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RACE

How to Be a Better Ally to Your Black Colleagues

by Stephanie Creary

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The late singer and songwriter Sam Cooke appropriately summed up the desires of many Black Americans in 1963 when he penned the song, "A Change is Gonna Come." Well, it's been a long time coming, but corporate America — and the world — has finally woken up to the idea that systemic racism still surrounds us.

As I write this, we are in the midst of two interrelated public health crises that have magnified the disparities that Black Americans continue to experience in the U.S. More than 130,000 Americans have died from the coronavirus, and the mortality rate for Black Americans has been more than twice as high as that of other U.S. racial groups. Further, our collective witness to the killings of Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Rayshard Brooks, Elijah McClain, and others has called attention to the fact that systemic racism against Black Americans is also a public health crisis. This is not news: We have long known that Black Americans don't have access to adequate educational, health, housing, political, and economic opportunities at the same rates as other racial groups. And, quite simply, the psychological and physiological impact of racism on Black Americans is and has always been devastating.

Yet, it took the collision of these two crises for corporate America to hear that your Black colleagues are not and have never been okay. Now, corporate leaders are calling on their organizations to end systemic racism and support Black employees. While public commitments to anti-racism and town hall meetings to discuss race in the workplace have been an important starting point, much more needs to be done to improve the experiences and opportunities of Black employees in corporate America.

LEAP: A Framework for Becoming a Better Ally to Black Employees

Fourteen years ago, I began studying corporate diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) practices in both the U.S. and across the world. To date, I have interviewed hundreds of leaders in different sectors and industries about their workplace experiences. My research suggests that the relationship between Black employees and their employing organizations is, at best, a tenuous one. Black employees — at all levels — feel that they have not been adequately heard, understood, or granted opportunities to the same extent as their white peers.

Recently, I developed the LEAP framework, which is designed to help people from different backgrounds build stronger relationships in the workplace. LEAP is based on the idea that relating to people who are different from us takes hard work and can be anxiety-provoking. Yet, doing the necessary work to notice, connect, value, and respond to others' needs results in more effective working relationships.

In this article, I bring together more than a decade's worth of insights on DEI initiatives and Black employees' experiences and my LEAP framework to propose how company leaders — particularly people managers — who are well-positioned to support Black employees might all LEAP to become better allies in DEI work.

L: **Listen and learn from your Black colleagues' experiences.**

Research has shown that Black employees who talk about race, advocate for other Black people, or openly discuss discrimination and unfair treatment at work are penalized for doing so. Yet, when their voices are not suppressed, we learn that Black employees often feel that they have to work harder than their colleagues for the same rewards. In the words of one Black leader:

I had to be adaptive. I went to a historically Black college and university, so I was not given the same opportunities as those that went to predominantly white colleges and universities. I had to think of different ways of doing things — and doing it a little bit better than those around me to be afforded the same opportunity

Instead of dampening your Black colleagues' voices and experiences, you can look for opportunities to listen to and learn about their experiences at work. Participating in company-sponsored town halls focused on race in the workplace is one good option. Attending your company's employee resource group (ERG) meetings for Black employees is another.

E: Engage with Black colleagues in racially diverse and more casual settings.

Since Black employees often feel like they need to over-perform at work, gaining deeper insights into their experiences may be more feasible in non-evaluative settings where other Black employees are present. This is echoed in research which reveals that Black employees are less likely to open up at out-of-the office social events where they are in the minority but are more likely to share their experiences when they are around other people of color. You may learn that Black colleagues are not getting the support that they need from their direct managers.

Your company's ERG for Black employees is a great place to start. While these groups are specifically designed to address the needs of Black employees, membership and related activities are typically open to all employees from all racial backgrounds.

One Black leader I interviewed explained the significance of his company's Black ERG to his and his colleagues' development:

... the [ERG] had an impression on me. I had that early exposure to other Black leaders and saw what was possible. [The ERG] helps build that pipeline of the next generation of leaders, which I think for any company adds real value when you have people reaching out, being willing to do things above and beyond the day job to invest in the talent, and to make sure that there are mechanisms to retain them if, in fact, they're at risk of leaving the company.

If your company does not have an ERG for black employees, consider joining an online community where personal experiences about race are being openly discussed and facilitated by experts.

A: Ask Black employees about their work and their goals.

Inquiry can be a powerful tool to create connection when people can effectively read social situations and body language. However, when done without care — for example, by focusing on their racial backgrounds, personal lives, or their physical appearance — inquiry can feel overly invasive and harmful to Black workers.

To improve the quality of your relationships with your Black colleagues, ask them about their actual work, including what they are hoping to accomplish, any concerns they have about doing that, and how you might be able to help them reach their vision. One Black leader I spoke with recounted such a conversation:

Having [the leader] as a mentor has been significant in my career. We've had a very similar career path. I have been able to talk to him about a lot of the issues that I face. He speaks to me not just in general terms about careers but in specific terms — he offers suggestions based on my experiences…[The relationship has] helped me understand that I need to continually grow and learn.

Another spoke about a senior leader who encouraged him to advance his education after hearing about his career goals. He said, "You have to work hard to remain competitive in life. Go and take those opportunities."

P: Provide your Black colleagues with opportunities, suggestions, encouragement, and general support.

It is clear from research from the Center for Talent Innovation and the McKinsey/LeanIn Women in the Workplace report that Black employees often lack the same opportunities at work as their peers from other racial backgrounds. One Black leader in one of my research studies explained her experience and perspective:

When I first came into the organization, I didn't get the help that I needed or development that I needed because I was a Black woman, because of stereotypes or people's prejudices or biases…My peers who are minorities who are in the same boat as me have the same issue.

To support your Black colleagues, amplify their experiences — the good and the bad. Recommend them for highly visible opportunities. Volunteer to provide them with feedback on their work. Introduce them to influential colleagues. Openly acknowledge their accomplishments to others. Reward them for doing DEI work alongside their formal work. And most, of all, share their more challenging experiences with those who have the capacity to create systemic change.

We will only reduce the harmful impact of system racism on our Black colleagues when we challenge and change the very structures that create inequality at work, including who we support and how. This will require being more intentional in supporting Black employees, including by asking them first what they need and then supporting them in that way. Your Black colleagues are ready. Are you?

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