

# Let Go of the ROPE



Diversity discussions are often a tug of war between white males and other groups. Smart companies get white men on board to grow diversity strategy and create an inclusive culture. *By Ladan Nikravan*

Some may not believe it, but diversity isn't just about women and people of color. This perception is not only false, it's damaging because it keeps white men, who represent the largest power base in many cultures, from participating in inclusion efforts. Feelings of exclusion leave many in the dominant group angry, confused or indifferent to their company's diversity initiatives.

"To overcome this, one key area diversity and inclusion professionals need to address is helping white men rediscover their self-interest in diversity, because the bottom line is that without everyone's engagement in inclusion efforts, long-term, sustainable change is not possible," said Bill Proudman, chief operating officer and co-founder of White Men as Full Diversity Partners.

When diversity becomes only about hiring or promoting women and non-white males, it contributes to an "either/or" approach that can unintentionally pit various segments of the workforce against each other. Viewing diversity as an either/or construct contributes to a feeling that white men are losing ground if women and minorities are gaining in power, being promoted or are in prominent positions where their opinions and thought leadership are actively sought. Moving to an "and/both" proposition will ensure that valuing one perspective in the workplace does not invalidate a different one.

#### On the Web

For more on leveraging white men in a diversity and inclusion strategy, read "Engage and Equip White Men to Lead Diversity" at [diversity-executive.com/articles/view/741](http://diversity-executive.com/articles/view/741).

"Diversity leaders must begin by building and strengthening key partnerships," Proudman said. "Start with one or two key white male leaders. Build trust within those relationships. These partnerships help spread ownership for leading inclusion efforts. As you deepen that partnership, help white male leaders understand they have a culture — white male culture — and that culture impacts both their own and others' behaviors and partnerships. This culture is not bad; it plays a powerful role in how we view and act both in and out of work."

Proudman said because white men in the United States work in organizational cultures that have been created by other white men, the prevailing business culture is comfortable and has been long-lasting. Thus, when the topic of white male culture is raised, people often interpret the conversation as an assault on the dominant work culture. As companies continue on their diversity journey, they should seek out white men to learn with and from during diversity training.

## Start at the Top

According to Proudman, white women and people of color often become the exclusive coach, mentor, leader or champion on all diversity and inclusion efforts. This can create frustration, fatigue and can make work more difficult for them.

Further, minorities often feel they have to prove their competence every time they get a promotion or become the “first” woman or person of color on a special project, in a department or to attain a certain level of influence in their organization. This increases their internal pressure to succeed, having to prove they got the position because of competence rather than because of diversity quotas. That pressure can have far-reaching negative consequences on partnerships, employee morale and engagement.

As a white male leader’s understanding of how culture impacts behavior grows, it extends his effectiveness and cultural competence. When white men understand systematic privilege and its effect on their own and others’ opportunities, when they become more aware of the daily challenges that women, people of color and minorities need to negotiate at work and in their personal lives, it dramatically changes how these men respond to issues of access and opportunity.

“Once white male leaders expand their mindset, they can come to their partnerships with new awareness, vitality and rigor, and can help lead real, sustainable change in the ongoing work of creating inclusive work cultures,” Proudman said. “But it starts with getting senior leadership involved. Nothing will change without willingness from the highest contenders to take on this messy topic.”

At McDonald’s Corp., diversity and inclusion leadership starts at the top. When Jim Skinner became CEO in 2004, one of his top priorities was building diverse talent throughout the organization. He has since appointed several white men who provide similar diversity leadership in their functions, even if their formal roles aren’t lodged in the diversity office.

“Jim Johannesen, chief operating officer for McDonald’s USA, has always been a very strong champion and advocate for diversity,” said Pat Harris, global chief diversity officer for McDonald’s. “From a global perspective, Tim Fenton, president of our Asia-Pacific/Middle East/Africa (APMEA) division, has provided outstanding leadership with our Global Women’s Initiative. Because of his leadership and focus on gender diversity, we have greatly increased the number of women managing directors throughout APMEA. We’re also proud of the fact that our inclusion director is a white male. Dennis Brennan leads our department inclusion strategy, ensuring that we continue to create and build an inclusive environment on both sides of the counter.”

The company provides opportunities for diversity leadership, inclusive of white men, through executive sponsor roles in employee business networks and resource groups,

along with the opportunity to be diversity education workshop facilitators and leaders or sponsors of the organization’s quarterly Diversity Speaker Series.

“We believe diversity at McDonald’s is everybody’s business,” Harris said. “We encourage all employees, departments and leaders to get involved. Education is one of the key success factors in building a strong diversity and inclusion strategy. It’s part of helping us learn how to leverage the differences within our organization at all levels. It’s an evolution because we are on a journey with continuous changes every day, but how we manage and leverage these changes is the key.”

Professional services firm PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) also realizes that genuine commitment from the top of the house is critical to sustain an inclusive culture.

“We actively engage our leadership and listen to their points of view in order to understand how they look at diversity,”





# White Men Can Help It

In 2000, a 54-year-old Wal-Mart worker in California named Betty Dukes filed a sex discrimination claim against her employer. Dukes claimed that despite more than six years of hard work and excellent performance reviews, she was denied the training she needed to advance to a higher salaried position, and she wasn't alone. Five other women went to court with Dukes, seeking class-action status for their lawsuit alleging that Wal-Mart discriminated against women in pay and promotion. The plaintiffs argued that women made up about two-thirds of the hourly workforce at their company, but less than a third of salaried managers. They claimed the company had a sex-segregated work setting, where a "tap on the shoulder" system of promotion permitted managers to make staffing decisions with little company oversight.

William T. Bielby, professor of sociology at the University of Illinois at Chicago, served as an expert witness in the case, testifying on the plaintiffs' behalf. He said he believed Wal-Mart gave managers too much discretion and let them rely on too many subjective factors in hiring, promotion and pay. In an unregulated atmosphere, people can revert to stereotypes in making decisions.

Six years after the case commenced, Bloomberg Businessweek published an article by Michael Orey titled "White Men Can't Help It," stating Bielby believed white men will inevitably slight women and minorities because they just can't help themselves. Days before oral arguments began, the sociologist's hometown paper referenced his participation as an expert witness in the trial and stated he had a prominent theory on unconscious bias. Businessweek stated if an employer is faced with a class-action based on gender or race, there is at least a 50 percent chance that plaintiffs will cite Bielby's unconscious bias theory moving forward. However, this isn't a theory Bielby takes ownership of or believes in.

"On the one hand, there is an issue of social cognition: We all take cognitive shortcuts when

we perceive the world — it's how we're wired," Bielby said. "That's not the issue. The issue is, 'What is it about this organization that shapes how decisions are being made?'"

In a case like Wal-Mart's, Bielby said it's not a matter of unconscious bias; it's about whether the company adopts practices that create and sustain bias or whether it implements those that minimize it instead. He said organizations must be sure there are systems in place so people making hiring and promoting decisions receive timely, relevant and objective information that forces them to consider individuals' qualifications and preferences rather than rely on gut feelings or what has been appropriate for a certain kind of job in the past.

Bielby said he gets involved in cases because organizations have subjective, discretionary decision-making policies and practices about hiring, job assignments and promotions. These companies do not provide effective oversight on how diversity fits into retention. They have a loose connection between formal diversity statements about nondiscrimination and actual HR practices. The result is confusion, stereotyping and adherence to the status quo.

He said many organizations may articulate that diversity is everyone's responsibility and business, but for it to work, it has to connect to business responsibility structures so it's not just rhetoric. "When diversity is everybody's business and no one's specifically, it can easily become nobody's business," he said. "It's very important that powerful white men become part of those structural solutions, not just signing onto the company's overarching diversity principles. Companies need diversity task forces with chief diversity officers, and powerful white men who are connected to those kinds of organizational arrangements have to participate actively in them." «

— *Ladan Nikravan*

said Chris Brassell, director of the national office of diversity for PwC. “We discuss what they want their roles to be and challenge the assumptions they may have about it. We believe our white male leaders in particular want to feel a sense of belonging to the diversity effort, and that’s been a positive result of our conversations.

“Bob Moritz, our U.S. chairman and senior partner, reflected our leader’s commitment when he said the following at a recent diversity conference: ‘Diverse and unexpected pools of talent are emerging around the world. To succeed in today’s global economy, we must acknowledge them, understand them and make them part of our talent strategies.’”

To create this culture, Brassell said the company has a distinct approach to address minority and majority populations because it’s critical to engage and include all perspectives and experiences that shape the organization’s points of view. For example, when discussing gender, discussions focus on men’s and women’s roles. In discussions about race, leaders address both minority and majority experiences. Similarly, a major component of LGBT strategies focuses on engaging straight allies.

PwC has a broad definition of diversity, which includes a range of differences and similarities between people. It encompasses 24 dimensions including race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, generation and physical ability. Some components are visible, some are not.

“Including the unique and critical role that our white male professionals play in maintaining and sustaining an inclusive workplace is critical to accepting diversity’s full definition,” Brassell said. “We have seen that making an active effort to bring our white male partners into this discussion is critical to how we change the culture of our firm in a meaningful way.”

Benefits like this aren’t uncommon when white men’s talents are leveraged toward the diversity strategy, according to White Men as Full Diversity Partners’ Proudman. He said he believes organizations that create a culture like McDonald’s and PwC will consistently see:

- Enhanced quality and depth of relationships, both at work and at home.
- A larger support system rather than thinking that competence is having to go it alone.
- Reduced time and energy wasted on dysfunctional work relationships that result when matters of difference are not acknowledged and understood.
- Less time spent being unconsciously incompetent and having more time to be a vital work partner willing to make mistakes during the learning process.

### **Keep the Business in Mind**

At RBC Wealth Management, a subsidiary of the Royal Bank of Canada, leaders, regardless of gender or color, see

the diversity business imperative. Gordon Nixon, CEO and chairman of RBC, chairs the executive diversity leadership council and holds quarterly meetings to track the company’s diversity progress, its goal achievement metrics and how these affect the overall business. John Taft, CEO of RBC Wealth Management in the U.S., has said he believes understanding employees as customers is the most significant driver to business. All of Taft’s direct reports are involved in Nixon’s diversity strategy, whether they’re on councils, executive sponsors to employee resource groups or they’re mentors in the company’s diversity mentoring program.

“When you understand all of your employees and you’re engaging all of your employees, you help them feel welcome,” said Wanda Brackins, head of global diversity for RBC Wealth Management. “You’re only going to get 100 percent from them from there.”

Employees are encouraged to participate in the company’s reciprocal mentoring program. White male leaders are matched with women and people of color. The regular mentoring program focuses on employee development, guidance and leadership strategies to accelerate their careers. Employees also mentor senior leaders by providing them with knowledge about challenges and roadblocks women or people of color encounter generally and as they try to progress in the organization. This offers senior leaders information about cultural nuances and what items they have to address to remove barriers.

“Everyone has a role in diversity here,” Brackins said. “John Taft and our regional directors have certain accountabilities in each year’s overall work plan, and diversity is included. When regional directors and next-level managers have it in their work plans as well, they’re engaging the employee and customer base to help drive strategies, goals and objectives outlined for the year.”

Proudman said companies that don’t already have an established framework to include white men in their diversity discussions shouldn’t expect lavish returns at first. Sometimes the line forward won’t be an upward curve. Companies may move backward before they move forward.

“A lot of white men say, ‘I’m going to do as little as I can, and I’m not going to bring up any diversity topics because I’m going to get my head taken off when I say the wrong word,’” Proudman said. “Diversity executives need to de-escalate that and say, ‘Think about the last time you learned a new skill. Let’s use snow skiing as an example. Did you expect to go to the top of the double black diamond run on your first time on skis, point your skis downhill and make it to the bottom safe and sound? Of course not. You start on the bunny hill and fall down.’”

“In companies, we have to give ourselves permission to fall down on these topics. White men are going to make mistakes. They’re going to say things they shouldn’t, but we won’t get anywhere if we let that fear guide us.” «