

# Building a Positive Organizational Culture Through Antiracism

The key is taking an intentional and active, rather than a passive, approach.

BY EMMANUEL V. DALAVAI

**A**s a result of the spate of defining moments in 2020, this is a unique time in America's and the workplace's history. Sociopolitical events have sparked outrage and heightened consciences, and more individuals have become active in social justice efforts. In response, among other priorities, many companies are now seeking to ensure they are fostering a healthy organizational culture that is conducive to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Part of that is exploring the concept of antiracism and its effect in the workplace.

As Ibram X. Kendi, author and director of the Antiracist Research Center at Boston University, explains in his TED Talk, it is insufficient to be not racist; rather, he suggests being antiracist. For us, as talent development professionals, antiracism becomes even more paramount as organizations look to us for leadership. I am familiar with that call to action because I have worked in the field of organi-

zation development and effectiveness for the past 20 years, helping leaders to promote the positive aspects of increased cultural awareness and to bridge the cultural divide among various people groups.

The TD function can take on a significant role in shaping antiracist philosophies, because it can specifically raise awareness, educate employees, and reinforce a culture that syncs with positive organizational values.

Understanding the constructs of *not racist* and *antiracist* requires defining them. Think of it as differentiating between active and passive language when writing: *Not racist* is passive language, while *antiracist* is active. Being nonracist is characterized by watching the game, whereas an antiracist watches, gets in, and acts.

When we turn passive inaction into intentional action, the residual effects on corporate culture magnify positively.



## Organizational initiatives

During the past several months, there has been a renewed interest in proactively implementing DEI initiatives at the corporate level. In August, the *New York Times* noted several companies that are making a push to realize meaningful change in their corporate practices. Adidas, for example, has launched a hiring initiative that started to fill 30 percent of its open positions at its own brand and at Reebok with black and Latinx candidates. Likewise, Facebook announced its goal to increase by 30 percent the number of black people in the leadership ranks during the next five years.

The *New York Times* further reports that other organizations, such as Estée Lauder Companies, PepsiCo, and Sephora, have committed to increasing their spending with black-owned suppliers.

Most recently, Starbucks published a letter that CEO Kevin Johnson penned to employees pinpointing how the company “will be intentional in cultivating a culture of inclusion and diversity” via mentorships; partnerships with organizations that focus on developing BIPOC (black, indigenous, and people of color) talent; and goals to achieve BIPOC representation of at least 30 percent at all corporate levels by 2025.

I have found that when companies implement a top-down and bottom-up philosophy to advance DEI initiatives, they

realize more long-term success. To drive change and help introduce new paradigms vis-à-vis racial boundaries and implicit biases, I have discovered that it requires companies to employ a multipronged approach. The best efforts, from my experience, combine elements of corporate training, transparent conversations taking place at all levels, prescriptive guides on how language and communication shape a more positive organizational culture, and the formation of employee resource groups to foster healthy dialogue and sustain meaningful change.

## Intentional individual actions

To some degree, everyone may display racist tendencies, at least if we are to believe Harvard University’s Implicit Association Test, which reveals implicit bias in most people. In his TED Talk, Kendi asserts that individuals who consider themselves non-racist could be in denial and utter the phrases “I would never do that” or “I’m not racist” but lack motivation on what they would do. Conversely, an antiracist readily admits when exhibiting racist tendencies and takes action—for example, antiracists examine whether they value immigrants from Europe differently from other immigrants and then work to initiate change. So-called nonracists often permit offensive comments to go unchecked in the breakroom or during a virtual discussion or chuckle at racial jokes while maintain-

ing that “I would never say that.” However, antiracists would respond courageously: “I won’t tolerate that kind of language or humor. Please don’t use it again.”

So typically, antiracists effectuate change through words and deeds. For instance, in the relationships between leaders and followers, an antiracist manager acknowledges team dynamics and immediately addresses intended or unintended slights of a team member of color. Similarly, an antiracist trainer intentionally uses respectful language and relevant anecdotal references in the classroom. By incorporating anecdotes that highlight antiracist practices, such a trainer empowers participants to connect with their values and to tell their own stories, which can create increasingly cathartic experiences.

We can champion antiracism by delivering training on values that encourage inclusivity and greater empathy. That takes the form of training leaders on what a strong culture represents and how to support that culture by having feedback loops that promote open and genuine conversations across all levels of the organization.

## How language shapes training and workforce planning

The right language can bring about needed change. Language and communication function best when they welcome as many individuals into the conversation



as possible. That is precisely the antithesis of microaggressive language, which serves to exclude and marginalize.

Language and how we frame it during our training initiatives can radically influence learning outcomes. Using relevant, unbiased examples and language that are inclusive ensures an optimal learning experience for all participants. For example, the overuse of social and identity labels such as mental illness, disability, and socioeconomic status can come across as bias. Moreover, being mindful to invite all learners into the conversation and using emotional intelligence to check for participants' nonverbal and verbal cues can also contribute to inclusive training sessions. In checking for these cues, we can better gauge whether learners are apprehending the content, examples, and language so that we can make modifications as necessary to optimize the learning experience.

Regarding the talent life cycle, companies should exercise caution in workforce planning and succession efforts. When assessing performance and potential, phrases like "He has great potential for a [fill in with ethnicity]" and negative comments related to ageism, adultism, and historically underrepresented groups are not conducive to antiracist workplaces. As Ben Hecht explains in his *Harvard Business Review* article "Moving Beyond Diversity Toward Racial Equity," the goal should not be refitting some people to match the organization but rather retrofitting the organization to match all its team members.

### Getting proximate to biases in talent development

Eradicating microaggressions and racism requires a proximity to our biases. Bryan Stevenson, a social justice activist and author of *Just Mercy*, likes the phrase "getting proximate" to confront the long-standing demons of indifference and racist practices. Getting proximate means taking the time to engage, understand, and lean into prob-

lematic areas, practices, and policies. This suggests that we be willing to call out our own blind spots in all areas, including hiring and training talent.

We, as well as company leaders, can do so by following these antiracism guidelines, which I've used with success:

- Acknowledge that a problem could exist (self-awareness, the first quadrant of emotional intelligence).
- Listen to employees by holding focus groups and lunch & learns.
- Encourage employees to speak up when they experience racism. Use the phrase "See something/hear something/feel something, say something" as a guide.
- Implement policies that are staunchly antiracist, as Kendi recommends. The company should be bold about proclaiming its opposition to racism.
- Continually reflect on current data and make course corrections.

### Antiracism training

Although you may think that there is no way that your company's training and development practices reflect bias, confirm it by assessing your last few training classes. In role plays, did you consistently portray the manager as one nationality and the employees as another? Are the examples you included applicable and palatable to a broad representation of the socioeconomic strata? Did your language invite all participants to have a seat at the table, or did it cater to specific segments?

How can we ensure that our training programs are antiracist? First, numerous research papers recommend that companies go beyond diversity training that they have implemented as a standardized response to racial ills. The typical diversity training I have participated in has raised awareness that race makes corporate leaders uncomfortable. However, antiracist training focuses on what to do about it. The goal of antiracist training should

be to foster environments where all employees feel comfortable in speaking out without fear of retribution.

A related activity is antiracist storytelling, which can be a powerful tool for employees to inspire others to take a stand. By telling real stories, workers can give added voice to the values of respect and candor. You can frame it by creating a storytelling resource group that capitalizes on the work of Michele Norris, former host of National Public Radio's *All Things Considered*. Her Race Card Project asks participants to describe and post their feelings (on a notecard) about the uncomfortable subject of racism in six words. Told in simple terms, the stories can strengthen the fibers of organizational culture by stressing authentic communication.

Spotting microaggressive language is another component of authentic communication. Therefore, we should include the concept of microaggressions in our training. Remember the adage "See something/hear something/feel something, say something."

To ensure employees retain the content—and just like we typically do for other training topics—revisit the information covered in the training regularly in newsletters, leadership town halls, and other communication channels. In addition, hold leaders accountable for key training takeaways and for discussing them in ongoing one-on-ones with their staff. Finally, acknowledge that not everyone has the same level of passion for antiracism, so concentrate on illuminating individuals who can champion future antiracist programs.

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## Racism: There's No Gray Area

*A closer look at outcomes can help identify organizational policies and practices rooted in racism.*

The Association for Talent Development recently hosted author and historian Ibram X. Kendi for a conversation with CTDO Next members centered on ideas from his bestselling book *How to Be an Antiracist*. The talent development executives looked to Kendi for ideas on what role they can play in creating a more equitable organizational culture. During the discussion, Kendi challenged TD leaders who want to weed out racism from the workplace to dig deep and look for racist cues beneath the surface.

### **Examine the outcomes of organizational policies.**

Kendi contests the thought of race-neutral policies and practices. As a litmus test for assessing whether a particular organizational policy or practice is racist, the question leaders must ask is: Does this process or policy produce more equity or not? "If it's leading to equity, it's antiracist. If it's leading to inequity, then it's racist," Kendi asserted. There's no gray area, he explained; the outcome is all that matters.

**Use training to point out problems in policies, not people.** While broaching the topic of racism can be hard to do, Kendi said organizations cannot avoid it. Anti-racism workshops as well as training programs designed to heighten awareness of implicit bias are well and good, he explained, but he added that training people to spot racist policies and practices also can be beneficial. "Where training can be effective, especially when it's coming from leadership, is: People can be trained to understand the policies and practices of their units that are causing racial problems as opposed to being trained only in what's wrong with them as individuals," Kendi stated. "That's when you're able to really train a cadre of people who have the ability to carry an organization forward."

**Evaluate organizational culture using data.** Most companies use data to fuel improvements in every area of their business, and building a more equitable workplace should be no exception. As a best practice, Kendi advised that organizations continuously collect data on job offers, promotions, resignations, terminations, and the like. If after analyzing the data, inequities surface, it's time to revisit and revise the policies and practices that led to those outcomes.

"One of my central arguments in my work is that ... *racist* is not an essential term; it's a descriptive term," Kendi shared. That is true not only of individuals but of organizations as well. Kendi believes that by putting a focus on outcomes, talent development professionals can further help foster an antiracist organizational culture.

—Derrick Thompson, Writer/Editor, ATD



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