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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

# Advocating for social justice, equity, and inclusion in the workplace: An agenda for anti-racist learning organizations

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**Abstract**
Amidst ongoing racist violence in the United States, this article will recognize workplace-based efforts to act against racially motivated discrimination targeted at the Black community. More specifically, this article will examine anti-racist initiatives in the workplace by connecting these efforts to broader discussions of human rights, organizational social justice, and the Black Lives Matter movement. Culturally responsive leadership approaches, ally development efforts, employee resource groups, and mentorship/sponsorship programs are among the leading strategies currently used by employers to resist workplace racism; and thereby, each of these initiatives will be reviewed to illustrate how they drive organizational efforts, foster anti-racist workplace cultures, and work against antiblackness. To consider how this work can be improved, the article concludes with suggestions for how academic HRD programs can reform curriculum to prepare graduates to be drivers of organizational social justice.

Recent high-profile acts of racial injustice including the police killings of George Floyd, Breonna Tayler, and Ahmaud Arbery have led to civil unrest across the United States. The Black community and its non-Black allies stormed the streets to demand justice. They demanded justice for the victims, but they also called upon those in power to support their cause and act against racial injustice and the everlasting target against the Black community. In response, droves of *Fortune 500* companies flocked to social media to post messages of support, while others remained silent. Companies that demonstrated a heightened sense of social responsibility also shared letters from their chief executive officers that outlined their commitment to invest in anti-racism within and outside their organizations. To fulfill these commitments, we call for culturally responsive leadership that confronts antiblackness while working toward broader visions of equity, inclusion, and social justice.

According to the United Nations ([1976](#)) *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, all people have the right to experience "just and favorable conditions" in workplaces that provide safe and healthy working conditions as well as equal opportunities for advancement and pay. Unfortunately, these goals do not reflect the current reality for the Black community as many forms of injustice continue to abound in organizations (Byrd, [2018](#)), and antiblack racism in the workplace has been shown to not only forestall equal opportunities for Black people, but also to undermine the safety and health of Black workers. The stark differences in economic opportunities (Gould et al., [2018](#)) and life expectancies between white[1] and Black workers (Kochanek et al., [2013](#)) should provide a clarion call to organizational leaders to pursue solidarity with the #BlackLivesMatter (BLM) movement. By acknowledging the purpose of the BLM movement, organizations move toward recognizing the reality that racism pervades their organizations and needs to be proactively resisted (Bohonos, [2019](#)). The purpose of this article is to advance the discussion around workplace anti-racism. To do this, we will outline an agenda for learning organizations that recognizes anti-racism and racial justice as part of their organizational mission and vision. First, we will discuss how culturally responsive leadership can be considered within human resource development (HRD) contexts. Second, we will bring attention to leading practices currently utilized in organizations and recommended by researchers who seek racial justice and equity in the workplace. Finally, we will discuss implications for researchers and organizational leaders working to advance understandings of racial injustice and remove barriers to the flourishing of Black stakeholders.

## CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE LEADERSHIP

Researchers focused on K-12 education are building a body of literature around culturally responsive leadership. By encouraging leaders to learn about the communities they serve through investments of time and energy in community engagement and study of relevant literature, this approach has the potential to help administrators understand and be responsive to the locally situated needs of their students and their families (Gay, [2002](#); Johnson, [2007](#)). Given the explosion of writing on culturally responsive leadership in school settings, adult education scholars might wonder how this approach might be adapted in HRD contexts. We see at least two significant barriers that should be accounted for in attempts to adapt this approach to HRD. The first is that, unlike school administrators whose students reside in discrete geographic areas, leaders in most large organizations recruit talent from diverse geographic locals and will serve employees from across the country and around the world. Particularly when we consider international and global firms, it is difficult to imagine how leadership would be able to spend enough time deeply engaging with locally situated employee cultures to be appropriately responsive. In this context, culturally responsive leadership will likely emphasize being sensitive to broader cultural trends and national or regional levels. The second major barrier relates to ethical questions that arise related to the implications of organizational leaders following employees into their home communities as this could easily be an unwelcome intrusion into employees' private lives. This is especially worrisome in the case of Black employees, who have been shown to take care in safeguarding how their racial identities are perceived at work (Sisco, [2020](#)).

Given the tremendous plurality in Black experiences and Black cultures, leaders of large organizations who attempt to be "culturally responsive" without understanding the local and even individual experiences of their Black employees run the risk of reinscribing racism by promulgating stereotypes, essentializing the Black experience, and engaging in pandering behaviors. For this reason, we advocate for leaders to read broadly about Black

peoples and communities while remaining mindful that there is no singular "Black experience" that they can easily be responsive to. We also advocate for being responsive regarding one force that influences the formations of all Black cultures: antiblackness (Dumas, 2016). Antiblackness is a particular form of racism that is named to allow for greater specificity when discussing forms of racism experienced by Black people and communities. While antiblackness is not part of Black culture, but rather a force that acts on Black cultures, we argue that a first step in being responsive to Black employees is to work to identify and challenge the overwhelmingly racist norms that pervade most organizations.

## SOCIAL JUSTICE, ANTI-RACISM, AND THE LEARNING ORGANIZATION

Leaders need to proactively address issues of equity and inclusion in their efforts to move toward more socially just organizations. Organizational social justice incorporates "a workplace vision of equity, fairness, dignity, and respect across lines of differences" (Byrd, 2018, p. 4) which seeks to resist the marginalization of minoritized groups by pushing back against the power of majority group privileges (Byrd, 2018). Furthermore, the movement toward organizational social justice requires leaders to callout specific forms of injustice—including ableism, sexism, nativism, homophobia, and racism. The importance of proactive measures cannot be overstressed because, in a society where racism is endemic, we can expect racism to pervade virtually all organizations.

Leaders' proactive commitments to organizational anti-racism can be rooted in a learning organization approach to change facilitation. There are five key components of a learning organization (shared vision, mental models, systems thinking, personal mastery, and team learning) all of which can be leveraged in the struggle against organizational racism. Shared vision is a "force in people's hearts" (Senge, 2006, p. 192) that compels them to unified action; mental models refer to underlying or taken-for-granted assumptions; systems thinking is the effort to see individual aspects of an organization as part of an integrated whole; personal mastery refers to individualized efforts to expand one's capacity to contribute results they seek; *team learning* is about developing a groups capacity to achieve its goals.

When aspiring to organizational social justice, leaders should work for *shared vision* of organizations anti-racist efforts, which should regard the "respectful treatment of people as the primary concern of workplaces" (Byrd, 2018, p. 8) and in which organizational members are encouraged to resist unjust social, economic, educational, and political systems. Pushing against unjust systems will require a *systems approach* (Senge, 2006) to understanding the effects of racism. One which recognizes that anti-racist efforts will have limited success unless coordinated anti-racist changes are implemented across an entire organization as well as in concert with broader political and economic reforms. Moving toward such coordinated efforts will be difficult for many members of an organization because they will need to shift their *mental models* before they are able to adequately identify many of the subtler forms of racism. Shifting mental models regarding racism will include deep challenges to epistemological assumptions undergirding organizational practice, which are often steeped in concealed white supremacy (Scheurich & Young, 1997; Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008). Additionally, because attempts at anti-racist dialogue often reproduce the very racial systems they seek to challenge, shifting mental models will require organizational members to critically examine the discourse frames which they use to discuss their anti-racist efforts (Bonilla-Silva, 2017; Hill, 2008).

Organizational leaders and other change agents are also encouraged to obtain feedback from a variety of historically marginalized stakeholders to reduce the possibility

of counter-productive anti-racist efforts. Finally, team learning speaks for the need for collaborative efforts to confront antiblackness. Team learning will need to be integrated into the previously articulated four steps if any of them are to be successful. For example, when teams engage in open and facilitated dialogue about antiblackness, it can assist in the process of challenging assumptions about racism (French et al., 2021; Yeo, 2002) as well as helping to build shared visions, and guide collaborations regarding coordinated multi-pronged anti-racist efforts.

## PROMOTING AN ANTI-RACIST CULTURE IN WORK ORGANIZATIONS

As transformative and action-orientated employers, learning organizations are facilitators of change (Jones & Hendry, 1994), which make them ideal platforms to implement racial justice and equity initiatives. By adopting a learning-focused approach to anti-racism, organizations can move from passively racist practices toward proactively anti-racist stances. Allyship and ally development (Erskine & Bilimoria, 2019; Katz, 2003), cross-cultural mentoring (Hill & Grant, 2000; Hu et al., 2008), sponsorship (Erskine & Bilimoria, 2019; Thomas, 1990), and employee resource groups (ERGs; Dennissen et al., 2020; Welbourne et al., 2017) have each emerged as leading strategies to cultivate a more diverse and inclusive climate for professionals of color. Learning organizations have utilized these initiatives to reform their approach to race relations, reinforce their efforts through collaboration, and take responsibility for their progress or lack of progress to foster an anti-racist environment. Below we further discuss each of the recommended practices with attention to Black professionals.

## Allyship and ally development: Reformation

Most of the ally development literature can be found within the field of higher education under the guise of multicultural education and campus inclusion initiatives. Universities and colleges have used allyship to build support and acceptance for minority students (Vaccaro et al., 2020), especially for students within the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer community (LGBTQ; Goldstein & Davis, 2010). Regarding race, ally development is a recent phenomenon that has grown to be different from LGBTQ allyship. Most noticeably, the way LGBTQ allies and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) allies are expected to convey their support underlines how the two roles diverge. LGBTQ allies are encouraged to self-identify as individuals who recognize variations in gender expression and sexual preference and welcome challenges to heteronormative worldviews (Rose, 2020). Support has been signified by wearing a symbol, displaying LGBTQ flags, and embracing LGBTQ language to create a "gay/straight alliance" (Goldstein & Davis, 2010). White allies who aim to uplift racial minorities are more likely to demonstrate their support through organized efforts (Katz, 2003), and they are encouraged to acknowledge the plight of racial minorities and recognize the need for social justice through their actions—beyond affirmations of support (Reason et al., 2005; Sisco, 2020). Joining race-consciousness discussions, attending community events about race-related issues, and financially contributing to racial minority non-profit organizations have been loosely attributed to white anti-racist allyship as have participation in social movements and efforts to confront or disrupt racist language and systems (Bohonos, 2020; Bonilla-Silva, 2017; Hill, 2008).

Mentorship is also an example of how white individuals can offer their support to Black people. Although the importance of race within cross-cultural mentoring relations has

been a subject of debate, research has indicated that cross-race mentoring presents opportunities for cross-race interactions that might otherwise be avoided (Hu et al., 2008). In the context of the workplace, organizations have used mentorship programs as formal and informal strategies to contribute to the development and advancement of Black professionals (Brown, 2016; Hill & Grant, 2000). Cross-cultural mentorship programs that invite cross-race partnership, for instance, continue to be popular initiatives because they develop both white allies and their racial minority counterparts. White allies gain social awareness about race and racism, and BIPOC become connected to a broader network of resources and support (Hill & Grant, 2000). Additionally, sponsorship has been acknowledged as another way for whites to establish support for BIPOC, but it lacks the mutual benefit and learning offered from cross-cultural mentorship (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2004). In a study examining the support and developmental relationships between white managers and their Black protégés, Thomas (1990) explained that racial minorities gained the most from sponsorship because their white privileged, powerful, and more socially connected colleagues attempted to help people of color gain more visibility and professional opportunities, as opposed to being overshadowed by racial bias and social exclusion. Within the same study, the author also found that both sponsorship and cross-cultural mentorships were "temporally instrumental" because these relationship were often episodic and far in-between. Consequently, the inconsistency of support places allyship at risk of being more performative than transformative (Erskine & Bilimoria, 2019) since both cross-cultural mentorship and sponsorship are only available at the convenience of whites. White allies have the freedom to suspend or discontinue their support at any time. Katz (2003) explained that it has been known that white allies follow the hype of the media and only have a concern about BIPOC when social movement organizers successfully demand mainstream attention by highlighting particularly lurid instances of racial injustice. Thus, a call for more consistent allyship has been put forth since the killing of George Floyd. In corporate settings, these concerns are being addressed through the practice of workplace diversity and inclusion (D&I) training focused on unconscious bias, subtle forms of racism (e.g., microaggressions, colorblind racism, tokenism), and the impact of racism. Cross-cultural mentorship and sponsorship are also more effective when they are a part of an organization's D&I campaign, and not intended to single-handedly create a more diverse and inclusive workplace for Black professionals or other minorities.

Whether white allies are engaged in cross-cultural mentorship, elect to be a sponsor, or participate in D&I training, the goal should be to "develop an anti-racist, privilege-cognizant [W]hite consciousness" (Reason et al., 2005, p. 60). This means the service of providing good deeds for BIPOC does not qualify as anti-racism allyship. White anti-racism allyship must be accompanied by a mental shift that comprehends how whiteness is situated within racism and how whiteness can be used to challenge racial injustice. Tatum (2007) explained that the role of white anti-racism allies is "to use one's privilege to create more equitable systems; [and realize] that there are white people throughout history who have done exactly that; and that one can align oneself with that history" (p. 37). If racial justice is to be achieved in the workplace, organizational leaders and other change agents must adopt this anti-racist mentality as a guiding philosophy. This approach involves leveraging the power and privileges of whiteness to resist racial oppression while attempting to create more equitable opportunities for Black professionals.

## Employee resource groups: Reinforcement

ERGs are a way to reinforce the organization's anti-racist efforts. Like the foundations of allyship, ERGs are inspired by affinity groups found in higher education. Affinity groups

are social groups that share a common interest and/or identity. Affinity groups can be classified as a diversity intervention that creates spaces for intragroup support and bridges together different groups. Tauriac et al. (2013) also asserted that "participants can receive validation from same-race peers and might 'test out' ideas or previously unarticulated feelings about other groups before bringing them up directly to outgroup members" (p. 245). In the context of the workplace, affinity groups are facilitated through ERGs. ERGs are specialized groups for minority employees. Different racial groups, women, veterans, members of the LGBTQ community, persons with disabilities, and other protected classes have the option to join ERGs. Individuals with multiple marginalized identities usually have the choice to become affiliated with multiple groups (Dennissen et al., 2020). Welbourne et al. (2017) describe ERGs as social networks that assist underrepresented populations with resources to participate in professional development opportunities, become acquainted with different organizational functions, and connect with senior leaders in the organization.

ERGs have become popular and standard practice in top companies. By 2010, organizations that had three or more ERGS spent roughly $7000 for every 100 ERG members (Brotherton, 2011). Moreover, on account of making ERGS available to their minority employees, organizations are presumed to acknowledge the value in providing equitable opportunities that might not otherwise be available to minorities (Friedman & Holtom, 2002). Thus, many business analysts and D&I professionals endorse ERG as a needed practice (Raeburn, 2004; Tauriac et al., 2013). More specifically, Douglas (2008) claimed that ERGs operate as an inclusionary business strategy "to make certain that everyone in the organization shares the same advantages:

- A voice that is heard,
- Access to information necessary for success,
- Productive links to other co-workers and management,
- The chance to contribute, and
- The opportunity to advance professionally" (p. 11–12).

Over time, some employers have developed better tools and organizational systems to manage and serve ERG participants. The diversity among the different ERG groups also lead to the different resources and support needed from each group (Sisco & Collins, 2018). Black and/or African American ERGs, for example, have different needs than Asian inspired ERGs. Black and/or African American ERGs benefit most from companies who offer community outreach, employment pipelines, employee retention, and leadership pathways (Donnellon & Langowitz, 2009; Friedman & Holtom, 2002), while Asian and/or Pacific Asian ERGs value Pan-Asian networking and English proficiency resources for employees and Asian-American community members (Weng, 2019). Although the ERGs have similar interests, the unique history and ongoing anti-Black stigma placed on the Black community creates a higher concern for sociopolitical issues in Black and/or African American ERGs.

Consequently, companies need to realize that Black professionals are not separated from the sociopolitical needs of the Black community. In relation to this notion, Sisco (2020) argued that companies should provide space and opportunity for Black professionals to improve the conditions of the Black community within and outside of their respective organizations. Among the strategies to support the sociopolitical causes associated with Black professionals, Sisco (2020) also claimed ERGs provide a forum for Black professionals to advocate for Black representation, inclusive practices, and equitable resources. Such forums have been known to benefit employers as well, considering that ERG members inform D&I standards and call attention to existing and potential discriminatory

infractions (Douglas, 2008; Welbourne et al., 2017). However, as previously expressed, Black professionals and ERG members should not be the only advocates and monitors of D&I. Organizational leaders should take responsibility for tracking and assessing D&I efforts.

## Diversity and inclusion tracking: Responsibility

Many companies provide D&I trainings to educate their employees about anti-racism, and to establish universal standards about D&I. Companies who institute consequences for acting outside of their D&I standards have been known to have a better chance of fostering a culture of respect and dignity (Deitch et al., 2003). Even when these motions are set in place, other factors inherently disrupt D&I efforts. Mays et al. (1996) argued that the perception or mere possibility of discrimination can adversely influence the professional progression of racial minorities, especially in the case of Black men. Hence, the effectiveness of D&I training has received mixed reviews, with critics questioning the impact of mandatory training (Erskine & Bilimoria, 2019; Holladay & Quiñones, 2005). Others have recognized D&I training to include racial discourse in the workplace and supplement other D&I efforts (Brown, 2016; Katz, 2003). In addition to diversity training, many organizations internally evaluate their progress toward D&I goals, especially when they believe that such reports will enhance shareholder confidence (Brown, 2016; Douglas, 2008).

Aside from tracking demographic information, one of the ways companies attempt to monitor their D&I efforts is through inclusion assessments, which involves critical thinking and employee input. Assessments take the form of diagnostic testing and evaluations, and both quantitative and qualitative data are usually collected, along with cultural competency analyses (Trenerry & Paradies, 2012). Effective inclusion assessment should also request all employees to participate in inclusion measures for a holistic review of the organization. Inclusion assessment research has found that in the process of determining the organizations inclusionary practices, it is not unusual to discover that some employees unconsciously and unintentionally contribute to exclusion by relying on stigma and stereotypes to predict the performance and aptitude of minorities (Linnehan & Konrad, 1999). Thus, Mor-Barak and Cherin (1998) explained that assessment results provide a summary that reflects "inclusion-exclusion as a continuum of the degree to which individuals feel a part of critical organizational processes such as access to information and resources, involvement in workgroups, and ability to influence the decision-making process" (p. 48). Despite the depth and scope of pertinent information provided by inclusion assessments, they are still new and underutilized resources. More research is needed to fully appreciate and understand the significance of tracking D&I efforts through both interpretive and empirical methodologies.

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

As killings of unarmed Black people by the police and #BLM organizing continue to force people to pay attention to the racism that pervades both their society and their organizations, this article argues for using learning organization approaches to culturally responsive leadership for anti-racism. We also argue for organizations to commit to ally development, ERGs, cross-cultural mentoring, and inclusivity assessments to specifically address the needs of Black employees. As organizations grapple with the complexity of resisting racism, they will find that redressing antiblackness needs to be a central priority in larger inclusion, equity, and social justice efforts. Such anti-racist efforts should also be

coordinated with larger efforts to combat racism in the society at large, as well as to align these efforts with global visions for more just societies.

In the realm of research, much work needs to be done to better understand the influence of racism on organizations and how to effectively oppose it. Areas where research is needed include how to better understand racism's effects in different industries and occupations as well as how racism manifests at different levels of class hierarchy and intersects with different social identities. Detailed understandings of the diverse guises under which racism presents should serve as a foundation for systems-based approaches to antiracism. Research is also needed that explores how to better develop majority group members as racial justice allies as well as additional strategies for enhancing organizational opportunities for Black people and other BIPOC. To prepare practitioners to confront racial inequity, academic HRD programs should respond to recent calls for increased commitment to social justice-related curricular reforms (Alfred et al., 2020; Bohonos et al., 2019). Reforms should include department and program level efforts that would provide professional development for faculty aspiring to higher levels of racial literacy, work to ensure that race and racism are integrated throughout HRD curricula, and incentivize research and service relative to racial justice. We also call on the Academy of Human Resource Development to affirm that course content should regularly be taught from social justice, critical, and anti-racist standpoints. While addressing antiblackness in places of employment is only part of a much broader change agenda needed to move our society toward greater racial equity, it is a necessary component that should be pursued in concert with reform efforts related to policing, criminal justice, schooling, and other economic and political structures.

## ENDNOTE

[1] Throughout the paper the names of racial categories are generally capitalized, however, per the first author's preference, the term white is left in a lower case for reasons similar to those described by Gotanda (1991), "As a term describing racial domination, "white" is better left in lower case, rather than privileged with a capital letter" (p. 4).

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