

Intersectionality, Racism, and Sexism in the Workplace

Written Report to Stakeholders: McAllen ISD Human Resources

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Prof 610: Intercultural Communication for Professionals

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Intersectionality, racism, and sexism in the workplace is a topic that, while gaining more acceptance as a part of the workplace vernacular, can still be misunderstood depending on a variety of factors, such as workplace culture. This can lead to varying opinions or understanding of intersectionality.

For context, Kimberlé Crenshaw developed intersectionality theory in part out of the legal case of *DeGraffenreid v General Motors*. The plaintiffs were five Black women who sued their former employer General Motors in 1976 for discriminating against Black women following their collective layoff (Helena, 2020). As part of Crenshaw's work, it is important to understand that intersectionality is not just confined to thinking about people's marginalized identities, but that "structural intersectionality" is concerned with the gendered, sexual, racial, and economic systems of oppression in our society (Helena, 2020). Another definition summarizes intersectionality as the idea that people have more than one identity and those identities are inherently combined (Studenroth, 2021).

White fragility in the workplace can represent a group of stakeholders who do not see themselves as racist or needing to take part in intersectionality conversations or overall culture. Common responses such as, "I am white and I do not see myself in racial tones or I don't see color," really translates to refusing to acknowledge the reality of others (DiAngelo, 2020). In the workplace, when people of color for example experience or hear this kind of communication from their peers, it can directly affect how they present themselves. Women of color may face some of the same issues, but the stereotypes they battle are different. For African-American women, it's often that of the

angry black woman. For Latinas, it can be that they are perceived as too emotional or too wedded to their families (Tugend, 2018). This results in more people of color in the workplace “toning down” their own true selves. Being on guard manifests itself in different ways, often as repressing perceived traits that play into the stereotype of being frightening or intimidating or just “too much.” Black men for example, talked about making sure they arrived at meetings early so they could be seated when others arrived to appear less threatening. (Tugend, 2018).

Another stakeholder includes those in leadership roles at organizations. In order for there to be a healthy culture that understands and communicates with understanding about intersectionality, racism, and sexism, leaders at the organization have a duty to model the way. If leaders are saying things like, “focusing on race is that divides us, this is embracing the white narrative. Changing the narrative to how have I been shaped by racism is how those in leadership roles can create an environment that fosters the best understanding and conversations (DiAngelo, 2020).

The ongoing challenges of addressing intersectionality, racism, and sexism in the workplace will continue as long as racism, white fragility, bias, and stereotypes are tolerated as part of workplace culture. In order to create a workplace where all employees feel equal, included, and understood, it is important to understand what barriers exist that perpetuate this type of environment.

When a work culture tolerates keeping quiet or looking the other way when racist actions take place, any stakeholders involved will have ongoing issues to correct and improve. From the start of the hiring process, employees should have it engrained that

they are entering a work environment that is not only a zero-tolerance culture, but one that encourages employees to speak up and be a part of creating safe environments. Racism at work runs rampant, and in order to be allies—not bystanders—white co-workers need to consider anti-racist actions part of their job description (McPhillips, 2020). It is also important to have mechanisms in place that would safeguard against any potential retaliation. For example, providing a secure hotline gives employees the ability to report or share anonymously, which can allow employers to solve problems quickly and with minimal disruption (Nagele-Piazza, 2021). This type of mechanism combined with promoting a culture of compliance and nonretaliation prevents retaliation. Company policies should actively encourage employees to come forward, and HR professionals and supervisors should be trained to promote these policies to employees each time there is a complaint or investigation (Nagele-Piazza, 2021).

Organizations can also have anti-racist policies that exist to protect white employees rather than any employees who are part of minority groups. Sonyia Richardson, PhD, LCSW, a clinical assistant professor of social work at the University of North Carolina Charlotte was referenced in the article, *How To Make Anti-Racist Change in Your Company—Whether You're Entry-Level or an Executive* as follows: "It is easy for companies to publish diversity statements acknowledging a commitment to diversity, but it's harder for them to actually demonstrate their commitment to diversity in their actions. This allows companies to mask themselves in equality "efforts," while continuing to underemploy and undervalue BIPOC employees" (McPhillips, 2020).

Dr. Richardson also explained that part of white fragility is the inability to talk about race. "I would suggest that the discomfort or fragility that some people have with discussing race in the workplace reinforces racism," says Dr. Richardson. "This discomfort and inability to have these real conversations only perpetuates racism and reinforces the quietness of employees of color" (McPhillips, 2020).

Organizational leaders, HR professionals and D&I advocates are encouraged to work together to create an inclusive environment where people feel safe to speak up and share their concerns. Depending on the organization, there are a variety of ways to communicate anti-racist policies to employees. Regardless if the learning is delivered by an expert outside the organization to employees or if anti-racist policies are woven into regular professional development sessions, it is important that the communication is provided in a safe and open environment. Research by the NeuroLeadership Institute (NLI) in New York found that when team members feel safe discussing racism openly and exploring whether unconscious racial biases are negatively impacting their decisions, the conversations are likely to have a more lasting and sustainable impact (Hirsch, 2021).

In a professional workplace, if the culture and everyday standards are set to those of whiteness, it makes it very difficult for anyone who does not fit in that category to be or feel excluded. One of the most obvious ways we see this play out in workplaces is tone policing. Who is allowed to get angry, who can express excitement or frustration, and what are "acceptable" forms of those emotions? What is a "professional" way to dress or speak (Davis, 2021)? This can further exacerbate intersectionality, racism, and

sexism in the workplace when there is a lack of black, indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) representation in leadership positions within organizations. BIPOC employees are statistically less likely to get promoted, and Black workers who are in positions of power at work are often alone, representation-wise, at the top (McPhillips, 2020).

Women are also more exposed to situations that involve anxiety and stereotyping. Although anxiety and stereotyping are not unique to women, we have singled it out as a primary cause of women's greater workplace stress for a simple reason: the workplace is a minefield of negative stereotypes for women. This minefield exists because success in business and the professions — being perceived as a leader, effective negotiator, strong advocate, and keen evaluator — involves performing tasks associated with positive male stereotypes and negative female ones (Kramer & Harris, 2016).

In addition, biased reaction can arise from responses to biased or unfair treatment. The problem isn't just that people experience bias. It's that their experiences are often undiscussable. Victims don't want to call others bigots or be accused of "playing the diversity card" — these options can be career limiting. Instead, they keep their concerns to themselves (Grenny et al., 2017).

A horrible truth that exists in the workplace is harassment, which heightens for employees depending on their gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. Research from the UK has shown that LGBTQI+ people's experience of sexual harassment and assault at work varied significantly depending on their ethnicity. More than half of lesbian, bisexual and trans Black and minority ethnic women (54%) reported unwanted touching

compared to around one third of white women (31%). Black women were found to be much more likely to be subjected to sexual harassment in the workplace than their white peers, in a US study looking at data from 1997 to 2016 (Begalini, 2020). The authors from this study wrote, “The shift from sexual harassment of white women to African-American women indicates that harassers are conscious of power relationships, and choose to target more vulnerable women in their workplaces.”

The loss of valuable employees is also a red flag for any organization that is turning a blind eye to intersectionality, racism, and sexism in the workplace. People of color who experienced microaggressions in the workplace were more likely to quit: more than a third (35%) of Black professionals intended to quit within two years compared with 27% of white professionals, with rates slightly higher for Black women (36%) than Black men (33%). This could be due to the “emotional tax” Black women bear at work, where the inequalities they face lead to an environment in which they are always “on guard to protect against bias, discrimination and unfair treatment”, according to nonprofit Catalyst (Begalini, 2020).

# Memo

**To:** Marcos Hinojosa, Director of Human Resources - MISD

**From:** Marta Elena Pena, Consultant - Better Together Group

**Date:** April 10, 2022

**Subject:** Proposed Solutions and Communication Strategy: Intersectionality, Racism, and Sexism in the Workplace

After careful review of the challenges shared at McAllen ISD regarding intersectionality, racism, and sexism in the workplace, the Better Together Group has developed proposed solutions for you and your team to review. It is commendable that as a leader at your school district, you are ready to address areas of growth in the culture, education, and mindset of employees.

## **Short Term Solutions:**

True diversity can only be achieved if the organization's leadership is diverse. Black people account for only 3.2% of senior leadership roles at large corporations and hold just 0.8% of Fortune 500 positions; all are men. Similarly, Latinos hold fewer than 2% of Fortune 500 CEO positions; most are men. If we want to see true racial equity, then we must promote people of color to leadership positions (Caballero, 2020). As it stands, we need to do more to create equitable opportunities. According to McKinsey's Women in the Workplace Report, both men of color and women of color are less likely to be promoted than their white counterparts (Caballero, 2020). We can apply that approach to racial equity.

The first step is simply capturing data on who is hired, who is promoted and who leaves. The second step is to make that information publicly accessible. The data, of



course, should be anonymised – but we can nonetheless capture gender identity, race and ethnicity. Simply collecting that data can inform your institution and showcase any trends – positive or negative – in hiring, retention and promotion (Caballero, 2020). HR must remain committed to exploring various learning opportunities to keep leadership and employees engaged in learning. Organizing an inclusion council can help address underrepresented employee groups and advance diversity internally through hiring, developing, promoting and retaining diverse employees (Kurter, 2021).

In addition, it is recommended that the McAllen ISD HR Department incorporate an audit of their current recruitment process to see where bottlenecks and barriers exist when it comes to attracting diverse talent. This includes rewording job postings and being mindful of language that promotes your organization's commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion, evaluating the McAllen ISD website and social media platforms to see if pictures, videos and language show diversity efforts, use blind resumes where information such as names, date of birth, schools, etc. are removed, and identify sources where diverse candidates can be found.

### **Long Term Solutions**

Luckily, we already have a fantastic tool for fighting racism and sexism – it's just not a tool that a newly "intersectional" liberal establishment is willing to wield. Unions. Beyond just giving everyone more money and job security, collective bargaining agreements won by labor unions radically reduce the wage gap between men and women, as well as those between white and non-white workers.

Female union members earn \$224 a week more than non-union women workers. They still, however, get paid 12% less than their male counterparts. That's an

intolerable divide, but one that compares well to the 18.4% less than non-union women earn. The gains are even more substantial for black and Latina women. Latina union members take home 36% more than Latina non-union members. For black women union members, it's 23% more than non-union members.

If creating a union goes beyond your school district board policies, another long-term solution is to evaluate each department to understand how work is being assigned and distributed. The goal here is to assess if the most celebrated or high-level projects are consistently being assigned to the same individuals and if the more clerical or behind the scenes work is being assigned to females and minority groups. The McAllen ISD HR Department can then invest into helping minority employees gain those needed skills by providing specific training opportunities that will support them being selected for projects they are interested in pursuing (Williams & Multhaup, 2021). Also, junior employees can shadow senior workers, and if HR has additional professional development funds, those can be used to help a broader range of people develop the skills (Williams & Multhaup, 2021).

### **Communications Strategy**

The recommended communications strategy for McAllen ISD to consider includes short term communication that results in long term engagement. As the director of human resources, Mr. Hinojosa should meet with the superintendent to share a drafted statement that defines the district's policy on racism and sexism. Mr. Hinojosa's buy in is important as the superintendent will also determine her trust in the process based on the quality and context of the information provided during this meeting. Once the drafted statement is finalized, the superintendent can then

present it to the MISD Board for vote and approval as the district's official statement and policy on racism and sexism. These two leadership stakeholder groups are key to establishing the foundation of communication that will then be cascaded to the next group of stakeholders - district departments and staff members. At the 2022-2023 Beginning of Year Assembly that kicks off Beginning of Year Professional Development Week, the superintendent will address all district staff to officially share the new statement and outline the policy. On day one of the Beginning of Year Professional Development Week, department leads will receive the new racism and sexism training that is aligned with the new policy. On day two, they will cascade and train their department teams. Follow-up and long term communication will continue during department operating mechanisms, that include monthly strategy meetings and quarterly step backs.

The Better Together Group is confident that our proposed solutions and communications strategy will springboard your school district forward with an understanding of diversity, equity, and inclusion in a safe environment for all employees.

## Resources:

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