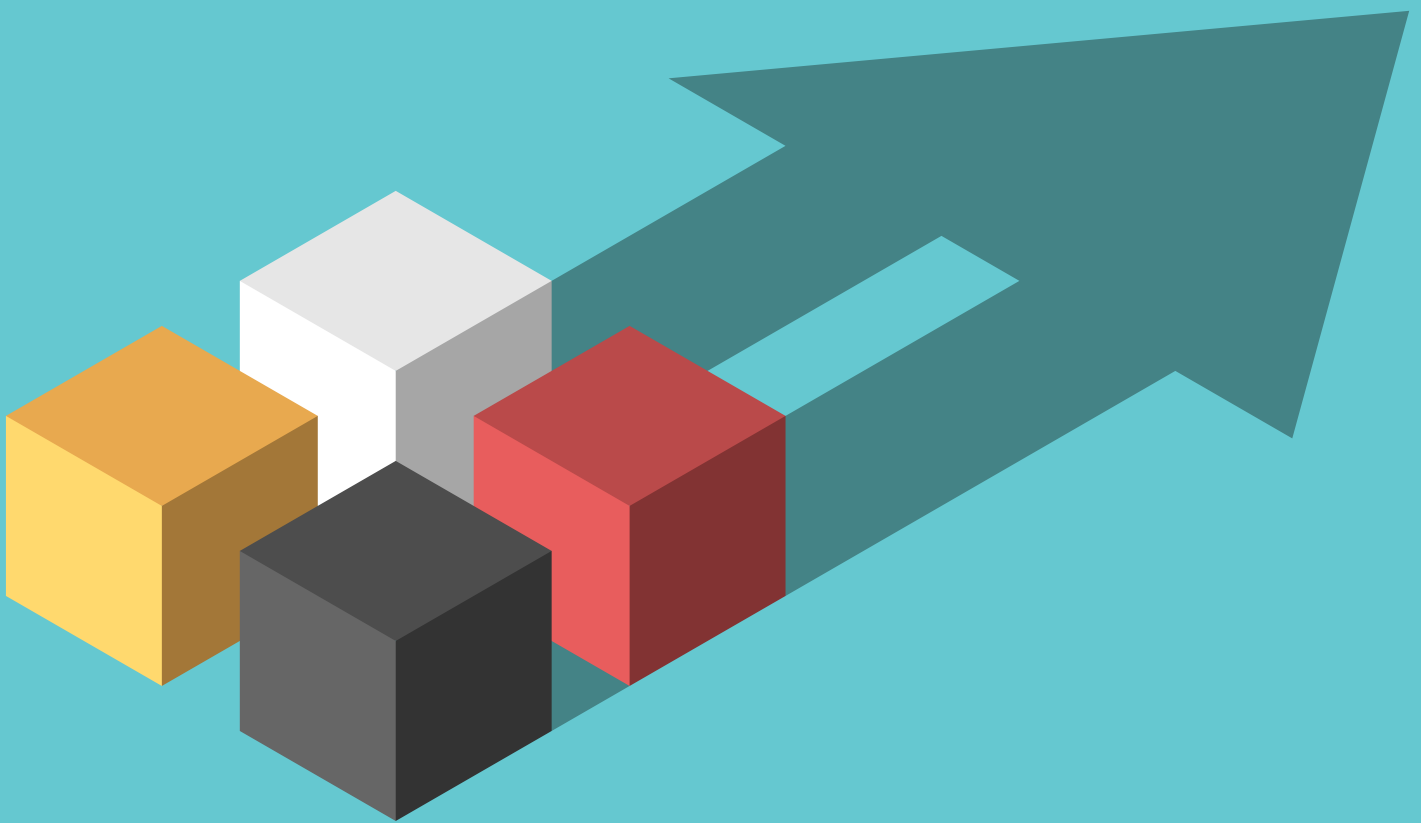


Still a Long Way to Go: The View from Young Black Leaders

For all the commitments by organizations in recent years around DE&I, how much real progress has been made? To broaden the range of perspectives on this issue—and discuss what still needs to change—*People + Strategy* articles editor Adam Bryant hosted a roundtable discussion with three young professionals. The Posse Foundation, a nonprofit that partners with U.S. colleges and universities to provide student scholarships and leadership training, provided introductions to the three participants, each of whom is a Posse Scholar.



A roundtable discussion with:

Niani Tolbert, speaker, consultant and the founder and CEO of the #HireBlack Initiative

Desmond Austin-Miller, a senior consultant at Deloitte in Washington, D.C.

Christopher Dean, an attorney in the Northern California office of Burris, Nisenbaum, Curry & Lacy

People + Strategy: Let's start with the big-picture question. Has there been real progress since the murder of George Floyd, when so many companies promised to do more and do better?

Niani Tolbert: There was so much rallying and support at first, but it has definitely diminished. Last year, a lot of funding for diversity programs was paused, or those programs were shifted to become non-diversity programs. For example, one of my clients started a rotation program specifically for Black and Latinx people, but then they broadened it to make it available to everyone.

The waning interest is exacerbated by what's happening in the economy. With all these layoffs at big tech companies, we hear about other firms trying to hire those people because they see them as a "gold mine" for talent now. That just reinforces the notion of elitism that diversity programs are trying to address. Companies are now letting go

of other approaches to hiring that they had adopted when the market for talent was tighter.

One challenge I see is that the commitments were not matched with the necessary infrastructure to implement the change. And that infrastructure means there is going to be a certain amount of tension in the organization, because you need that tension to effect change.

Desmond Austin-Miller: In that first year and a half after George Floyd's murder, there was a sharp increase across so many industries in efforts to find training programs, resources and facilitators with expertise in DE&I. Companies saw it as a core part of how they were going to be successful. Three years after that groundswell of support, it's become a bit muddled, and it's not clear what has happened to some of those huge investments.

In many cases, diverse employees are having to direct and guide where those resources go, and it's a very fraught and difficult process to navigate. A friend told me, for example, that he felt like he had to put his career on hold in order to manage all the DE&I investments and resources that were coming his way. He's an engineer, but he has sidelined himself in that engineering work to focus full-time on DE&I.

And to Niani's point about infrastructure, companies want proof points and successful case studies to justify their investments. But change doesn't just happen overnight. You don't just decide to spend money in a certain area and then your investment comes back many times over right away.

One thing that I've seen with clients across industries is that if a company wants to start a DE&I program, they often get hung up on the questions of, *"How are we going to know that we had an impact? What are we measuring, and how are we going to know that we were successful?"* They are already so focused on the end result without doing the work to think through what's needed in order to get to that impact. That kind of action-reaction, input-output thinking can really hamper some DE&I efforts, which take time to put into place.

Christopher Dean: A lot of companies did show their support at first and made commitments with respect to diversity. Many companies said they support Black Lives Matter and created initiatives to support a cause.

Many things they said they wanted to do or implement have not really come to fruition. Some larger companies have not put certain initiatives in place or put diversity at their core. Although George Floyd's death sparked a larger conversation and led to people being interested to put initiatives in place, it has, in essence, just been performative.

Tolbert: And because of that focus Desmond mentioned on the quantitative approach, that can result in a lack of research into the experience of marginalized employees. For example, a lot of companies may not prioritize doing exit interviews as part of their efforts around retention. Or they do those interviews, but they are conducted by supervisors or by someone who is not seen as a neutral third party.

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—Desmond Austin-Miller



The Big Question

It's important to have DE&I specialists conducting these exit interviews because this research helps you understand what's behind the numbers. It's important to uplift and amplify the people who have been impacted to show that you are making a difference for them.

Dean: That's a great point, because those exit interviews are so important to give you the data so you can focus on the changes that need to be made in your company's culture. In those interviews, you can ask people not only for the reason they are leaving, but also what the company can do to improve. Ultimately, you want to get that feedback from your employees, even though it doesn't necessarily happen at a lot of big companies.

P+S: At a personal level, do you feel like progress has been made? Not only in terms of broader awareness about systemic racism in this country, but also just your experience day-to-day?

Austin-Miller: I have seen a marked increase in the diversity of teams, organizations and the different communities that I belong to. With the workspaces I walk into, or my colleagues or my friends walk into, there is now more than a surface-level awareness of racism and microaggressions. But there is almost an ironic aspect to that awareness. Things are being done to lessen or alleviate those things, but people see it more as an organizational, systemic

problem rather than putting the onus on themselves to change behaviors. Because people are acknowledging that it permeates all levels of our society and workplaces, that almost makes it seem more impossible to tackle as an individual.

Progress still relies too heavily on the actions, behaviors and overall involvement of diverse practitioners across organizations. We are the ones who are on the ground driving to make our workplaces look different and feel more inclusive. Until that changes, and until the people who have the lowest stakes in this type of work start to take most of the responsibility for it, there will continue to be an uneven sense of progress and waning interest.

Dean: I live in the legal world, and we have seen some progress in many states in terms of the laws they are enacting with respect to how officers have encounters with civilians. But police misconduct and racism still exists. And as a Black man, I still feel the same pressures that Black men have faced for a long time.

Tolbert: It has been exhausting for many marginalized folks who have been taking on additional research or speaking out or have been in DE&I positions to try to change what's going on, particularly as we enter spaces that weren't necessarily built for us. We face silent rules in navigating the workplace. We have to code switch, educate others, and also balance that with being authentic to ourselves so that we can

create meaningful relationships. That is an exhausting experience.

We expected that the murder of George Floyd would be a catalyst for transformation, but we don't want our oppression to be a trend, to feel it is somehow conditional. For example, in 2019 the Crown Act, which stands for Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair, was created. It is a policy to protect against discrimination based on race-based hairstyles at work and at public schools. While there is support and awareness behind it, in December 2022, the Senate blocked it from becoming law nationally.

There are about 20 states that have supported the CROWN Act by outlawing hair discrimination, but the fact that we don't get that federal support is so disappointing. And these are the kind of small things that we experience every day that continue to show that our existence is not appreciated. We see some progress, but we're continually told that our existence has to be changed in order to be professional. We're continually reminded that professionalism is a Eurocentric concept and that we don't belong.

Dean: I totally agree. I have friends who wanted to enter the professional arena, and they made these modifications to themselves, such as cutting their hair. That is something I have prided myself on in my career—that if an employer doesn't find value in the way that I look, then ultimately, I don't want to be part of that firm.

Austin-Miller: Over the last three years, I've been asked to take part in so many panel discussions and conversations about race. And while I almost always enthusiastically raise my hand and say "Yes," it's very tiring as a Black man. The Japanese have this interesting saying about how we have three faces. We have the face that we show our friends and family, the face we show our co-workers and a third face that only you see. For me, as a Black man, it's like I have a fourth face that I have to put on for pretty much anybody who's not Black. That performance is exhausting.



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—Niani Tolbert

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P+S: What advice do you have for HR leaders?

Austin-Miller: As HR professionals are trying to make their workplaces more diverse and inclusive, there is this kind of chicken-and-egg problem. Companies will say they want more Black talent in their organizations, and then they recruit them into the junior ranks. But as they are making their way up, you begin to see high attrition at the mid-career level. And it’s usually because those mid-career employees feel like they don’t have anyone at the executive level at their organization who looks like them or has similar life experiences.

The chicken-and-egg problem is that you want Black talent to come to your organization and you want them to work their way up the ranks and become leaders, but you don’t have any leaders that look like them at your organization currently. But in order to get them, you have to develop those leaders.

To solve this chicken-and-egg issue, you need to be making investments without constantly looking for an immediate return. Maybe you need to simply make more ambitious investments to bring in and keep Black talent. You need to think of unconventional approaches to solving this chicken-and-egg problem, because it’s not going to get solved on its own.

Dean: Companies have to be motivated by creating a sustainable infrastructure that is more than just a desire to create something because they want to say that we support DE&I. They have to be motivated to have DE&I incorporated in their values and their long-term strategy. The future is going to be blended and different, and HR executives have to be looking at how they can really

incorporate these broad shifts into their future planning. It can’t be just about addressing a hot topic.

Tolbert: We need to recognize that the recruiting process is inherently biased and needs to be restructured. Whether you source from platforms like LinkedIn, or vet resumes or rely on referrals, elitism tends to disqualify and limit the number of diverse candidates you see. So you have to do a lot of research outside of simply going to HBCUs.

And then to increase retention, you need to look at the needs of employees. There are deep systems we need to address. As just one example, women are the key breadwinner at about 80 percent of Black families, so childcare assistance is also a huge aspect of DE&I. Companies also need to ensure there is transparency around pay equity. Because of the racial wealth gap, a lot of Black people don’t feel like they have the power to negotiate while our backs are to the wall. Companies need to really understand how the system has affected and currently affects us in order to help us be a great addition to the organization.

P+S: Let’s fast-forward. Is the conversation going to be different when each of you is 60 years old?

Austin-Miller: I don’t think that a lot of the issues we’re talking about now will suddenly be solved or will be no longer relevant. They’ll have just changed a little bit. Yes, our generation is a lot different now than the current generation that’s in power. But I do think these behaviors and systems take several generations to change, not just one or two. I often think about the difference between myself and my grandmother,

who didn’t finish elementary school. Progress plays out over generations.

Of course, workplaces will be more diverse over time. That’s the way that our country is trending from a demographic standpoint. But ideologically, our country is splitting in two. It’s going to be interesting to see how those two halves continue to develop by the time my generation is in their sixties and in positions of leadership. Will we continue to bifurcate as a country or come together a bit more? What is that trajectory going to be, and what impact will it have on our communities and workplaces?

Dean: I’m optimistic about the advancements we will have made in conversations like this. As we know, we have made some advancements after centuries of oppression. We always have these conversations, but my hope is to also see them backed up more with more action and concrete steps.

Tolbert: A lot of progress has been made. But is the world going to be what I want it to look like when I’m 60? Probably not. There needs to be more representation in leadership positions, which are still mostly held by white men. We need to see more people of color, women, trans and nonbinary people, and neurodivergent or people with disabilities in those roles. There has to be that representation in leadership teams. There has to be representation in policymaking. There has to be representation even when it comes to lobbying. I recognize that a lot of hard work has been done to get us to where we are today. I think that there will be a lot of progress in the future, but that will require a lot more hard work. We need access. ■■