

Race *in the* Workplace

*Zoom in partnership with TIME for Learning invited **Shaun Harper**, one of the world's leading racial equity experts, to join Zoom's Chief Diversity Officer **Damien Hooper-Campbell** for a multi-part series focused on practical approaches to improving and advancing racial equity, diversity, and inclusion in organizations.*

For many leaders, tackling race in the workplace is challenging, and so they have historically chosen avoidance as their primary strategy. Many executives have little to no personal and professional experience talking about racism, and are afraid of being naïve, making mistakes that make them seem insensitive, or worse, racist.

But since the recent murders of many Black people, including George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, avoidance is no longer an option. The issues of police brutality in Black communities, structural and systemic racism, anti-Blackness, and white supremacy, as well as inaction on long-standing racial problems have come to the fore, and corporations have felt compelled to make internal and external statements stating that they are anti-racist and that Black lives matter.

However, these statements have to be more than just words in a moment of crisis. This can't be a moment, it must be a movement that leads to long-term, demonstrable progress on racial equity goals, and increased value on the lives and professional contributions of people of color in the workplace.

This document will summarize the key takeaways from each episode. To watch or learn more about the other episodes in the series, please visit time.com/raceintheworkplace.

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Essential Takeaways: Episode 4

Advancing Employees of Color to Leadership Roles in Companies

Oftentimes, people of color are overrepresented in the lowest paid, least powerful roles — and are underrepresented in mid-level management and senior leadership positions. This episode of Race in the Workplace offers strategies to invest in and advance the careers of employees of color throughout your organization.

Why are there so few employees of color in leadership roles?

- It's not because employees of color are less smart or less talented.
- It's not because employees of color are less ambitious or don't want to be in leadership roles.
- It's not because employees of color have historically underperformed as leaders.
- It's not entirely explained by a pipeline shortage of highly qualified employees of color.

8 Explanations for the Underrepresentation of Employees of Color in Leadership Roles

1. **Accelerating employees of color to leadership roles is not usually viewed as a serious company-wide goal.** Very rarely is it a top priority or is it deliberately made clear that this is the intention.
2. **Emphasis is placed on hiring, not advancing employees of color.** Not enough thought is put into how to nurture and leverage the skills of these employees.
3. **Managers aren't held accountable for advancing people of color.** They are usually only evaluated on financial performance and retention of employees overall.
4. **Managers aren't taught how to advance employees in general and especially employees of color.** Leadership training programs are typically raceless. Consequently, managers do not know how to equitably invest in the career ascension of employees of color.
5. **Inequitable "tapping,"** which is when a leader identifies someone early, invests in them, and "sponsors" their acceleration to leadership.
6. **Implicit bias,** which refers to when people think about who has historically been in the C-suite and therefore don't even envision people of color for the job. It's outside of their scope of reference.
7. **Undervaluing the contributions of employees of color.** Many executives brag about having diverse teams just for the sake of saying they have employees of color. They often fail to understand or harness the unique perspectives that diverse colleagues could bring to business strategies.
8. **The myth of colorblindness.** Many well-intended executives say they don't see color. This negates the cultural backgrounds of employees of color and invalidates their racial identities in the workplace.

What's the Difference Between Equality and Equity?

But what about the argument: “We should treat everyone the same – isn’t it racist to treat one person differently because of their race or ethnicity?” That brings forward two important terms that need to be defined and clarified: equality vs. equity.

- **Equality is treating everybody the exact same way and giving them exactly the same thing.** But what if everybody doesn’t need the same thing? What if their needs, outcomes, and experiences are unique and therefore you have to adapt approaches to meet those group-specific needs?
- **Equity is customizing support and investment in employees of color in order to maximize their likelihood of success.** It demands a correcting of historical harm and negligence, and unapologetically linking actions to the company’s espoused equity, diversity, and inclusion goals.

There needs to be an equity-focused approach to accelerating employees of color to positions of leadership. So how do you do this?

9 Strategies to Advance the Careers of Employees of Color

1. **Be proactive and strategic and develop concrete goals** just like you would if you were putting together financial goals. It can’t be haphazard or a one-time fix. There needs to be a team who weighs in and creates a long-term strategy that you can follow.
2. **Hold yourself and others – especially managers and leaders – accountable** for actualizing the goals of equity, diversity, and inclusion.
3. **Understand why employees of color stay at your company.** What are the cultural practices within your organization that help? What did their previous managers and leaders do to help them advance? By doing so, you will learn ways to increase – and scale – the number of employees of color who ascend to leadership within your organization.
4. **Understand how other companies achieved success**, both within and beyond your industry. Humble yourself and learn how other companies may have combated the overrepresentation of people of color in the lowest-level positions and the underrepresentation of them in leadership roles. Exchange strategies and tips with each other.
5. **Invite input and feedback from your employees of color** about the barriers and threats to their advancement to leadership. Do this through focus groups, surveys, or interviews.
6. **Co-construct individualized leadership career acceleration plans** with your employees of color. Sit with them and ask them their five-year plan to show that you value not only the diversity they bring but that you value them as colleagues.
7. **Leverage your power, networks, and resources within the company** to make strategic mentions and introductions of employees of color to ensure executives are seeing them and valuing their contributions –and that those employees are seriously considered for leadership positions as they become available.
8. **Create formal career acceleration programs** for employees of color. But be careful, many companies historically have had leadership programs that were fairly raceless in their approach and too few people of color have participated. Create a custom, formal year-long or multi-year management acceleration program within the company specifically for employees of color.
9. **Create coalitions and industry partnerships** that focus on getting more employees of color to mid-level and ultimately executive-level leadership. Work with other companies to identify employees of color at lower levels and bring them together for a monthly professional learning experience, the goal being to develop a cadre of hundreds of people of color poised for leadership and advancement across companies in the industry.

Let's not stop now. Check out more info and takeaways from additional episodes of the Race in the Workplace series, in partnership with Zoom and TIME for Learning at time.com/raceintheworkplace.