A

3 ways employers can decenter whiteness in the workplace and promote inclusivity

Jean Lee, president and CEO of the Minority Corporate Counsel Association (MCCA).

When Brittanie Rice first showed up to interview at the offices of a major aerospace company, she traded her trademark twists for a slicked-back bun. It was safer that way.

Although she wore her hair naturally in her daily life, she knew corporate America operated on a different set of standards — and that she risked judgement if she didn't fit them. As she put it, "I can't really be looked down upon because of how I wear something that is as natural as the hair on top of my head."

This is just one of the ways employees of color often contort themselves to fit the white-centric assumptions and expectations about professionalism that govern our workplaces. These standards dictate everything from the way they speak, to the way they dress, to

the work they are given. And the end result is always the same: an environment that makes it harder for people of color to do their best work.

As the President and CEO of the MCCA, I often hear from lawyers of Black, Asian, and Hispanic/Latinx descent who are tired of navigating a corporate America that wasn't designed with them in mind. One lawyer, who regularly fielded questions about her appearance as the only Black woman on her team, recently told me: "I have to work 20 to 30% harder thinking about microaggressions, while others can spend their full energy focused on their work."

What's the cost of a corporate culture that excludes large segments of the workforce?

The answer: Too much. That's why we see investors demanding racial audits of companies they invest in, and policymakers in states like California and Washington mandating greater board diversity. That's why the SEC may require diversity disclosures as part of companies' environmental, social, and governance (ESG) obligations to improve accountability.

But one group hasn't fully embraced this shift: corporate leaders. Since George Floyd's murder, I've seen waning interest on diversity issues — or worse, a quiet dismissal of employees of color and their experiences. Diversity leaders are underfunded, under-supported, and saddled with unrealistic expectations that focus on programmatic window-dressings.

Overcoming hiring bias

Time and again, I've seen well-meaning allies across corporate America fail to adopt inclusive recruitment practices.

They'll search for diverse candidates by recruiting from elite schools, where students of color are already underrepresented due to a host of well-studied historical and contemporary factors. These disparities

are magnified in areas like the legal field, where many of the largest corporations recruit people who previously worked in elite law firms, and where — surprise — white lawyers are [overrepresented](#), since those firms themselves recruited from the same exclusive, top schools.

And so, the cycle goes. This cycle reinforces the white standard that only graduates of top schools are qualified for top roles, without accounting for the reality that qualified candidates of color may have faced barriers to reaching those schools.

As a leader, you need to step outside your current process to meet qualified candidates. As the [MCCA's Bias Interrupters Survey Report](#) shows, this means:

- Considering candidates from beyond the Ivy League and focusing on schools that cater to people of color and candidates from non-professional backgrounds.
- Tracking the candidate pool from start to finish and analyzing the data to determine where candidates from underrepresented groups are falling out of the hiring process.
- Setting tangible targets and insisting on a diverse applicant pool — and, it doesn't yield the results, collect data on the process to understand gaps.
- Establishing clear grading rubrics and ensuring that all candidates are measured on the same scale.

Retaining talent by being better ourselves

I still remember one white male manager who approached me after one of our Interrupting Bias workshops. Somewhat embarrassed, he said quietly, "I had no idea that women of color faced so many barriers in the office. How can I make sure my white managers understand these issues?"

We all have unconscious biases. And until we recognize that a professional culture centered around whiteness creates barriers for

all who don't fit that mold, we will continue to reinforce those biases —
in everything from inequitable job assignments to microaggressions.

Here's my advice. To find solutions, start building awareness of what
inequity looks like by:

- Auditing your retention policies to ensure, for example, that more
  glamorous assignments are spread evenly across employees and
  developmental opportunities are equitable.
- Implementing processes to ensure managers are distributing
  assignments equitably.
- Conducting manager workshops to help mid-level managers
  recognize bias.
- Establishing a regular check-in cycle between managers and
  employees to give employees the space to safely voice concerns.
- Educating top leaders on systemic barriers that perpetuate
  inequities so they can find solutions to systemic bias.

Revamping a biased promotion structure

"She's not assertive enough in meetings."

That was the feedback given for an Asian American colleague's
performance review, and the justification provided for why she was
passed over for a promotion — not once, but twice. It was only after
she pointed to her body of work and explained that her

was being confused for meekness — perhaps due to stereotypes
related to her ethnicity — that her concerns were heard, and she was
promoted

Too many employees of color in corporate America are held back as
they are held against white standards of leadership. Are some
employees considered "inspired" for speaking passionately, while
others are deemed "aggressive"? Are some communication styles
valued over others, like sharing an idea during a meeting instead of

over email afterwards? These are all signs that a workplace is measuring success within a white corporate mold.

Employers can break this mold by:

- Implementing specific and transparent performance criteria for the promotion process.
- Providing team managers with targeted training to spot bias and involving them in each step of the evaluation process.
- Holding reviewers accountable for providing evidence to justify their evaluations.
- Separating personality issues from skillsets to limit bias against women and people of color.
- Educating and holding top leaders accountable for eliminating or reducing systemic barriers in promotion.

Homogeneity does not exist in a vacuum. A lack of diversity is the result of systems, processes, and standards that benefit white male professionals and exclude so many others. Changing these white standards will take work from all of us — advocates and people from diverse backgrounds. But true systemic change requires the active involvement and leadership of those in positions of power, and only then can we unleash the full potential of our workforce.

Jean Lee is president and chief executive officer of the MCCA, the leading national organization focused on improving diversity, equity, and inclusion in the workplace by providing strategic solutions based on scientific research and data analytics.

For you