Our Voices Mattered: Role Expectations of Black Employees in Helping Employers Create a Supportive Diversity Climate: A Retrospective View

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The first two tenured Black American faculty members in a business school accredited by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business reflect on their efforts to help administrators and faculty further embrace diversity as a key component of its growth strategy and marketing plan. The authors assert that institutions of higher learning are in a unique position. Not only are these institutions expected to teach about the benefits of embracing diversity, but to also model behaviors that demonstrate they walk the talk, thereby enhancing the organization's diversity climate. Change may not be immediate, but over time with deliberate practice, faculty and organizations should see marketable results. Seven suggestions are set forth to help employers create a supportive diversity climate.

Keywords: Black Americans, business schools, diversity climates, faculty, job roles, marketing plan, role portrayal

INTRODUCTION

More than 900 business schools are accredited by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB). AACSB asserts that it is known, worldwide, as the longest-standing, most recognized form of specialized accreditation that an institution earn (AACSB, 2021) and business schools with AACSB accreditation can build their brand identities and are positioned to create a *competitive advantage*. Like many organizations, AACSB includes diversity and inclusion among its core values and as a critical component of its business accreditation standards. Those that have good outcomes may include diversity as part of their marketing plan (Richardson, 2012).

As Harrison et al. (1998) point out, when organizations discuss diversity they are generally referring to diversity in terms of surface-level characteristics that result in workplace discrimination, such as race, gender, age and physical disability. However, embracing diversity goes beyond mere recruitment of a diverse workforce and adding it as a component of the organization's code of ethics or values statement. Embracing diversity also involves acknowledging differences and making a concerted effort to ensure that all members of the organization feel like they belong; that their perspectives and opinions matter. An examination of an organization's diversity climate informs how well a diversity and inclusion strategy is working. Diversity climate is measured by employees' perception of the inclusiveness of their work

environment Mor Barak et al., 1998; McKay et al., 2009). Supportive diversity climates provide a sense of belonging.

Institutions of higher learning are in a unique position. Not only are these institutions expected to teach about the benefits of embracing diversity, but to also model behaviors that demonstrate they walk the talk. Given the business case for diversity is grounded on deep-level characteristics that result in a competitive advantage by extending the diversity of thought that are found in cultural differences (Ely & Thomas, 2001). It is plausible that AACSB accredited business schools are expected to foster awareness, understanding, acceptance, and respect for diverse viewpoints related to current and emerging issues (AACSB, 2021, p. 16).

As pointed out by diversity scholar Diana Bilimoria, transforming organizations into entities that truly value and embrace diversity means that educators must lead by example. "Before asking their students to develop in this direction, they must have the personal discipline and courage to examine and expand their own actions and interactions, their own biases and barriers, and their own intents and attitudes. And they must be able to dream of organizations and societies in which diversity is genuinely welcomed" (Bilimoria, 1998 p. 120). In particular, they view diversity efforts as an ethical responsibility to those members of underrepresented groups who are recruited and accept employment.

Stewart and Gregg (2015) point out that faculty have expectations and that business schools have expectations of faculty and gaps may exist between those expectations. They note that faculty play many roles - some desired, some loathed, some self-imposed, some imposed by students, some by employers of students, some by peers, some by institutions, and some by the global nature of the business world (p. 13). Prior to their work, Harris (1990) addressed role responsibilities for those teaching Black American students. He identified three role responsibilities for faculty: 1) competence (to instruct black students to be excellent); 2) commitment (to produce the finest black students); 3) choice (to maximize the quality of selections). They argue that this list should be extended to include communication (efforts to enlighten others about the need for diversity and when diversity efforts are being resisted).

In this paper, two Black American faculty members whose academic careers began within a business school at a major university in urban city in the southeastern part of the United States seek to identify the challenges and opportunities that they faced in their efforts to inform other organizational members about diversity resistance in the workplace. Anecdotal evidence provided through on-going discourse suggests that their experiences are not unlike those of other Black American faculty and other diverse groups in similar situations in the US and beyond. They highlight some of the recent research on diversity resistance. Then, they reflect on some situations when they felt diversity resistance occurred within their business school and discuss their individual and joint attempts to bring these issues to the attention of effectual audiences. They conclude by offering some strategies to address diversity resistance based upon their years of experience.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cynthia Burack and Suzanne Franks (2000) note it is common for proponents of diversity to point out the advantages of diversity and likewise, it is also common for diversity critics to point out the problems with diversity. However, it is less common for proponents of diversity to directly address resistance to diversity. In this paper, they make no attempts to determine which scholars are proponents and which researchers are opponents, only to highlight some of the major points that have been set forth in the literature.

Kecia M. Thomas (2008) describes diversity resistance as the opposition to the successful integration of diversity into the workplace. She posits that at the interpersonal level, diversity resistance can involve the rejection, exclusion, harassment and/or subordination of others based upon differences. At the organizational level, diversity resistance is systemic; manifesting in policies and practices. Like prejudice or discrimination, resistance to diversity can manifest in ways that are overt as well as covert.

Marvin Johnson (2001), the Founder and Executive Director of the Center for Alternative Dispute Resolution and a former professor of labor relations, law, and conflict management at Bowie State University, identified some examples of diversity resistance:

- delaying consideration/implementation of diversity issues
- attacking diversity as being too time consuming or complex
- resisting the inclusion of people with diverse backgrounds in all aspects of the organization
- accepting/condoning the inequitable compensation/utilization of people with diverse backgrounds
- discrediting information provided by people with diverse backgrounds
- unwilling to acknowledge and recognize the contributions of people with diverse backgrounds.

From a strategic management perspective, supporters are prone to draw attention to diversity as a means to strengthen the organization's competitive position (Cox & Blake, 1991; Giscombe & Mattis, 2002; Milliken et al., 2003; Roberson & Park, 2007). When it comes to resistance, the question "Does diversity really improve organizational performance?" tends to permeate the strategy literature (Herring 2009; Stojmenovska et al., 2017). Supporters and critics use the performance argument to suggest that resources should continue to be allocated to diversity initiatives or that they should be reallocated.

From a marketing perspective, HR's role in helping organizations stay ahead of their competitors has led to a closer working relationship between HR and marketing functions to increase organizational performance and strengthen the brand. Wells et al. (2021) explored the influence of diversity climate on employer branding and argued that firms that tout their diversity outcomes, but mismanage their DEI efforts, risk negative brand publicity (word of mouth or other) associated with not meeting the expectations of traditionally excluded group members who leave the organization (Bambauer-Sachse & Mangold, 2011).

From a HR perspective, efforts largely focus on recruitment and retention, and development efforts (i.e. training, mentoring, and networks). However, very little research has been conducted on the organizational dynamics of diversity resistance in the workplace, particularly from the viewpoint of those who have been recruited as part of diversity initiatives. Laura Bierema (2010) noted that the omission of diversity in HRD and OD literature is glaring. She stressed the need for academic programs to address diversity issues in their programs and noted that HRD and OD cannot leave diversity education to chance. Furthermore, she pointed out that their first challenge in HRD is to elevate the interest level in conducting diversity scholarship and teaching.

Burack and Franks point out that if leaders do not understand the pressures the group is under, they send group members the message that although they must give lip service to the goals of diversity, leaders and group members tacitly are in solidarity against these goals. Two questions posed by Burack and Franks bring the discussion home: "Why is it necessary to permit entry to these 'others'? If they belonged here with us wouldn't they be here already?" (Burack & Frank, 2004).

Donald Langevoort sets forth a convincing argument that diversity resistance may be self-serving. Langevoort maintains that diversity is something that typically has to be sold to other groups within the firm, and to overcome resistance the sales pitch has to be devised so as to minimize the threat of disempowerment. Power and control within most organizations lies with White males who have a continuing advantage and often determine the norms (practices and policies) that maintain the status quo (Langevoort, 2004).

C. Douglas Johnson interviewed Dr. Roosevelt Thomas, one of the pioneers of diversity training and education, discussed the resistance that Dr. Thomas faced in getting people to understand the difference between diversity and affirmative action. As described by Dr. Thomas, organizational leaders, funding agencies, etc., believed that "the problem was managers just had to treat people right, and if organizations had the will to treat people right, there wouldn't be a problem. So it was not that they didn't know what to do, it was that they didn't have the will to do it." Moreover, Dr. Thomas asserted that organizations must have a culture that supports diversity training and initiatives or they will face difficulty (Johnson, 2008).

Amanda Lewis, Mark Chesler, and Tyrone Forman stimulated their interests. Their findings suggest that many Whites believe that the racial/ethnic climates of organizations are fine and they are not aware of

the ways in which their behaviors directly and negatively affect Americans of color (Lewis, Chesler, & Forman, 2000). While Lewis, Chesler, and Forman examined the perceptions of students on college campuses, evidence of this view can be seen in other environments. As shown in the following letter of support and follow-up attempts, racial/ethnic climates of organizations may become anything but fine when people of any race fail to acknowledge that their behaviors affect others in the organization.

Diversity resistance, the opposition to the successful integration of diversity into the workplace, is used as a backdrop to present and analyze an actual diversity situation at a major southeastern university. The following scenario could have happened at any university at any university quite frankly, in any organization that is going through organizational change in today's workplace environment. This case illustrates how diversity resistance was handled at their university.

THE SCHOOL AND OUR BACKGROUND

The business school discussed in this paper was established in 1971 after operating as a department since 1966. In 2007, an article about the school's diversity efforts was published in Diverse: Issues in Higher Education (Diverse Issues) which outlined some of the difficulties the school was encountering in regards to its efforts to hire diverse faculty. Diverse Issues provides critical news, information and insightful commentary on issues concerning diversity in American higher education and seeks to be change agents and generate public policies that resolve inequities. At that time the state's universities were under a court order to hire Black American faculty and administrative staff in order to remove vestiges of discrimination (see https://www.diverseeducation.com/faculty-staff/article/15084789/alabamas-decree-of-difficulty).

Fast forward and today, the university touts its high racial/ethnic diversity among faculty (26% are Black or African American). Insight into Diversity magazine, the oldest and largest diversity publication and website in higher education, recognized the university as a 2020 Higher Education Excellence in Diversity Award recipient and a 2020 Diversity Champion. The 2020-2025 strategic plan of the School of Business, led by a Black dean who rose quickly through the ranks, includes diversity and inclusiveness as part one of its shared values: Everybody counts every day. We actively seek varied perspectives in our decision-making.

While it is admirable when an institution includes a diversity component in its values statement and increases the number of faculty from traditionally underrepresented groups, the authors contend that the mere presence of Black faculty is not really significant. Rather, it is the willingness of Black faculty to actively enhance the curriculum and inform the faculty/administration about workforce diversity related issues that makes their presence significant.

The first author has been at this university for more than 35 years, twenty five of those years as the only Black full-time tenure-tracked/tenured faculty in the school. The second author was the first and only Black female full-time faculty member in the business school for more than 10 years. Although she left the university after 15 years to join the faculty at a Historically Black College located in another urban city in the southeastern part of the United States, without question, both were pleased with the hiring and promotion of additional Black faculty in the school of Business, including the hiring of a Black business school dean. See Table 1 for a summary of full-time black faculty from 1976-2010. The diversity outcomes grew changed from one faculty member in 1976 to eight in 2010. Again, the second author left in 2011. Two additional tenured track faculty were hired since 2010, but both left the School. Thus, there are currently seven Black faculty members in the business school.

TABLE 1
SUMMARY OF FULL-TIME BLACK FACULTY FROM 1976-2010

#	Gender	Year Hired	Department	Tenure Status	Rank
1	M	1976	Management	Tenured	Full
2	F	1996	Management	Tenured	Associate
3	M	2000	Accounting	Left Org.	N/A
4	M	2000	Management	Tenured	Associate
5	M	2001	Management	Tenured	Associate
6	M	2003	Management	N/A	Instructor
7	F	2007	Finance	Non-Tenured	Assistant
8	F	2010	Accounting	Tenured	Full (Chair)

As management professors, workforce diversity is one of the topics that they cover in their courses. As affirmative positive hires, teaching about workforce diversity means more to them than developing diversity management courses or introducing and integrating the topic of workforce diversity into those courses. Teaching about workforce diversity means addressing diversity issues as they arise in the workplace so that the administration, faculty, and thus, the students will be better prepared to manage diversity related issues in their careers. The first author's teaching interests include: management theory and practice, human resource management, employee-employer relations, compensation management, human resource development, and research advocacy and scholarly publishing. His research interests are effective human resource strategy, employee-employer relations, critical race theory and practice, and higher education desegregation management. The second author's teaching and research interests are strategic management and entrepreneurship, corporate social responsibility and business ethics, ethnic business enterprises, organizational behavior, constraint management, diversity in organizations, employee voice, and management education.

The authors recognize that diversity encompasses more than race, but as espoused by Harvard professor and diversity expert, David A. Thomas, "Diversity brings people to where there's the most challenge and pain in an organization, and today that's more likely to be [the subject of] race than any other issue." (see Alleyne, Edmond, Spruell, & Brown (2005). Furthermore, the authors' diversity-based research and teaching interests lie mainly in the areas of race and ethnicity. Thus, they typically voiced concerns about diversity issues surrounding their areas of expertise. Not only were they outspoken on race issues within the school but they were also vocal about issues throughout the university and in the local community. In addition to their teaching and research activities, the first author served on the African American Faculty and Administrator Recruitment and Retention Committee (Title VI): for a statewide higher education desegregation case. The committee's charge was to "advise their respective administrations on the best methods for increasing and retaining black representation on their respective faculties and administrative staffs." He also served as the affirmative action officer for the school for several years in the early 2000s.

Both authors served on a mayor appointed- task force to examine racial disparities in their city. The task force was charged with determining whether contractors of color receive disparate treatment in the general contracting environment. Additionally, upon return from sabbatical in 2004, the second author interviewed the former dean of the business school regarding their diversity initiatives, particularly in regards to racial diversity. The interview was published in an online journal.

Their activities involve communicating not only the best practices in management, but also the practices and policies that the authors deemed were not in the best interest of the organization and its members. Thus, they brought diversity resistance matters to light, perhaps earning them the label of "troublemakers." While "making trouble" is not their intention, the authors believed that it was their responsibility to address both group and organizational dynamics as well as identify managerial strategies that value diversity within their organization. They share the views of scholars who allege that in the communication process, people are expected to be able to grasp the worldview of others and through discourse, develop some kind of common

language and common ground (see Kersten, 2000 for a complete argument) and that organizations are disadvantaged when employees are afraid to speak up (Edmondson & Munchus, 2007). Thus, throughout their tenure in academia, they have provided their professional and personal insights about diversity related issues to the administration and to other members of the faculty. They felt that perhaps the administration felt some apprehension about the bond that developed between them as two Black American faculty members.

STRATEGIES TO CREATE A SUPPORTIVE DIVERSITY CLIMATE

As management theorists and scholars, the authors contend that organizations that can create and implement an effective diversity and inclusion strategy are better positioned to recruit and retain a diverse workforce that leads to greater competitiveness. The following strategies are intended to help organizational leaders create a supportive diversity climate:

1. Acknowledge that resistance is a possibility. The first step in overcoming diversity resistance is for organizational leaders to acknowledge that diversity resistance could be a root cause of problems in the organization. Failure of organizational leaders to be willing to accept this reality causes additional frustrations in the workplace. A public announcement that diversity resistance may be a hindrance to the organization's diversity initiatives and other competitive strategies increases the chances that organizational members will speak up about issues they deem to be unfair or inequitable. When members speak up, careful measures should be taken to ensure that they are not labeled and treated as "troublemakers."

2. Provide dispute resolution or conflict management training in addition to diversity sensitivity training. Sensitivity training is often seen as a cure-all for diversity resistance. While sensitivity training increases awareness of differences and undesirable behaviors, it often fails to adequately address conflicts that may arise in the workplace. Dispute resolution or conflict management will not only aid in diversity management, but can be beneficial in many other management areas.

3. Do not assume that new recruits or persons under consideration of promotions share the organization's values. During the interview process, familiarize people regarding expected attitudes, and behaviors. Pay close attention to their (and their former organization's) commitment to diversity as some people often attempt to bring old values and behaviors (practices and policies) to their new organizations. As time goes by, people who do not share the organization's values and beliefs but are able to infiltrate the organization will have an adverse effect on the organization's diversity climate.

4. Introduce formal policies and programs to drive unethical and illegal behavior (e.g. rejection, exclusion, harassment (including unwanted jokes or characterizations of members of diverse groups) and/or subordination of others based upon differences) to the surface. Work with members of the diverse group(s) to identify patterns of covert, as well as overt resistance.

5. Educate leaders about laws regarding disparate treatment and disparate impact. Organizational leaders often argue that the practices and policies implemented are not intended to harm members of diverse groups. However, a concerted effort must be made to ensure that people who are in protected classes are treated fairly and equitable and that the practices and policies that are in place do not unfairly impact diverse members of the organization.

6. When diversity is a component of the marketing plan, it is essential to hold routine discussions about diversity. If diversity is included in the organization's code of ethics or values statement, and diversity goals are established, then discussions about diversity should be held as often as discussions about other goals set by the organization. Yet, discussions around diversity remain sensitive and often are not routinely held.

7. Conduct organizational surveys to allow members of the organization to express their concerns with some degree of confidentiality and anonymity. In order to be effective, employees must have regular access to surveys (which can be achieved via the Internet/Intranet); those

conducting the research must be viewed as influential, effectual audiences who will ensure that leaders will respond with survey-based interventions.

CONCLUSION

As educators, how does faculty teach students (current and future organizational leaders) to value diversity of any kind (race, gender, religion, national origin, sexual orientation, etc.)? Faculty members are challenged not only to inform students of best practices, but to also identify practices and policies that are not in the best interest of the organization and its members. As members of a diverse group, Blacks (faculty members and organizational members) have special insights into attitudes and behaviors that are potentially harmful to the organization's diversity initiatives. While they cannot determine whether the actions of those in control are truly intended to harm, the authors have argued that Black faculty and organizational members have a responsibility to communicate workforce diversity-related issues to effectual audiences within the organization and to identify managerial strategies to help create a supportive diversity climate.

Certainly, addressing the challenges and opportunities presented by diversity is an ongoing endeavor as new challenges will require new strategies. However, the seven strategies set forth in this paper serve as a starting point for any organization that needs to improve its diversity climate. Without question, the authors commend AACSB and this institution for the progress that has been made and for acknowledging that more needs to be done. Including diverse viewpoints provides the sense of belonging that members of underrepresented groups desire.

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