

Member's Quarterly

Fall 2025 Edition

Feature

Beyond Statements

Discrimination at work in the age of DEI cancel culture



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Shock. Fear. Embarrassment. Shame.

Your heart is pounding and you are lost for words that will have any meaning in this totally unexpected moment.

This is what it feels like to experience discrimination in the workplace.

What's even more surprising is that many organizations do not have policies, procedures or frameworks for managing this excruciating level of harm and pain that is caused when racism at work has leadership teams running around in circles trying to do the right thing resulting in, more often than not, the issue being mishandled or even worse, swept under the rug.

DEI, or diversity, equity and inclusion, came into sharp focus in the early 2020's when George Floyd was murdered and the Black Lives Matter movement took over our social media channels. In Canada, national and organizational DEI initiatives started to include land acknowledgments, changes to hiring practices and new governance ground rules. But is all this simply perfunctory?

If we lead with curiosity and ask ourselves if these DEI initiatives truly protect people from racism, discrimination and bias, the answer is clearly NO. Regardless of statements on websites, standard operating procedures in HR handbooks or mandatory self-guided online training, people are still experiencing harm caused by unsafe workplace culture, rooted in hope that complacency will buy time. In addition, with this gift of time will come watered down and mishandled yet accepted versions of: "This is how we deal with this problem in our workplace." This fragility of systems only perpetuates the problem. Erasure by omission allows the undercurrent of racial tropes, blood libel and double standards to fester.

The good news is that this part of the problem can be fixed. Acknowledging that some discrimination and bias are inherent in a person, organizations can and should develop a sensitive, respectful and safe culture whereupon a shared responsibility for education, cultural and racial tolerance, and co-developed incident management protocols reduce the risk of harm while simultaneously building a communal sense of openness and acceptance of difference where the organization's people choose to show up and do their best work every day.

There are many initiatives that organizations can explore. The possibilities are endless for how leaders choose to build safe workplaces that have a zero-tolerance policy that is thoughtful and protective while simultaneously demonstrating allyship and sensitivity toward all people who come to work every day. Because, at the end of the day, people want to be seen. People want to be valued. In addition, people want to be authentic and work in place that aligns with their personal values. When this harmony exists in workplaces, organizations flourish!

The framework for best practices that reduce racial discrimination and bias within organizations must include tools to assess readiness of the leadership to thoughtfully engage in this work, as well as the

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readiness of the teams to peel back the layers of racism that are inherent in all of us. This work demands vulnerability and there must be a foundation of trust within the organization. Even if that trust has come into question because of an incident involving racial discrimination, it must be reaffirmed before the organization can safely move forward. This may involve hiring a consultant who specializes in performing these assessments.

Culture in organizations is established at the top and has a trickle-down effect, for better or for worse. Leaders must step into hard conversations with humility and be prepared to ask for guidance in areas that are unknown to them. This can be a barrier for executives who've spent a lifetime climbing the corporate ladder. Additionally, leaders must be prepared to invite in the people who have lived experience but who perhaps fall short on being professionally polished – it is this type of person who is most likely to have experienced discrimination and bias in the workplace who can offer insights and a frame of reference that can and should guide the work ahead. Notably, a trauma informed workplace will be sensitive to the needs and expectations of those who've been harmed. Trauma informed workplace training is another area of professional development available for organizations to consider.

Measuring outcomes of this work is not standardized and requires careful consideration. Unlike traditional KPI's, measuring qualitative (and quantitative) outcomes that involve race-based data collection remains under studied. Organizations are encouraged to consult specialized thought leaders on how to execute this work safely so that the information is held and used responsibly, and in some cases as per industry standards.

Courage. Consistency. Calling in rather than pointing out. This is what's required to name racism and discrimination at work. Addressing race and bias at work is a moral obligation that is critical for organizational health and wellbeing. If executed properly, this will drastically improve the overall culture of the workplace resulting in optimized productivity and happiness for the people who come to work each day.

Robyn Berman brings over 20 years of experience in healthcare and community sectors to her work as a consultant with The Delfi Group. Her consulting practice focuses on leadership development, organizational growth, strategic and emergent planning and workplace culture.

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