

Vaulting the Color Bar: How Sponsorship Levers Multicultural Professionals into Leadership

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CTI's flagship project is the Task Force for Talent Innovation (formerly the Hidden Brain Drain Task Force)—a private-sector task force focused on helping organizations leverage their talent across the divides of gender, generation, geography and culture. The 75 global corporations and organizations that constitute the Task Force—representing 4 million employees and operating in 190 countries around the world—are united by an understanding that the full utilization of the talent pool is at the heart of competitive advantage and economic success.



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An era of vibrant diversity is rewriting our culture, schools, workplaces and history. But more than a decade into the twenty-first century, talent of color are not breaking into the top executive ranks in numbers proportionate to their achievements and demographic mass. To move past lingering bias and subtle exclusion, people of color need the powerful advocacy of sponsorship. This robust relationship capital drives engagement and retention, fostering workplaces of inclusion, authenticity and innovation. Sponsorship levers talent of color and syncs progressive organizations with a rapidly diversifying world.

Our data quantifies the under-utilized wealth of multicultural talent, shows how sponsorship can help multicultural employees achieve their full potential, and explores the complications of this relationship:

- Multicultural employees are highly ambitious. Nearly 35 percent of African-Americans, nearly half of Asians and 42 percent of Hispanics are “willing to do whatever it takes to get to the top” compared with 31 percent of Caucasians. Moreover, people of color are more eager to be promoted to the next level and more likely to aspire to hold a top job in their profession than Caucasians.
- Despite high levels of ambition and aspiration however, people of color continue to be under-sponsored; only 8 percent of people of color—9 percent of African-Americans, 8 percent of Asians and 5 percent of Hispanics—have a sponsor, compared to 13 percent of Caucasians.
- Among people of color, sponsorship is particularly crucial in invigorating ambition and driving engagement. Fifty-three percent of African-Americans with a sponsor are satisfied with their rate of advancement, compared with 35 percent of those without such advocacy and 55 percent of Asians with a sponsor are content with their rate of advancement, compared with just 30 percent of Asians without such backing. Sponsorship is also a key retention tool; people of color with sponsors are less likely than those without sponsors to quit within a year.
- People of color too often feel that they have to hide their true selves, a discomfort that breeds two-way distrust and distance. More than 35 percent of African-Americans and Hispanics and 45 percent of Asians, for instance, say they “need to compromise their authenticity” to conform to their company’s standards of demeanor or style. An alarming fifth of Hispanics, a third of African-Americans and 29 percent of Asians believe that a “person of color would never get a top position at my company.”
- Adding to the sense of distrust and exclusion—the feeling that “people just don’t see you as a leader”—are incidents of outright bias and discrimination that are taboo to openly discuss. Overall, nearly 40 percent of African-Americans, 13 percent of Asians and 16 percent of Hispanics have experienced discrimination in the workplace owing to their ethnicity, compared to about 5 percent of Caucasian men and women.
- The desire by people of color to “pay it forward” is robust; at the senior level, an impressive 26 percent of African-Americans, and a fifth each of Asians and Hispanics feel obligated to sponsor employees of their same gender or ethnicity—compared with 7 percent of Caucasians. However, all too often, they are hesitating. Sponsors of color—especially at the top—worry that they do not have the armor or ammunition to pull protégés of color up the ranks. Just 18 percent of Asians, a quarter of Hispanics and more than 20 percent of African-Americans currently are sponsoring someone at their company, compared with 27 percent of Caucasians.
- Multicultural protégés are also hesitant; while multicultural employees are more likely than Caucasians to see benefits in having a multicultural sponsor, they are also more likely than Caucasians to think that there are disadvantages to having a sponsor of color. Despite the need for sponsorship, people of color nevertheless worry—most even more than sponsors of color do—about the taint of favoritism on their careers if they enter into a minority-minority sponsor relationship.