and last weeks. By June 3rd, over 200 US cities had imposed curfews, and over 62,000 national guard personnel had been deployed (Sternlicht, 2020; Warren and Hadden, 2020). Professional athletes and celebrities joined protests. Major media outlets provided round-the-clock coverage. And the biggest corporations in the world vowed to stamp out racism in their organizations. It was the wildest summer I had ever experienced.

Minnesota, an American Paradox

Minnesota is, as many here will say, *interesting*. Often, Minneapolis, St. Paul, and the surrounding suburbs are named as top places to live, work, or raise children (U.S. News & World Report, 2022). There is some truth in these declarations. There are what seem to be endless outdoor activities, cultural events, and Fortune 500 companies in the metro area. But there are also other truths, those that led to the murders of George Floyd, Daunte Wright, and Philando Castile. This is part of what University of Minnesota economist Dr. Samuel Myers, Jr. calls "the Minnesota Paradox": it is the best state for some but also has some of the worst social and economic racial gaps in the country (Myers, n.d.). While White citizens enjoy the lakes, fresh air, and abundant employment opportunities, Black and other citizens of color contend with food deserts (Jackson, 2020), racial covenants (Mapping Prejudice, n.d.), and high incarceration rates (Minnesota Department of Corrections, 2020).

Recognizing the vast disparities, The Mapping Prejudice project has worked since 2016 to identify one source of the structural racism here: housing. The initiative, led by historians, librarians, geographers, digital humanists, and community activists, has worked to expose racial covenants, which real estate developers used in the early 20th century to keep people of color out of neighborhoods (Mapping

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