



Chapter 9

Deconstructing Standards of Whiteness to Establish the Power of Black Women


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ABSTRACT

This chapter will examine standards of whiteness that are embedded in current organizational cultures and how these standards impact Black women (BW) in the workplace; particularly after the dual pandemics of COVID-19 and the racial reckoning of 2020. The authors widen the perspective beyond the confines of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) as a role, to discuss cultural issues that universally diminish the power of BW, and that DEI practitioners should inherently be charged to recognize, name, and be empowered to eradicate. The work introduces microevaluation as a construct encompassing an array of racial aggressions often experienced by BW in public settings. The authors further examine the effects on innovation caused by the lack of inclusion of the voice of the BW within organizations. The chapter ends by providing recommendations that organizations and institutions must adapt in order to transform and achieve equity for BW and reap the benefits afforded by diversity and inclusion.

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It's not about supplication; it's about power. It's not about asking, it's about demanding. It's not about convincing those who are currently in power, it's about changing the very face of power itself. - Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw (1991)

INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of the public murder of Mr. George Floyd and the racial reckoning of the Summer of 2020, many companies sought to appoint diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) leaders. The primary role of these DEI leaders is to ensure that the companies' DEI strategies are being followed. They have also been tasked with changing organizational cultures while serving top leadership, employees, and even external partners. Many companies have since appointed Black women (BW) to DEI roles. As an example, in the inaugural Elite 100 Black Women leaders list by Diversity Woman Media more than 35% of the BW listed were in DEI roles (Sykes, 2021). Built on their race and gender identity, BW DEI leaders offer the institution the benefit of credibility to their commitment to diversity and inclusion. However, it is that same racial and gender identity that puts them at peril within organizational cultures that have not done the necessary work to support their leadership. Therefore, the BW DEI leaders are left to walk a tightrope, balancing what's best for the company's profile and brand, while supporting people within their ranks, at the exclusion of themselves. Many have felt the burden to fix a system where they are themselves the victims and to do so in a manner that is acceptable to their offenders. This burden shows up in many ways, such as in having to educate on matters related to appropriate and inclusive behaviors, as well as historical factors that make certain language and behaviors inappropriate or non-supportive of inclusion. To be effective the BW DEI leaders must be empowered to call out problematic and systemic behaviors. But when raising her voice, she runs the risk of being seen as militant or of being ascribed negative stereotypes. The authors include a historical view of the ways in which BW have been diminished through tropes as well as the effects that these have had in achieving parity of representation. The authors then challenge the notion that BW are guests at "the table" and offer a new construct of micro-devaluation. Lastly, the authors discuss the lost opportunities to institutions that do not have diverse work cultures and offer recommendations to elevate the voice and power of all BW within the workforce, especially of BW DEI practitioners.

The authors choose to define BW's power as fearlessness in the face of obstacles, having the courage and willingness to confront any adversary to achieve an intended goal that will break barriers. Poet Audre Lorde (1984) has referred to Black womanhood as "dark, ancient, and deep" (p. 37). The authors believe that this ancestral power is the immense capacity that BW have displayed, for centuries, to defy the odds against all prognostications. This power is enveloped in ancestral knowledge and will, gleaned from our ancestors - our grandmothers, mothers, and aunts - to overcome obstacles. We carry a "legacy that resists and ensures our survival" (Harris, 2020, para. 6). It is this capacity that corporations, institutions, and governments need to harness as a vital resource.

The authors choose to define DEI as the inclusivity, representation, and contribution of all voices. Inclusivity is centered on equitable investments in all human capital. The authors also believe that in the 21st Century, companies, institutions, and governments will lack the ability to thrive without the level of innovation that only inclusivity can bring. Thus, harnessing diverse talent is critical to organizational, institutional, and global survival and success.

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