Diversity

The Myths that Undermine Racial Equity at Work

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by Janet Foutty
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From "We are an unbiased meritocracy" to "Advancing Black professionals will mean fewer opportunities for others," every organization has a series of orthodoxies, or accepted ways of thinking, that it must challenge in order to truly drive racial equity. Challenging these orthodoxies is not easy. It requires empathy and vulnerability, tough conversations and constant self-reflection. It takes sustained commitment from leaders and team members, even when it is uncomfortable or unpopular—or perhaps especially when it is uncomfortable or unpopular. The author, executive chair of the board of Deloitte US, describes how the company's internal conversations helped them identify a set of myths organizations need to bust to become more equitable, and offers questions that can help leaders dismantle them.

More than a year has passed since many corporate leaders made bold commitments about diversity, equity, and inclusion. Like many other executives, I invested significant time listening to professionals within my organization and outside of it to understand their experiences at work and in the world, and what I can do to improve it.

One conversation in particular sticks with me. I received a note from a Deloitte colleague who wrote, "As a mother to 26- and 24-year-old Black men and an 18-year-old daughter, I am never without fear that they will encounter something akin to the travesties we see in communities of color on a regular basis. The Black experience in this country is truly unparalleled."

As the mother of a white son and daughter in that same age range, I cannot imagine what it would be like to fear for my children's lives every time they go for a jog, step into a grocery store, or hang out in a park. Nor would I be able to comprehend the reality that if my children were Black, they would be more likely to contract Covid-19, more likely to be underemployed, more likely to experience job loss, and more likely to experience discrimination in the workplace.

Over the past year, I've continued to listen and to learn more about the systemic bias and racism that plagues the Black community. That process has crystallized my belief that, as business leaders, we have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to commit to collective action in advancing racial equity.

Why equity? Simply put, it's because equity isn't just about efforts, it's about *results*—measurable, meaningful outcomes in the lives of our people, our communities, our country, and our world.

Why focus on the Black community? In our society we also witness discrimination and violence against women, Asian American and Pacific Islander communities, LGBTQ+ individuals, and Latinx people. Make no mistake: Equity is critical for *all* races and *all*

identity groups. But I believe it's critical to understand and take meaningful action *now* toward greater racial equity for Black people, who have suffered the consequences of systemic racism in the United States for more than 400 years. And, as I'll discuss later, evidence suggests that when we address the systems that harm Black people, others benefit, too.

Recently, my organization Deloitte published a report I commissioned, *[The Equity Imperative](#)*, identifying how businesses can—both within our organizations and outside of them, both individually and together—combat systemic racism and drive more equitable outcomes.

Every organization has its orthodoxies. In *Detonate: Why and How Companies Must Blow Up Best Practices*, Geoff Tuff and Steve Goldbach define these as "[beliefs] or [ways] of thinking that [are] accepted as true or correct" and "that [go] unstated and unchallenged." While many corporate leaders have written about the orthodoxies we must challenge in order to drive innovation and business growth, there is little public conversation around the orthodoxies we must dismantle in order to drive racial equity.

It's time that changed.

My colleagues Joanne Stephane and Andrew Blau began this conversation last year and built a new set of orthodoxies that sometimes get in the way of pursuing equity, which many organizations likely share. That conversation inspired us at Deloitte to identify a set of myths that we must bust to become a more equitable enterprise. I'll share five of those orthodoxies here and pose questions that can help us dismantle them. Because only when we interrogate our assumptions can we better understand ourselves and our organizations—and truly begin down the path to equity.

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"We are an unbiased meritocracy."

At U.S.-based companies with at least 100 employees, just 3% of executives or senior leaders are Black. After Merck CEO Kenneth Frazier retires at the end of June, we will have only four Black Fortune 500 CEOs. The disparity is shaped and exacerbated by the underlying assumption that our processes are *fair* and *equal.*

But equality assumes that everyone applying to a job had the same opportunities afforded to them—be it the means to attend a private university or accept an unpaid internship, or the time and resources to prepare for an interview. It also assumes that once hired, two people who enter with the same degree have the same chance of success.

Neither assumption is true. On the whole, white kids have greater access to educational opportunity, starting as young as preschool. Employees who are white and male often have wider professional networks within their organizations, and are therefore more likely to advance.

As leaders, we should acknowledge and address these inequities in education, in hiring, and in developing and advancing professionals into leadership roles. And as a society, we should reassess what we mean when we say our systems are "fair," "balanced," or "merit- based." Because as long as "equal" systems have unequal inputs, those systems won't deliver equitable outcomes.

Questions to ask

- Are our talent-sourcing networks and approaches limiting the pool of candidates?
- How can we change our job application processes to consider more, and more diverse, candidates?
- How can we rethink the way we assess candidates to minimize bias?

- How can we adjust our professional development systems to consider the diversity of experiences and educational backgrounds of all employees, and support the variety of development needs?

"We don't have a racism problem here."

Most leaders would like to believe that their place of work is a safe space. That because they are well intentioned and well informed, and because they have implemented policies, processes, and procedures

that address diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), their organizations are fairer—fairer than they used to be, and fairer than the world around us.

But the idea that organizations are unaffected by the society in which they operate is just not realistic. Companies reflect communities—and racism exists, individually and systematically, within communities. Employees do not leave society at the door when they show up for work, and neither do their leaders. "Society" is in the office, right alongside them.

Biases may appear in casual conversations between colleagues, or entrenched policies affecting everyone; in how opportunities are assigned, or how performance is evaluated; in the elevator, over email, or in the boardroom.

Questions to ask

- How can we confront biases—as individuals, as teams, and as an organization?
- What specific practices can we adopt to fight bias, and advance equity—again, as individuals, as teams, and as an organization?

"Advancing Black professionals will mean fewer opportunities for others."

Equity is not a zero-sum game. Yet many people still believe that there are limited opportunities, so gains for one identity

group must come at the expense of another. Or, even more perniciously, that those who currently hold the most access to opportunity do so because of a natural right to them, rather than because of a historically unfair system.

Organizations should remind their employees, and themselves, that advancing Black professionals doesn't mean fewer opportunities for non-Black individuals. It just means that the talent pool is larger and has more available, capable, and qualified people. Plus, such efforts

often result in what Angela Glover Blackwell has coined "the curb-cut effect": That is, that steps taken to address the needs of Black professionals ultimately benefit others as well.

Questions to ask

- How can we access and nurture a broader, richer, and more competitive talent pool?
- How can we source and develop Black talent, at all levels of their academic and professional careers?

"Taking bold action around DEI is too controversial/risky for our business."

For too long, many companies have operated under the assumption that it is "riskier" to take a stand against inequity than it is to stay silent. When they do that, what organizations are really doing is masking racism as "risk avoidance." They are communicating to colleagues, consumers, and communities that enabling systemic racism is less harmful than the controversy that may come from dismantling it.

That must end now. At Deloitte, we believe in advocating for equal human rights and advancing social issues that are aligned with our values. We believe that driving equity will help us attract top talent, retain clients, and lead in competitive markets.

Questions to ask

- When have we previously used risk as an excuse to avoid taking a stand? Who was hurt by those decisions?

- What will be the cost of that inaction?

- How can we identify and mitigate risk in ways that further equitable outcomes instead of perpetuating inequitable outcomes?

"We can't find Black suppliers."

Too often, companies assume they can maintain the status quo and that Black suppliers will come to them. But if they're going to attract "hard-to-find" suppliers, they must pursue them outside of their existing networks and offer a differentiated, appealing value proposition—one that is specific, compelling, and consistently evaluated for efficacy. For example, companies could consider offering capability development to established suppliers, or creating internal tools and training for developing new supplier relationships.

Questions to ask

- What new, creative approaches can we take to source suppliers? What is our value proposition? Does it appeal to Black suppliers? If not, what should we adjust?

- Once we have engaged new suppliers, how can we mitigate systemic challenges they might encounter working with our organization?

Cultivating an Equity-Obsessed Mindset

Challenging these orthodoxies is not easy. It requires empathy and vulnerability, tough conversations, and constant self-reflection. It takes sustained commitment from leaders and team members, even when it is uncomfortable or unpopular—or perhaps *especially* when it is uncomfortable or unpopular.

Most importantly, it is just the beginning. Advancing equity requires cultivating an equity-obsessed mindset, one in which challenging orthodoxies is simply a starting point, rather than an end goal. Each of us—at every organization, in every industry, across every sphere of influence—has the moral responsibility and the opportunity to not only dismantle inequity in the short term, but to cultivate equity for the long term.

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