

We can continue to talk about diversity - or do something to achieve it

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In recent months, like many white people in business, executive coach Vanessa Ruda has spent time thinking about institutionalized racism. As the senior partner of RHR International was wrestling with what she could actually do to move the needle, a Black colleague advised: “Don’t look to your Black brothers and sisters to solve this; this is a white person problem to solve. You need your Black brothers and sisters to help inform you about the reality of their experience, but it is then incumbent on those in positions of power to take actions that result in change.”

In her coaching, she has been trained to meet clients “where they are at.” But she has edged beyond that perspective and challenged them to consider how they can leverage their positions of power to create meaningful, systemic change. “These conversations have felt risky and uncomfortable, and I’ve wondered aloud whether they are the right ones to be having,” she admits in a blog post. But the conversations have led to meaningful discussions and a list of five steps for individuals seeking to move forward:

First, recognize if you are in a position of power, influence, and privilege. If so, use that as a force for good, driving change. “Embrace this responsibility and be willing to own solutions within your sphere of influence,” Ms. Ruda urges.

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Second, acknowledge that there is an extraordinary amount of learning that needs to take place for you personally and for your organization. That can only happen when people can come together honestly and authentically, trying to understand the experiences of others. In line with that, don’t make assumptions. “Some of my Black friends are eager to talk about their experiences, and others are tired of telling the story to ears that feel deaf to them,” she told me.

Third, be willing to be vulnerable and say, “I’m not sure what the right answer is, but I’m committed to figuring it out.”

Fourth, know that you will inevitably make mistakes. “As hard as it may be, be willing to accept the feedback that is provided and commit to continued efforts to improve and learn,” she says.

Fifth, resist the urge to be silent. Even if you fear not knowing the right thing to say, your silence is complicit with maintaining the status quo.

“On the surface, these may seem like obvious suggestions, but they can be surprisingly hard to enact both personally and professionally,” Ms. Ruda stresses.

That’s a fairly personal look at what you can do. For a more organizational perspective, Joan Williams and James D. White – she’s a white academic and he’s an African-American who, while CEO of Jamba Juice, enhanced diversity significantly – teamed up to offer some actionable steps in *Harvard Business Review*.

In his seven years at Jamba Juice, Mr. White tripled the diversity of the top three levels of management, including hefty improvements at the top two tiers. And if your instinct is that such do-gooder instincts are wasteful, if not counterproductive, you’re wrong. “Over that same period the company’s market cap soared 500 per cent – performance that we argue resulted from James’s efforts to create a true meritocracy that holds every group to the same standards. When the whole work force can bring its talents to the table, results are better than when only some people can,” the two write.

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This won’t happen, they warn, unless the company wants it to – and that means diversity initiatives need to be led by the CEO or a chief diversity officer with substantial authority. A key step is to change the way glamour work is assigned – the career-enhancing assignments that can lead to promotions. Mr. White appointed 15- to 20-person action learning teams to accomplish key business goals like opening new distribution channels in airports. He chose previously overlooked employees for this glamour work, which meant the teams were far more diverse than the company’s white-dominated management and the work force as a whole. In this fashion, he created a pipeline for increasing diversity at the top.

At every organization Mr. White has helped to lead, he’s found that middle managers are the key to changing the culture. Another key step, therefore, is to change the incentives for those middle managers so they deliver diversity. At Jamba Juice, up to 20 per cent of store managers’ compensation was determined by engagement, climate and organizational health scores.

The company must also de-bias HR systems. They recommend an action learning team that includes the CEO or another executive sponsor, such as the chief diversity officer or head of HR, to root out the structural racism we are all talking about, though we’re not quite sure how exactly it emerges. That process will involve using metrics and measuring

results, just as the organization would do on any serious major effort. Prof. Williams has developed open-sourced tool kits with “bias-interrupters” that help you to focus on bad habits that can lead to bias.

We can talk about diversity or do something to achieve it. These steps might help you along that path of amelioration.

Cannonballs

- Here are a few questions that diversity and inclusion leader Kelli Newman Mason says can help probe job candidates on that issue: Please share with us what diversity, equity and inclusion mean to you and why they’re important. In your opinion, what is the most challenging aspect of working in a diverse environment? What is your approach to understanding the perspectives of colleagues from different backgrounds? How would you handle a situation where a colleague was being culturally insensitive, sexist, racist or homophobic?
- Unusual job titles like “evangelist” and “sales jedi” may be a detriment to diversity, since they are often used to appeal to young white males and may turn off women. Research found women are 38 per cent less likely than men to apply for “guru” jobs and 30 per cent less likely to go for “genius” and “champion” roles.
- Famed leadership expert Francis Hesselbein said, “Leadership is a matter of how to be, not how to do.”

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