

THE SWINGING PENDULUM OF DIVERSITY



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INTRODUCTION

The term DIVERSITY has become a ubiquitous word in the American business dialect—to the tune of it now being, by some estimates, an \$8 billion a year industry. But its overuse in name alone should not be confused with an earnest attempt at pursuing meaningful and sustained change. The nonstop chatter about diversity—its (alleged) importance, its (alleged) wide-ranging use in corporate America—has, indeed, yielded less-than-stellar results.

Diversity has become less an aspiring goal of the American business infrastructure and more an ever-evolving construct fueled by organizations' need to comply and conform to various diversity mandates. Are organizations pursuing diversity in good faith, or are they doing so to pacify a passionate populace (read: minorities) hoping for change?

The disparity is real between the rhetoric about diversity and what is actually being done to bring that rhetoric to life. Closing the gap between 'talking the talk' and 'walking the walk' is the only way true diversity can be realized. It appears to be a manageable task to bring it to fruition:

- *THOSE IN POWER EXPRESS A DESIRE FOR A MORE DIVERSIFIED WORKFORCE AT ALL LEVELS*
- *THEY DEVISE AND IMPLEMENT THE NECESSARY STRATEGIES TO REACH THAT GOAL*
- *THEY REVIEW AND MEASURE THEIR PROGRESS THROUGHOUT*
- *THEY MAINTAIN THEIR STRATEGY TO ENSURE IT EMBEDS ITSELF IN THE COMPANY'S DNA*

The above is an oversimplification to be sure, but the overarching message is that attaining diversity should be a straightforward process with REAL and MEASURABLE results.

Perhaps the first step on that journey is coming to a consensus on the definition of diversity. Its meaning tends to differ from person to person, from organization to organization. What one may consider diversity, another may consider homogeneity. That's the brass tacks of this issue. If the unsettled definition of diversity continues as part of the conversation, a universal

understanding—and thus, a universal strategy to implement real diversity—will remain elusive.

And that is where we begin this paper: Defining diversity. We will look at its introduction to the American consciousness in the early 1960s, and analyze how the pendulum has shifted from its clear-cut original intent to the hodgepodge concept we see today.

WORKPLACE DIVERSITY: ITS BEGINNINGS

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines diversity as “the state of having people who are different races or who have different cultures in a group or organization.” While the definition provides a rather innocuous description, like other sociological ideals, its interpretation is left up to each individual. What are the *different races*? How are the *different cultures* defined? These are important questions to raise, since the concept of diversity has taken on a different meaning from the time it was introduced.

During the 1950s, America’s racial harmony was, at best, tumultuous. The 1954 U.S. Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education* ruled segregation in schools was unconstitutional. Many whites in the South resented the new law. This resulted in open defiance and violent confrontations, in one case requiring the use of federal troops in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1957.¹ In 1955, 14-year-old African American Emmett Till was killed in Mississippi for allegedly whistling at a white woman. Later that year, the Montgomery Bus Boycott began in response to Rosa Parks refusing to give up her seat on a bus to a white passenger.

In addition to facing challenges while living their everyday lives, African Americans faced mountainous hurdles when seeking employment—hurdles that remain to this day. The unemployment rate for African Americans in 1954 (9.9 percent), the earliest year for which the Bureau of Labor Statistics began tracking

¹ “With an Even Hand: Brown v. Board at Fifty. Library of Congress.
<https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/brown/brown-aftermath.html>.

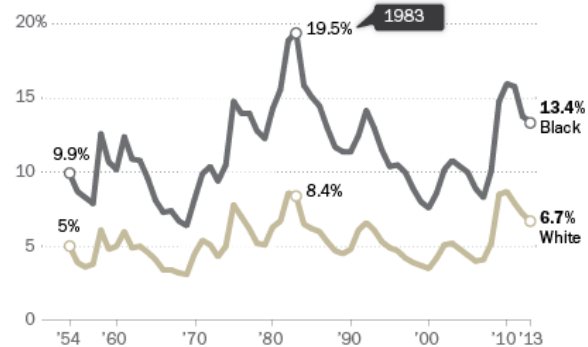
unemployment data by race, was about twice that of whites (5 percent).² Since then, the unemployment gap between the two groups has essentially remained the same. More specifically, between 1954 and 2013, the unemployment rate for African Americans has averaged about 2.2 times that for whites.³

With the Civil Rights Movement in full swing to counter the aforementioned crises, President John F. Kennedy on July 12, 1961 signed an Executive Order calling for a more thoroughly integrated workplace. He named it *Plans For Progress*. Plans For Progress was a voluntary program geared toward employers providing leadership in achieving equal employment opportunities for all.⁴ Its stated purpose, among other things, was to enrich America's free society by advancing basic human rights, while also developing the full potential of our nation's human resources.⁵

Plans For Progress was viewed

Unemployment rates by race

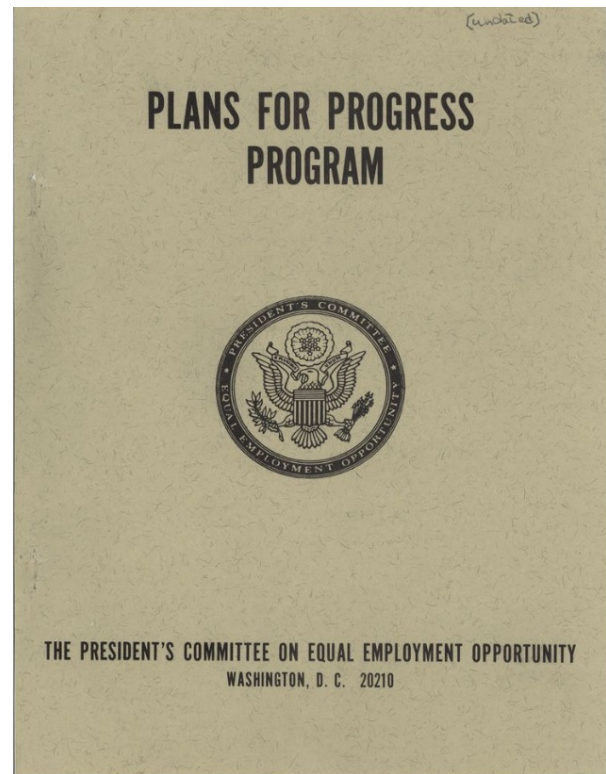
Seasonally adjusted



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics

Note: "Black and other," 1954-1971; "Black or African American" thereafter. 2013 average is January-July.

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² DeSilver, Drew. "Black Unemployment Rate Is Consistently Twice That of Whites." Aug. 21, 2013. Pew Research. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/08/21/through-good-times-and-bad-black-unemployment-is-consistently-double-that-of-whites/>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ John F. Kennedy Library. <https://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/JFKWHSFLCW-023-011.aspx>.

⁵ Ibid.

as a historic step forward in the effort to open new job opportunities to members of minority groups. In 1961, 88.6 percent of the country was white, and 10.5 percent was African American.⁶ So it is reasonable to conclude that the *minority groups* the Plans For Progress spoke of were African Americans.

But for all its well-intentioned plans, there are mixed reviews about just how successful Plans For Progress truly was. It did, at the very least, help usher in the notion that government could play a huge role in advancing social progress (*Civil Rights Act of 1964; Voting Rights Act of 1965; et al.*) at a time when America needed it most. It bears repeating, though, that African Americans were the focus of the government's interest in offering equal employment opportunities. In other words, African Americans, at the outset, were synonymous with workplace diversity.

As the nation continued sputtering toward a fully inclusive workforce during the 1960s and 1970s, Secretary of Labor William "Bill" Brock in 1987 commissioned *Workforce 2000* as a way to examine the current conditions. *Workforce 2000* was a report that looked at how new developments in technology, international competition, demography and other factors would alter America's economic and social landscape. The report mentioned that by the turn of the century, the anticipated changes would produce an America that would in some ways be unrecognizable from the one that existed only a few years earlier.⁷

The document listed as one of America's anticipated trends heading into the 21st century, a workforce that would grow slowly, become older, more female and more disadvantaged.⁸ Moreover, it stated that if the U.S. were to continue to prosper, policymakers would have to, among other things, fully integrate African American and Hispanic workers into the economy.⁹

⁶ U.S. Census Bureau. "A Look at the 1940 Census."

https://www.census.gov/newsroom/cspan/1940census/CSPAN_1940slides.pdf

⁷ Johnston, William; Packer, Arnold. "Workforce 2000: Work and Workers for the 21st Century." Pg. xiii. <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED290887.pdf>.

⁸ Johnston, William; Packer, Arnold. "Workforce 2000: Work and Workers for the 21st Century." Pg. xiii. <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED290887.pdf>.

⁹ Ibid. pg. xiv.

It also went in-depth about these projections:

- *THAT MORE WOMEN WOULD ENTER THE WORKFORCE*; THAT ALMOST TWO-THIRDS OF THE NEW ENTRANTS INTO THE WORKFORCE BETWEEN 1987 AND THE YEAR 2000 WOULD BE WOMEN, AND 61 PERCENT OF ALL WOMEN OF WORKING AGE WERE EXPECTED TO HAVE JOBS BY THE YEAR 2000.
- *THAT MINORITIES WOULD BE A LARGER SHARE OF NEW ENTRANTS INTO THE LABOR FORCE*; THAT NON-WHITES WOULD MAKE UP ABOUT 29 PERCENT OF THE NEW ENTRANTS INTO THE LABOR FORCE BETWEEN 1987 AND THE YEAR 2000, WHICH WAS TWICE THEIR SHARE OF THE WORKFORCE AT THE TIME.
- *THAT IMMIGRANTS WOULD REPRESENT THE LARGEST SHARE OF THE INCREASE IN THE POPULATION AND THE WORKFORCE SINCE THE FIRST WORLD WAR*; THAT APPROXIMATELY 600,000 IMMIGRANTS WERE PROJECTED TO ENTER THE U.S. ANNUALLY BETWEEN 1987 AND 2000; THAT TWO-THIRDS OR MORE OF IMMIGRANTS OF WORKING AGE WERE LIKELY TO JOIN THE LABOR FORCE.

It is for these reasons that Workforce 2000 is widely considered the genesis of the diversity industry. It put into plain English what changing dynamics the 'browning of America' would trigger. The homogeneity that characterized the American workforce during the years preceding Workforce 2000 made it critical that policies and procedures get implemented to meet the demand of the changing demographics. Organizations instituted training and consultations as a way to prepare their workforce and executive-level staff for this thing called diversity.

Not only that; the diversity phenomenon prompted companies to give executives certain titles aimed at improving their initiatives:

- *DIRECTOR OF DIVERSITY*
- *DIVERSITY MANAGER*
- *HEAD OF DIVERSITY*
- *CHIEF DIVERSITY OFFICER*
- *EQUALITY MANAGER*

With the focus placed on pursuing a more diverse workforce, has the pursuit been successful? Let's examine.

21ST CENTURY DIVERSITY

For all practical purposes, the concept of workplace diversity began as a way to stimulate more African American participation in the nation's workforce. Equal opportunity wasn't given. African Americans protested and demonstrated and sacrificed and DEMANDED that which was given to others at birth.

And it worked—at least partially. Between 1966 and 2013, the overall African American workforce participation rate increased from 8.2 percent to 14 percent.¹⁰ Specifically, African American office and clerical workers saw the greatest increase in participation, from 3.53 percent to 15.76 percent. In contrast, African American laborers showed the least change in participation over the years covered. The rate decreased 2.44 percentage points, from 21.1 percent in 1966 to 18.6 percent in 2013.¹¹

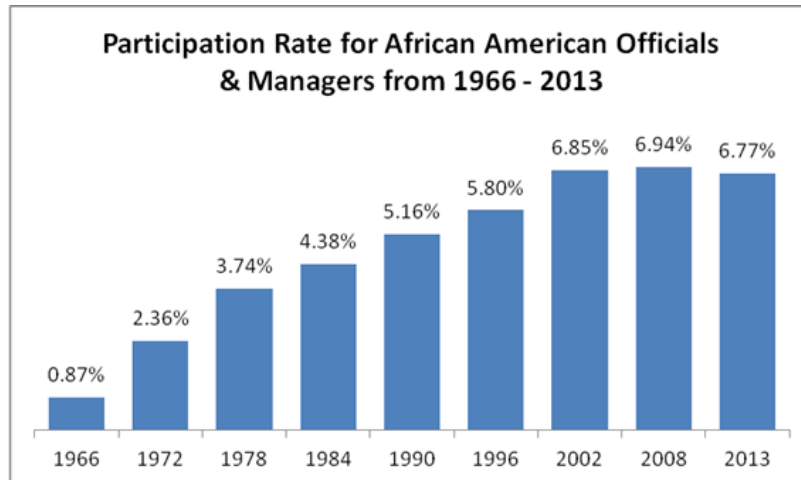
Here's what is most interesting, however. The participation rate for African American officials and managers increased 675 percent between 1966 and 2013. Impressive, until the layers are peeled back. The participation rate in that category was 0.87 percent in 1966—a time when African Americans made up 8.2 percent of the overall workforce.¹² It grew to 6.77 percent by 2013. In essence, at a time when African Americans made up 14 percent of the entire workforce, they were only 6.77 percent of all officials and managers.

¹⁰ U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.
https://www.eeoc.gov/eeoc/statistics/reports/american_experiences/african_americans.cfm

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

Indeed, we have a lot of work left to do.



Source: U.S. EEOC - https://www.eeoc.gov/eeoc/statistics/reports/american_experiences/african_americans.cfm

Today, workplace diversity is no longer a specific objective focusing on increasing African American participation. It is now a more holistic ideal—one that looks to improve Hispanics' participation in the workforce. And women's participation. And the disabled. And the LGBT community. Certainly, these groups are all deserving of the same opportunities granted to other groups and demographics. But one group's fight for inclusion should not be at the expense of others.

The lack of equitable African American participation in the officials and managers subgroup of the nation's workforce is proof that substantive work remains in the fight for diversity. And it mustn't be a partial application of diversity as alluded to previously—when African American participation in categories such as office and clerical workers is commensurate with our population percentage, but falls woefully short in the more influential roles such as managers. And the fact that more than 40 percent of the Fortune 100 corporations have no minorities among their executive officers should not be lost on anyone.¹³

¹³ Reed, Susan E. "Diversity in Corporate America...and What Can Be Done About It." Aug. 2011. Pg. 3.

We have yet to reach a utopian society whereby diversity efforts for African Americans are no longer necessary. But the changing dynamics around diversity—the increased attention to all the other demographics—implies as much. The figure mentioned previously—African Americans making up only 6.77 percent of the nation’s officials and managers—is crucial, partly because that is the pipeline that can potentially fuel the upward mobility of future African American executives. Only five African Americans currently serve as CEOs of Fortune 500 companies—an unfathomable one percent.

The truest irony of 21st century diversity is how studies show it helps white women as much as people of color—or maybe more so.¹⁴ President Kennedy in 1961 introduced affirmative action, which proved to be a major pillar in the fight for diversity. In part, affirmative action originally required entities that received federal funding to take tangible steps to ensure that applicants were employed, and that employees were treated during employment, without regard to their race, creed, color or national origin. President Lyndon Johnson added gender to that list in 1967.¹⁵ President Johnson’s update was necessary, as women in 1967 were only 36.7 percent of the labor force.¹⁶

Data from a 2014 Cooperative Congressional Election Study—an annual large-scale academic survey that tracks political attitudes—revealed that 66 percent of young white people between the ages of 17 and 34 described themselves as “somewhat opposed” or “strongly opposed” to affirmative action policies in employment.¹⁷ Among young white women, 67 percent were against affirmative action.¹⁸

¹⁴ Kohn, Sally. “Affirmative Action Has Helped White Women More Than Anyone.” Time Magazine. June 17, 2013. <http://ideas.time.com/2013/06/17/affirmative-action-has-helped-white-women-more-than-anyone/>.

¹⁵ Angyal, Chloe. “Affirmative Action Is Great For White Women. So Why Do They Hate It?” Huffington Post. January 21, 2016. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/affirmative-action-white-women_us_56a0ef6ae4b0d8cc1098d3a5.

¹⁶ U.S. Department of Labor. “Women in the Labor Force.” https://www.dol.gov/wb/stats/facts_over_time.htm.

¹⁷ Angyal, Chloe. “Affirmative Action Is Great For White Women. So Why Do They Hate It?” Huffington Post. January 21, 2016. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/affirmative-action-white-women_us_56a0ef6ae4b0d8cc1098d3a5.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Perhaps that disdain is unfounded. A Time Magazine article from 2013 referenced a study that affirmative action disproportionately benefited white women; that six million women, the majority of whom were white, had jobs they would not have otherwise held but for affirmative action.¹⁹

In the private sector, the advancements of white women eclipsed those of people of color. At IBM specifically, the number of women in management positions more than tripled in a less-than-10-year timeframe²⁰—all thanks in large measure to the benefits of diversity and affirmative action.

WOMEN AND THE AUTOMOTIVE INDUSTRY

The automotive industry has led the way in numerous sociological areas—modern-day unionism; middle-class wages; top-level employer-sponsored benefits. But there remains an issue that needs the industry’s attention. Women make up almost half of the U.S. labor force but represent only about one-quarter of the automotive workforce.²¹

Participation rate for women of color in motor vehicle manufacturing is around 8.9 percent; at the executive/senior level officials and managers level, it’s 2.7 percent.²²

Women are underrepresented throughout the entire automotive industry. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reveals that only 21.2 percent of women make up automobile dealers,²³ while in a survey of women in various industries, respondents stated the automotive industry was the least successful at attracting and retaining women.²⁴

¹⁹ Kohn, Sally. “Affirmative Action Has Helped White Women More Than Anyone.” Time Magazine. June 17, 2013. <http://ideas.time.com/2013/06/17/affirmative-action-has-helped-white-women-more-than-anyone/>.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Deloitte. “Women at The Wheel: Recruitment, Retention and the Advancement of Women in the Automotive Industry.” 2015. Pg. 6.

²² U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. “2014 Job Patterns for Minorities and Women in Private Industry (EEO-1) – 2014 EEO-1 National Aggregate Report by NAICS – 4 Code, Motor Vehicle Manufacturing (3361).” 2014.

²³ Bureau of Labor Statistics. “Table 18: Employed Persons by Detailed Industry, Sex, Race and Hispanic of Latino Ethnicity, 2015.” Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey 2016.

²⁴ Deloitte. “2015 Women in Manufacturing Study: Exploring the Gender Gap.” 2015.

AFRICAN AMERICANS AND THE AUTOMOTIVE INDUSTRY

Each year, dBusiness Magazine publishes its list of auto executives of the Detroit Three (formerly the Big Three)—Ford, General Motors and Fiat Chrysler. And like most years, 2016's list was a sobering reminder that the lack of diversity is real.

Ford listed 46 executives, seven of which (15 percent) were African American.²⁵ Of the 52 General Motors highlighted, three (5 percent) were African American.²⁶ And Fiat Chrysler had one of 38 (2 percent).²⁷

DIVERSITY'S OBSOLESCENCE

Has diversity run its course? Is it obsolete? If not the ideology of diversity, has the word itself become outdated? These are pertinent questions, especially at a time when the volatility of diversity's meaning continues to permeate the American landscape.

Whites make up 90 percent of Fortune 500 CEOs.²⁸ In those positions, they are, of course, able to influence corporate policy—up to and including designing, implementing and honing robust diversity strategies geared toward developing a varied staff. But a strange thing happened on our way to a more heterogeneous workforce.

Harvard Business Review published a story in January of 2016 with the eye-catching headline: ***Diversity Policies Rarely Make Companies Fairer, and They Feel Threatening to White Men.*** What does it say when those who are charged with implementing a socially progressive strategy feel threatened by that very socially progressive strategy?

²⁵ <http://www.dbusiness.com/January-February-2016/Big-Three-Executives-Ford-Motor-Co-2016/#.V9wMwj4rIb1>.

²⁶ <http://www.dbusiness.com/January-February-2016/Big-Three-Executives-General-Motors-2016/#.V9wM5D4rIb1>.

²⁷ <http://www.dbusiness.com/January-February-2016/Big-Three-Executives-FCA-2016/#.V9wNAj4rIb1>

²⁸ Thompson, Derek. "The Workforce is Even More Divided by Race Than You Think." The Atlantic. November 6, 2013. <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2013/11/the-workforce-is-even-more-divided-by-race-than-you-think/281175/>.

In a nutshell, Harvard Business Review's study put white men through a hiring simulation for an entry-level job at a fictional technology firm. For half of the "applicants," the firm's recruitment materials briefly mentioned its pro-diversity values. For the other half, the materials did not mention diversity. In all other ways, the firm was described identically. All of the applicants then underwent a standardized job interview while being videotaped and having their cardiovascular stress levels monitored.²⁹

Compared to white men interviewing at the company that did not mention diversity, white men interviewing for the pro-diversity company expected more unfair treatment and discrimination against whites. They also performed more poorly in the job interview, and their cardiovascular responses during the interview revealed increased stress levels.³⁰ Thus, pro-diversity messages signaled to these white men that they might be undervalued and discriminated against. These concerns interfered with their interview performance and caused their bodies to respond as if they were under threat.³¹

These findings aren't particularly surprising, especially when viewed against the backdrop of 43 percent of Americans telling researchers that discrimination against whites has become as large a problem as discrimination against African Americans and other minorities.³²

It's no wonder, then, that Merrill Lynch (\$200 million), Coca-Cola (\$192.5 million) and Walgreens (\$24 million) are a few major American corporations that have paid out substantial sums of money in punitive damages for their role in racial discrimination.

In another set of experiments, Harvard Business Review found that diversity initiatives also seem to do little to convince minorities that companies will treat them more fairly. Participants from ethnic minorities viewed a pro-diversity

²⁹ Dover, Tessa; Major, Brenda; Kaiser, Cheryl. "Diversity Policies Rarely Make Companies Fairer, and They Feel Threatening to White Men." Harvard Business Review. January 4, 2016. <https://hbr.org/2016/01/diversity-policies-dont-help-women-or-minorities-and-they-make-white-men-feel-threatened>.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ross, Janell. "White Americans Long For the 1950s, When They Didn't Face So Much Discrimination." Washington Post. November 17, 2015. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2015/11/17/white-americans-long-for-the-1950s-when-they-werent-such-victims-of-reverse-discrimination/>.

company as no more inclusive, no better to work for, and no less likely to discriminate against minorities than a company without a pro-diversity stance.³³

Both in theory and in practice, diversity efforts are alive and well in America. But how effective are they? Studies show that the most commonly used diversity programs do little to increase representation of minorities and women.³⁴ A longitudinal study of over 700 U.S. companies found that implementing a diversity training program has little positive effect and may even *decrease* representation of African American women.³⁵

DIVERSITY VS. EQUALITY

Perhaps the word DIVERSITY, as it relates to the workplace, doesn't have the power it once had. Perhaps the word has lost its potency, lost its stature. How else can we explain some peoples' ambivalence and disregard toward its importance?

Examined with a critical eye, one could conclude that diversity—the word itself—has become a nebulous, confusing and pliable paradigm. Companies shape and mold it to fit their chosen narrative, while others flat out ignore it altogether. Maybe we should substitute the term DIVERSITY for EQUALITY. It reeks of semantics to be sure, but equality has a lot less mystifying and contradictory meaning.

Equality is a matter of fairness and ensuring equal opportunity and equal representation. It's a much more easily defined and measurable concept. To whatever extent altering which word we use improves America's workforce dynamics, the fact remains clear: what we have been doing hasn't been good enough.

³³ Dover, Tessa; Major, Brenda; Kaiser, Cheryl. "Diversity Policies Rarely Make Companies Fairer, and They Feel Threatening to White Men." Harvard Business Review. January 4, 2016. <https://hbr.org/2016/01/diversity-policies-dont-help-women-or-minorities-and-they-make-white-men-feel-threatened>.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

CONCLUSION

Diversity counterbalances the decades of white-dominated thought that, history shows, has ignored and/or marginalized African Americans and all people of color in the workplace. One can surmise that those in power, in one breath, tout the importance of diversity in corporate America, yet in the other dismiss it out of hand while going through the obligatory steps as a sign of compliance—all for the sake of expedience.

To the cynic, diversity pits one group (white males) against another (everyone else). They view it as a restrictive idea aimed at uplifting everyone else at the expense of white males.

To the idealist, diversity is a fundamental concept that fights for equal opportunity for African Americans and all people of color. Whether we label it DIVERSITY or EQUALITY, however, the goal remains the same: to establish a labor force AT ALL LEVELS that reflects the varied American populace.

Diversity's meaning is shifting. That much is certain. In some ways, maybe that's not such a bad thing.

To the white males in power, perhaps a less ambiguous meaning would allow a greater embrace of diversity without the accompanying discomfort surrounding its presence. And to everyone else, perhaps a refreshed definition can add clarity to the fight. But to be sure, vigilance on both sides is required if we are to attain the kind of workforce that reflects America's highest values and ideals.



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