

A close-up photograph of teal-colored agave leaves, which are the background for the top two-thirds of the page. The leaves are sharp and layered, creating a sense of depth and texture.

Diversity, Equity & Inclusion

AN EMPLOYEE
WELLNESS
IMPERATIVE

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“Inclusivity means not ‘just we’re allowed to be there,’ but we are valued. I’ve always said: smart teams will do amazing things, but truly diverse teams will do impossible things.”

– CLAUDIA BRIND-WOODY

The COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately affected communities of color while the killing of George Floyd and others have, once more, brought racially motivated violence to the fore. These glaring reminders of systemic inequality, exacerbate old wounds and create new ones. The mental health and well-being of Black people has never been more important, and the need for corporate wellness initiatives has never been greater.

Now more than ever, companies understand that social justice issues cannot be divorced from the workplace: that whatever employees face “out there” inevitably shows up in offices, cubicles, and conference rooms. Since evidence shows that systemic racism has physical and psychological impacts, it’s unrealistic to expect employees of color to leave these stressors at the door.

The health implications¹ of systemic racism are well documented. Research² shows that, over time, the experience of discrimination increases the risk of adverse health effects including;

- ◆ **diabetes**
- ◆ **hypertension**
- ◆ **chronic stress**
- ◆ **cardiovascular disease**

From a mental health perspective, discrimination experienced by people of color has been linked³ to:

- ◆ **anxiety**
- ◆ **panic attacks**
- ◆ **depression²**
- ◆ **increased risk of severe psychological distress²**

The experience of racism can be compared to an ongoing stream of negative feedback about every aspect of one’s identity. When this information is internalized, it can lead to negative self-perception, and extreme self-doubt² – even among high-achieving individuals.

In fact, some researchers believe⁴ that imposter syndrome (the sense of being a fraud, or unworthy, no matter how well you do) is experienced more acutely by marginalized groups. This is likely because the microaggressions regularly faced by people of color serve to confirm this imposter syndrome by acting as ‘evidence’ that contradicts their humanity.

Ongoing doubts about one’s worthiness, talent, and ability can, of course, hinder performance and decrease professional motivation.

Beyond this, employees struggling with these anxieties may struggle to form relationships with their peers – an essential component of a positive workspace.

Clearly, employees who have suffered racial trauma deal with stressors and burdens that coworkers and supervisors cannot always see.

These challenges are then compounded by watershed social incidents, like the murders of Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery, as well as daily, race-related stressors, like social stigma, stereotypes² and implicit bias.

Ongoing daily stressors resulting from microaggressions and implicit bias also hinder employee engagement and lead to increased turnover rates, impacting organizational performance and the bottom line.

1 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4306458/>; <https://journalofethics.ama-assn.org/article/race-discrimination-and-cardiovascular-disease/2014-06>

2 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6532404/>

3 <https://www.anxiety.org/black-americans-how-to-cope-with-anxiety-and-racism>

4 <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/12/smarter-living/dealing-with-impostor-syndrome-when-youre-treated-as-an-impostor.html>

Although conversations about systemic racism and mental health can be daunting, organizations benefit from tackling these issues head-on. Doing so can ultimately improve staff wellness, support worker retention, and foster a more inclusive environment.

What Your Company Can Do to Foster Racial Equity

First, realize that you have a stake at this pivotal moment. Businesses with no means to support diverse workers risk decreased productivity from distracted or distressed employees who may find their performance suffering as they try to stifle their concerns and “power through.”

This is not sustainable and can only undermine company culture, productivity, and long-term employee satisfaction.

To facilitate DEI in the workplace, consider the following:

1. Create a roadmap

Create a plan that announces your company’s stance, illustrates immediate action, and holds your organization accountable for the long term. Use language that is clear, empathic and takes a strong, sincere position against discrimination.

As you create your long-term plan for wellness and equity, establish channels for employee feedback. Allow staff to submit suggestions about priority areas and let this information guide every step of the process. Elect the most diverse group possible to oversee this process, as well.

Smaller organizations may not have an established body that deals with matters of inclusivity. Now is a great time to begin this process and nominate a handful of diverse individuals to provide feedback on this initiative, and those to follow.

Finally, vocalize the plan. Share it with staff, disseminate it on the company website or social media, then implement it and hold the organization to task.

This may mean revisiting the plan at regular intervals or enhancing and expanding it as you go. Larger organizations with established feedback tools (e.g. annual reviews, surveys, polls) can also use these tools to assess their progress.

Methods that support anonymous feedback (e.g. polls), are more likely to receive honest responses that help your company commit to the plan.

2. Re-imagine an equitable workplace

Start by examining your current effort and resources and identifying the gaps. Then begin to envision what an equitable workplace would look like, and what the company would need to do to get there. This process should also involve individuals from diverse backgrounds and with various levels of seniority (i.e. not just management).

Many businesses make the top-down decision to offer diversity training and, while these efforts may help, they do little to address the real issues faced by Black employees.

Instead, your business can dedicate itself to fostering inclusion across the board. This may require management to rethink everything from office décor to long-established company traditions and practices. Is the physical corporate space itself accommodating to people of all cultural backgrounds?

Have steps been taken to make meetings more inclusive for employees with social anxiety? These are the micro-level changes that create more welcoming spaces.

By accommodating the diversity of your workforce, you let employees know that they need not suppress their identities, ideas, or perspectives to be the “right fit”.

Let’s Partner

I stand ready to support businesses and organizations in their DEI wellness initiatives.

As we negotiate a societal turning point, and find new ways of being in the workplace, companies have the unique opportunity to lead the vanguard. This is a time of adaptation, and innovation. Your organization can use this momentum to make lasting change.

