



Belonging, Support, and Trust: Racial Equity at Work

Real progress toward racial equity depends not only on hiring Black employees, but also on making sure they stay and thrive.

By **Julie Coffman** and **Maria Gordian**

Authors

Julie Coffman is Bain's Chief Diversity Officer and leads Bain's Global Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Practice.

Maria Gordian is a member of Bain's Board of Directors and leads Bain's Global Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Council.

At a Glance

- ▶ Hiring Black employees is critical in advancing racial equity, but making sure they stay and thrive ultimately matters more.
- ▶ To thrive, all employees need to feel a sense of belonging, support, and trust.
- ▶ Understanding these needs can help executives build better organizations in which all employees can thrive.

The United States is a nation of persistent structural inequity. A vast, sobering wealth gap between white and Black Americans reflects this inequity and helps reinforce it. A racial reckoning in 2020 prompted many companies, including ours, to acknowledge that existing corporate efforts simply have not done enough to address racial inequity in the workplace—and to ask what they can do to truly make a difference.

We've been reflecting on that at Bain; we are on our own journey, and we have seen already that it is long, difficult, and humbling. We don't have all the answers. No company does. We have, however, learned a lot. Below, we share our insights about what we believe companies can do to make real progress on racial diversity, equity, and inclusion inside their own four walls. And if we as companies do a better job of attracting, developing, and promoting more Black talent, we can lead meaningful progress in narrowing the wealth gap in our society.

As employers, companies have historically focused their diversity efforts on hiring and job creation. Increasing the number of Black employees matters a great deal. But retention—that is, making sure Black employees stay and thrive—ultimately matters more. The CEOs we speak with consistently cite retention as the biggest hurdle to their diversity, equity, and inclusion goals.

Increasing hiring of racially diverse employees requires focus, but it involves tasks that CEOs intuitively understand—namely, setting goals, allocating resources, developing new sources of supply, and measuring results. Setting up those employees for success demands a different set of leadership muscles. People stay at companies in which they feel they belong. They thrive at jobs and in workplaces that give them the support they need. They are eager to build careers at companies they trust.

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We all need belonging, support, and trust to thrive at work. When we feel fully included and valued, it gives us confidence to speak up and participate. We need all manner of support (tools, training, coaching, feedback) to learn and grow in our roles. When we have faith that our efforts will be fairly recognized and rewarded, it strengthens our aspiration for greater roles and responsibilities. But without a strong sense of belonging, support, and trust, it is much harder to do our best work—and much more difficult for companies to nurture and retain top talent.

Belonging, support, trust

Many companies fail to create strong levels of belonging, support, and trust for their Black employees. And many executives struggle to understand how to make real progress because these are complex issues. They are personal. They depend on how employees feel about their day-to-day experiences and interactions with their peers and supervisors.

Yet we have found that the lens of belonging, support, and trust helped us understand the experiences of all employees more deeply, and it shed light on ways to build a better organization. Black employees continue to face some of the greatest disparities when it comes to racial equity inside and outside company walls. Focusing on their sense of belonging, support, and trust not only can help companies begin to address those wrongs but also to create benefits for all employees.

We believe that the companies that will lead in attracting and advancing Black talent will be the ones in which all employees can be their authentic selves at the workplace, where they know that others are committed to helping them succeed, and where they believe that the people and the systems that affect their advancement are fair and equitable.

This is not how many Black employees feel today. They see few company leaders who look like them. They often must work harder than their white peers to fit in, expending considerable energy to construct a workplace identity. As Black employees navigate the unwritten rules of the workplace, they are less likely to benefit from the guidance of sponsors and mentors, who often gravitate toward employees of their own race. And it is naïve for leaders to assume that employees who regularly experience systemic racism outside the company will automatically trust the hiring, assessment, and promotion systems inside the company. Companies cannot presume trust; they must earn it.

The business benefits of diversity have been well documented: more perspectives, greater innovation, richer thinking—the list goes on. But if employees aren't bringing their whole selves to work, some or all of the power of diversity is squandered, and both employee and employer are worse off for it. Employees who don't feel as though they belong are less likely to speak up in meetings or in informal interactions, which also makes them less likely to be seen as rising leaders. Without support, employees are less likely to develop the critical relationships that open doors to promotion. And without trust, employees may hear feedback intended to be growth oriented and constructive as confirmation that they can't succeed.

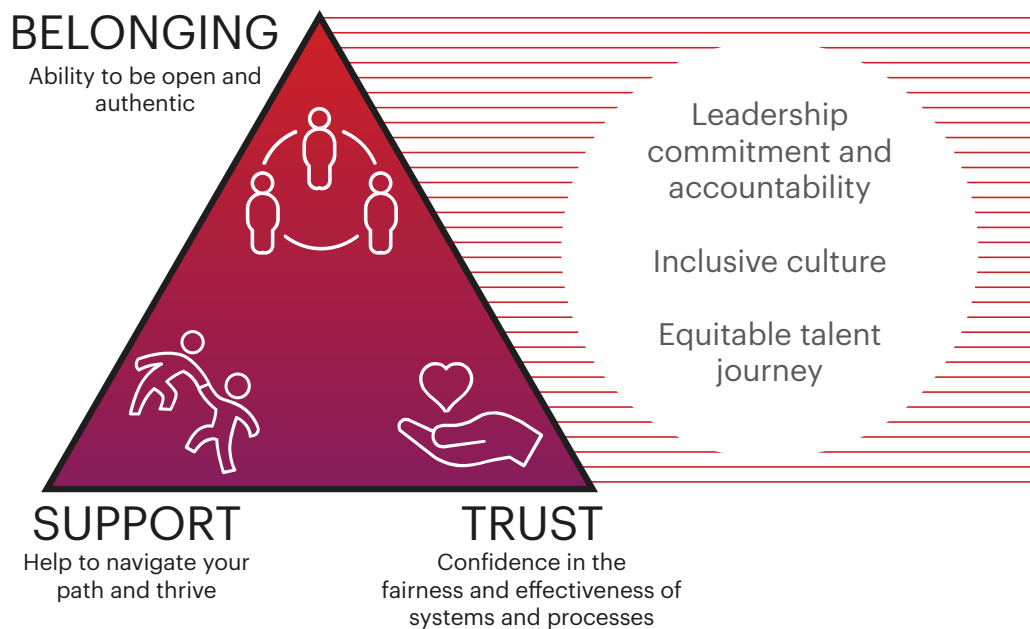
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Belonging, support, and trust are interconnected and mutually reinforcing—improving or undermining one affects the others. Together and individually, they have profound consequences for retaining Black talent. This is particularly true of trust—no employee will bet their career on a company if they feel the game is rigged.

This, then, is where leaders can start: By taking a hard, honest look at your own company (your leaders, culture, and talent management practices) through the eyes of Black employees who seek what all employees want: to belong, to be supported, and to trust that they will be justly rewarded for good work (see Figure 1). The tough questions leaders need to ask themselves:

- Do our company’s leaders consistently demonstrate their commitment and accountability to diversity by our words, our actions, and the diversity of our own team?
- Do our Black employees’ daily experiences reflect a culture of inclusion and belonging?
- Is the talent journey from hiring to promotion fair, transparent, and trustworthy?

Figure 1: The journey toward racial equity starts with a hard look at whether your company offers the environment all employees need to thrive



Source: Bain & Company

Leadership commitment and accountability

Most business leaders know diversity, equity, and inclusion won't happen without strong leadership commitment to a compelling ambition and a shared sense of where to focus. Yet the natural expertise and experience of most corporate leaders offer them little guidance on where to begin. One common stumbling block is their own lack of diversity, which makes it difficult to recognize the ways in which their company's structures, processes, or environment fail to provide belonging, support, and trust in equal measure to all employees.

It takes courage to look in the mirror and all around your organization. But it is only through listening to employees' stories, developing a shared awareness of their lived experiences, and examining the data around representation, retention, promotion, and employee engagement that leadership teams can begin to develop common points of reference and understanding. From here, they can agree upon a transparent set of goals and metrics by which to measure progress. And this process of listening, self-education, and goal setting is an important initial step in demonstrating the commitment that will earn employee trust.

The next steps—namely, extending that commitment beyond ambition and goal setting and translating it into inclusive behavior that senior leaders model for the rest of the organization—are harder. In inclusive organizations, people of different backgrounds can share ideas, opinions, and perspectives freely, and they can be confident that their voices are heard and valued.

Senior leaders play a key role in demonstrating the actions and behavior needed to create that type of atmosphere, as well as the expectation that all leaders in the organization support it. They also must ensure that training and development cascades to leaders at all levels of the company so that direct line supervisors are equipped with the skills and capabilities they need to create supportive and inclusive environments on their teams and within their departments. Ultimately, a “sponsorship spine” that promotes inclusive leadership behavior should extend from the senior leadership team all the way down to the front lines of the organization.

No business would expect training and goal setting to make this happen on their own. Companies also need ways to hold all leaders accountable. Inclusive behavior should be part of the feedback and performance management processes, and it should be tied to specific incentives and rewards to accelerate learning and adoption throughout the company.

To get a sense of what this can look like on the ground, consider Microsoft, which first publicly released an inclusion index in 2019 that captures sentiment data from a quarterly survey that asks employees about simple behavior, such as whether the manager regularly solicits feedback. From the general manager level on up, a portion of senior leadership compensation is contingent upon progress on diversity and inclusion within their organizations. Sodexo uses a diversity index scorecard that links bonus compensation to quantitative targets (such as number of diverse hires), qualitative measures (such as the mentorship of women and employees of color), and time spent in inclusion trainings.

Many corporations committed to diversifying their senior management teams in recent months. Increased representation at the most senior levels of an organization has a direct impact on belonging, support, and trust. Seeing Black people in leadership positions goes a long way toward enhancing Black employees' sense of belonging—and while outside hires are important, the effect is all the more powerful if those leaders rose to their positions from within the company. Such visible examples of upward mobility build a much deeper sense of trust in the organization.

Inclusive culture

Nothing affects an employee's sense of belonging, support, and trust more than their everyday experiences. An inclusive culture that proactively encourages people to be their authentic selves is essential to successfully retaining and promoting Black employees.

People often shy away from the topic of race in the workplace. Yet just as leaders must begin their journey by listening to Black employees, helping employees themselves be more aware of their Black colleagues' lived experiences goes a long way toward improving belonging and trust.

And creating regular opportunities to have constructive and supportive dialogues about lines of difference reinforces a more inclusive and supportive culture. But in order to do that well, companies need to train leaders on the best ways to have those conversations. Research shows that regular, facilitated conversations about racism and other difficult topics can improve employees' sense of belonging and trust.

Of course, such formal discussions make up only a fraction of employee interactions. The moments of truth that really define a company's culture take place thousands of times a day in meetings, hallway conversations, emails, and manager-to-employee and employee-to-employee interactions. Many are not even work related: Social interactions and lunchtime conversations can reinforce belonging (or exclusion). The more that employees are aware of each other's experiences and differences, the less likely they are to inadvertently make others feel as though they don't fit in.

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In an inclusive culture, managers (and ultimately every employee) understand that each interaction can erode or enhance belonging, support, and trust. Managers who are mindful of this dynamic reflect honestly on their interactions: “Did I make that employee feel they belonged? Was I supportive? Will they trust me more or less now?”

It’s valuable for employees to feel that they can safely speak their minds at work and be heard as individuals. It’s even more powerful when they know that their ideas and actions contributed to the success of their teams, or their entire company. And this can be contagious: When Black employees see other Black employees thrive, their sense of belonging, support, and trust grows. The reverse is true as well.

Even as companies work to build inclusive cultures throughout their organizations, companies also can help boost the sense of belonging and support for Black employees by investing in and supporting employee resource groups (ERGs). Also called affinity groups, these communities connect underrepresented employees with others who share similar backgrounds such as race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation.

Having allies among the broader employee population promotes a greater sense of belonging for groups of underrepresented employees.

Though focused on professional development and retention for employees with shared backgrounds, ERGs also can help bridge the gap between employees of different backgrounds through ally memberships. For example, Dow Chemical encourages all employees to affiliate with ERGs, either as members or allies, and tracks the number of its employees that do so. Having allies among the broader employee population promotes a greater sense of belonging for groups of underrepresented employees.

Finally, truly inclusive cultures celebrate diversity. Just as employees notice whether their leaders individually model diversity and inclusiveness, or whether their Black colleagues are thriving, they also pay attention to who gets awards and which accomplishments the company celebrates. Showcasing inclusive leadership, diversity, and successes among Black employees goes a long way toward reinforcing a strong sense of belonging, support, and trust.

Equitable talent journey

An employee’s talent journey starts even before they get an offer from a company, as does the opportunity to build a deeper sense of belonging, support, and trust. First impressions matter. Hiring managers and supervisors who overinvest in supporting hires lay a foundation of trust at a time when Black employees are sizing up their new employer and experiencing frequent moments of truth.

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We all know the feeling of starting a new job, learning the ropes, and becoming part of a new team. The more employees feel comfortable with being their authentic selves, the sooner they feel they fit in, the better they'll perform. An employee's onboarding, introduction to their team and supervisor, and training and development are all early opportunities to build trust, and they are just as important as opportunities that arise throughout their advancement, promotion, and later stages of their career.

In addition to making sure new hires have a strong start and receive the individual training and support they need, companies also need to provide coaching, development, and assessment processes that are fair and equitable. Sponsorship and mentorship, so critical to the long-term success of all employees, may be less available to Black employees because similarity bias makes sponsors and mentors inclined to offer their guidance and support to people who resemble them.

Studies have found that many supervisors who wish to avoid seeming racist fail to give direct and constructive verbal feedback regularly to employees of color, which provides those employees with fewer opportunities to adjust. This results in unpleasant surprises in formal written reviews that undermine trust. This is why it is critical for leaders at every level to be aware of the possibility for bias and to scrutinize new and existing processes to mitigate their potential for bias.

A company's talent and performance management systems are where the rubber meets the road for diversity, equity, and inclusion; they are also where metrics can point to tangible results. Leaders should take a hard look at the outcomes in the current talent management process to identify gaps, eliminate bias and subjectivity, and ensure that they are delivering fair and equitable outcomes. The leadership team should report promotion rates, leadership diversity, compensation distribution, and other measures as part of its commitment to its diversity ambition—an important basic step in earning the trust of Black employees.

Similar to an increasing number of companies, Walmart publishes an annual diversity and inclusion report that provides diversity statistics for its total US workforce along with a detailed breakdown of promotions for people of color and women across four levels and types of employees. It ties a portion of executive compensation to diversity, equity, and inclusion outcomes.

Transparency is critical here. Standards for hiring, rating, assigning, and promoting employees need to be very clear to all employees. Companies must earn trust not only by reporting talent management outcomes but also by relentlessly demonstrating that processes are fair and equitable.

Retention as a foundation

Racial diversity, equity, and inclusion is a journey, not a destination. The goal is sustained progress, reaching for a bar that is always rising.

This isn't an easy journey for the companies that commit to it. One need look no further for evidence than the C-suites across corporate America that still lack diversity. But in our experience, the companies

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that are advancing down the path with the most clarity and confidence have some practical actions and experiences in common:

- Their leaders seek to understand their Black employees' lived experiences through the lens of belonging, support, and trust.
- A level of awareness, dialogue, and fluency around diversity, equity, and inclusion exists across the entire organization, and leaders at all levels regularly seek to increase it.
- Senior leaders develop and model the inclusive behavior that is expected of supervisors at every level of the organization.
- Regular feedback on inclusivity, and accountability for it, help to accelerate learning and progress.
- Leaders at all levels regularly scrutinize the outcomes of their talent processes—recruiting, hiring, performance management, and advancement—to ensure that they are equitable.

As you examine your own company, traits such as these are good indicators of whether you are building a diverse, equitable, and inclusive environment—and where you have room to do more. Wherever you are on your journey, you'll find that a focus on belonging, support, and trust is the key to making continuing progress on attracting, retaining, and advancing Black talent. There is no better place to start—and likely no more effective way to tackle the wealth gap—than by creating an environment where all employees thrive.

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