Organizational Development

DEI Initiatives Are Futile Without Accountability

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Brian Flores, former Head Coach of the Miami Dolphins, recently filed a class action lawsuit against the NFL and each of its 32 franchises, citing racial discrimination. Though his experience was particularly egregious, other Black coaches have shared their stories of times they believe they were only interviewed so that teams could claim compliance with the so-called Rooney Rule, which was created to codify the practice of interviewing candidates of color for open League positions.

While the NFL seems to recognize the many structural issues at play —
Commissioner Roger Goodell said, "We will reevaluate and examine all
policies, guidelines and initiatives relating to diversity, equity and
inclusions" — I hope this "Rooney Rule Reckoning" will go far beyond
the NFL, because it is not the only organization, largely led by white
men, struggling to diversify their ranks through the flawed application
of well-intentioned diversity policies.

The Rooney Rule was created in 2003, and since then, other
organizations and industries have adopted similar guidelines (e.g., the
Mansfield Rule) to increase representation of people of color and
women. In 2020, the NFL updated and expanded the details of the rule
to require interviewing two candidates of color for every role. Consider
that a 2016 study found that if there's only one woman or person of color
in your candidate pool there's statistically no chance they will be hired.
But, having *two* women or *two* people of color in the pool yielded
dramatic improvement in the chances of getting hired: the odds of
hiring a woman were 79.14 times greater, and the odds of hiring a person
of color were 193.72 times greater.

As a diversity, equity, and inclusion practitioner, before beginning any
consulting engagement around hiring, I always ask my clients about
three things: the data they have available, the changes they'd like to see,
and their accountability plans for the stakeholders involved. For
example, it is essential to use data to understand the efficacy of your
hiring processes, and as you iterate on those processes, data will again
guide you to continue to improve them.

But, as we learned with the NFL controversy, any plans or policies are
only as good as the people responsible for carrying them out. If those
people don't understand what problem new processes or policies are

solving, they won't understand their role in bringing those plans to life. This is where having a clear plan for accountability comes into focus.

I often see organizations struggle when it comes to accountability in their DEI efforts. Without a framework for measuring and evaluating their efforts, the resolve that many leaders and organizations have shown around improving DEI in recent years will falter when challenges arise. Based on my work in this area, I've developed the following three-part framework for driving better accountability around DEI. While I use hiring as an example, you can also apply it to areas like performance management, compensation, and retention.

Step 1: Educate — Before telling people what to do, you have to tell them why.

Most companies and leaders I work with are genuinely invested in making DEI progress. They might have come to that conclusion in different ways — perhaps via the "business case," the "moral case," or something else — but they are eager to receive guidance on what they should do differently. But behavior change is hard, and in many cases, the strategies that are going to yield change will also bring a little friction.

For example, research shows that diverse groups make more innovative and accurate decisions than homogeneous groups; research *also* shows that diverse groups take longer to make those decisions, and feel less confident in their accuracy, than homogeneous groups. We should expect challenges when implementing DEI-related change, and that there are many factors that make the status quo seem tempting. What, then, is the antidote? Remembering the *why*.

People are more likely to persist in the face of change when they are intrinsically motivated. So, highlight how the changes you are

proposing are personally relevant to the leaders and to the company. Share data on how your low representation of people of color makes it hard to attract applicants from those groups. Emphasize how your homogeneous workforce raises questions of belonging for those from underrepresented groups, creating a revolving door of talent for the people you *do* hire. With every problem that you share, demonstrate how it undermines the company's DEI values.

For example, a talent leader once lamented to me that their company recently rolled out a new structured hiring process, and that they were having a difficult time getting the CEO on board. In particular, the CEO wanted their referrals to bypass the same review process that every other candidate had to go through, and the talent leader was feeling a lot of pressure to comply with the requested exception. There are many reasons why a CEO can spot a strong candidate, but that shouldn't exempt a referral from being properly vetted. No candidate should be greater than the process you've built to guard against bias and promote consistency in candidate evaluations.

In that situation, the CEO needed a clearer view of the why, not just the how. Providing such education might have made it more likely that the CEO would willingly comply with the new process, or, at the very least, made it easier for that talent leader to hold the CEO accountable for doing so.

Step 2: Listen — Invite feedback, really listen to it, and iterate.

While it can be tempting to create a plan with goals and proposals around DEI, and then present that fully-formed solution to your leaders, people are more likely to adopt changes if they help create the solutions themselves. So, instead of *telling* leaders what they should do, provide the scaffolding for a new approach, highlight the problems that exist and potential ways to overcome them, and ask for their input and

feedback. This will help you design a series of accountability strategies that allow you to ensure your new process has the intended impact.

I've seen this scenario play out quite powerfully with one of my clients. Their hiring process included having candidates do a take-home exercise — and the results of that exercise rendered a gender-diverse applicant pool to one that was almost exclusively male. The leaders decided to stop all hiring on the team in question until they could identify what was causing this disparity. Here, accountability meant taking seriously that the process was broken, and committing to a pause until they could iterate on a solution. It's a good example of the kind of immediate action leaders can take when they are educated on the problem and participate in creating solutions.

This step will also help you identify where new processes aimed at improving DEI will go off the rails. For example, if a manager loses a high performing employee and the rest of their team is edging toward burnout, swift hiring is going to be their priority. That leader may be tempted to resist a process that asks them to slow down and source a diverse pool of candidates as each role opens. Start by acknowledging this challenge, and invite them to think through other strategies, like how to build a bench of talent *before* a role opens or having more targeted recruiting strategies.

As you are crafting strategies together, take time to crowdsource accountability mechanisms as well. Consider proactive efforts — ways you can incentivize people toward the behavior you hope to see — and reactive ones you can leverage when folks go astray. This collective discussion will make accountability feel less punitive and more like commitment to a shared goal that you improve upon constantly.

Step 3: Recognize — Celebrate your wins. But nudge those who need it.

Creating these processes takes a lot of work. But sometimes the best-designed processes go unused, because change is hard. To combat this, give lots of encouragement and recognition to people who use the process well. And, give lots of encouragement to people who use the process rather poorly. Establish a regular debrief cadence where people can share insights with others. Acknowledge that none of this is easy or simple and reinforce that these changes will align your company's DEI impact with your intent.

When people resist using the new process, consider the planned accountability strategies that you developed in step two. The first couple times a person falls short, ask questions about the challenges they're facing, and why they didn't use the process. Their answers could help further refine things for everyone's benefit. And, communicate that they're not alone; lots of their colleagues are going through the same thing.

Emphasize a growth mindset, reminding them that learning often yields mistakes and failure, but that it is net positive over time. Of course, if someone refuses to change after subsequent nudges, it's time to ask deeper questions about why this person is behaving in a way that runs counter to your DEI values.

Just as we saw with the NFL's Rooney Rule, until there is meaningful reform and accountability around how individuals apply such rules, no manner of policy updates will yield change. In lieu of waiting for a crisis to emerge, be proactive about bringing stakeholders on board for any process changes you make — and don't be afraid to hold them accountable for that plan's success.

Evelyn R. Carter, PhD, is a social psychologist who has conducted cutting-edge research on how to detect and discuss racial bias. As the president of Paradigm, she leverages her research and client expertise to create and evolve Paradigm's blueprint for effective DEI. Follow her on Twitter @drevvycarter.