

Key Findings

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Being Black in Corporate America

An Intersectional
Exploration

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BEING BLACK IN CORPORATE AMERICA

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PART 1

FINDINGS

Why this study?

The US has not fully reckoned with its legacy of racism, and conversations about race are fraught. Despite the fact that hate crimes are on the rise, half of White Americans say, “There is too much attention paid to race and racial issues in our country these days.”¹

The subject of race is even more of a “third rail” at work—preventing the frank exploration it merits, and allowing systems of privilege to remain in place. Representation of Black professionals in leadership still lags far behind college graduation rates.

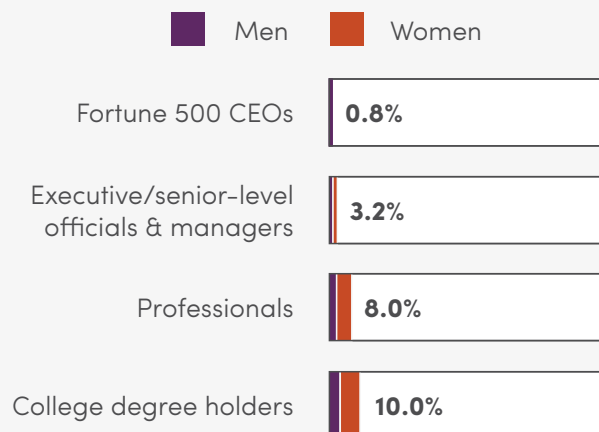
In human resources (HR) and diversity and inclusion (D&I) strategy, Black professionals are frequently conflated with all people of color,² and approaches that have worked for other marginalized groups—notably White women—are often redeployed for Black professionals, despite the different challenges these groups face.

Using data to reveal the systems of prejudice that many experience, we share what it is like to be Black at work—and explore intersectional differences. Then, we explore how employers can build more equitable, inclusive cultures for Black professionals.

“Black people lost ground when ‘of color’ became the popular thing to say.”

Michael C. Bush, CEO,
Great Place to Work

Representation of Black adults in the US³



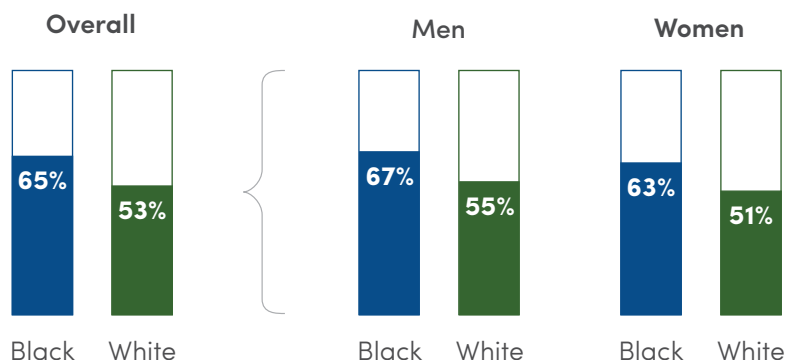
Black professionals are more likely than White professionals to be ambitious...

Black professionals aren't stopping short of the C-Suite from lack of desire. We find that Black professionals are more likely than their White counterparts to be ambitious in their careers and to aspire to a top job.

"It's embarrassing because there are thousands of [Black] people who are just as qualified or more qualified than I am who deserve the opportunity, but haven't been given the opportunity."

Kenneth Chenault, Former Chairman and CEO, American Express⁴

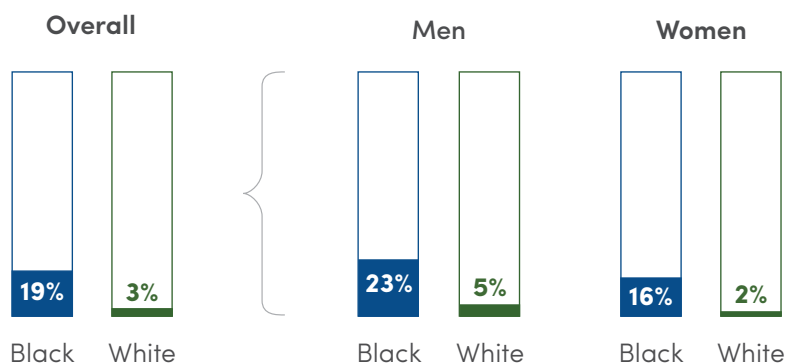
Professionals who are very ambitious in their careers



...yet nearly one in five feel someone of their race/ethnicity would never achieve a top job at their companies

Given how few Black leaders make it to the C-Suite, it's unsurprising that nearly one in five Black professionals feel that someone of their race/ethnicity would never achieve a top position at their companies.

Professionals who feel someone of their race/ethnicity would never achieve a top position at their companies



"There are not many senior leaders that look like me. So how am I going to get to that level, how is there a path for me?"

Black Millennial man

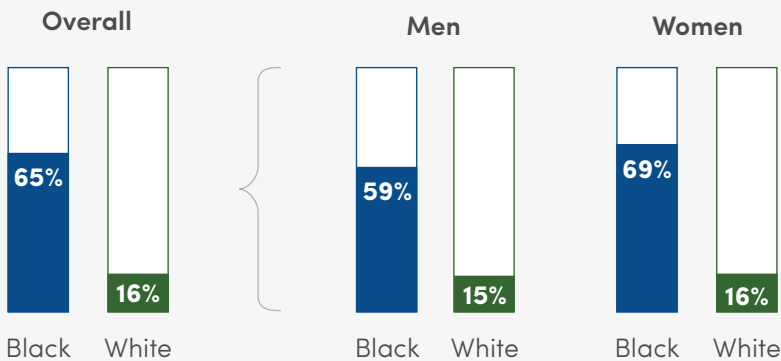
Black professionals see barriers to advancement that are largely invisible to White professionals

While nearly two-thirds of Black professionals agree that they have to work harder than their colleagues to advance in their careers, very few White professionals see it that way. Most White professionals just aren't educated about, or aware of, this reality.

“I was raised by a single mother, and she would always say, ‘Don’t be late, don’t bring your problems to work, dress a certain way. Because we’re Black, you’ve got to work harder than the others.’”

Black woman

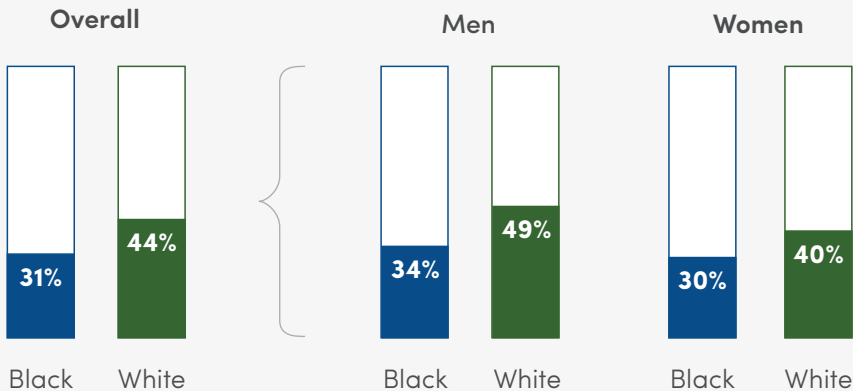
Professionals who feel Black employees have to work harder to advance



Few have access to senior leaders

When we asked full-time employees if they have access to senior leaders at work, nearly half of White employees told us they do. For Black employees, finding a line to the top proves more elusive. No wonder, then, that Black professionals are frustrated with advancement—they don't have the same opportunities to forge relationships with key decision makers.

Professionals who have access to senior leaders at work*



“If I were to say to my supervisor, ‘I don’t know what I want to do, but I want to change my job,’ that’s like saying you don’t have it together. But I have White counterparts who say that all the time, and people move mountains to create positions for them.”

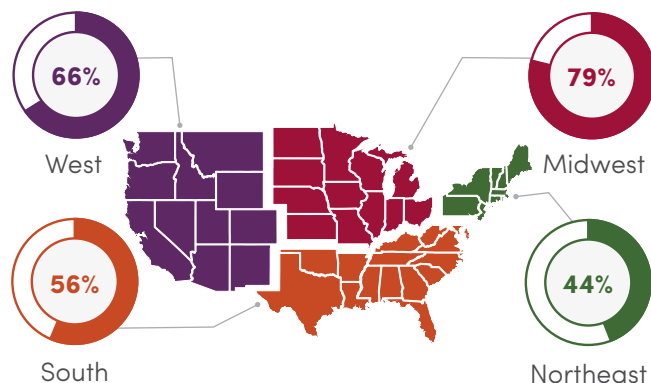
*This question was only asked of full-time employees

Black Gen X woman in management

They are more likely than any other group to encounter racial prejudice at work...

The majority of Black professionals have experienced racial prejudice at work. Unsurprisingly, this cohort is nearly four times as likely to encounter prejudice as White professionals are (58% vs. 15%)—but we also find a marked difference when we compare Black to Latinx (41%) and Asian (38%) professionals. In our sample, Black professionals working in the West and Midwest are even more likely, which could be due to lower Black population levels in those regions.⁵ Without as much exposure to Black people, colleagues have fewer opportunities to correct for stereotypes they've picked up.

Black professionals who have experienced racial prejudice at work, by US region



...and experience certain microaggressions at higher rates than all other professionals

Workplace prejudice often shows up in subtle ways, through microaggressions: brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to people of color because they belong to a racial minority group.⁶ We asked our survey takers if they had encountered any in a long list of scenarios, informed by the seminal work of Derald Wing Sue, PhD, and found Black professionals experience 14 of these microaggressions at significantly higher rates than all other racial groups we surveyed.

“If you walked over and poked someone on the shoulder, it would be mildly annoying. If you walked over and poked them on the shoulder in the same spot every day for thirty years, you would poke them on the shoulder one more time and they would go nuts.”

Black female executive

MICROINSULTS

Colleagues have touched my hair without my permission
I have been told I’m “not like others” of my race/ethnicity
I have repeatedly been told that I’m “articulate”
Others have regularly taken credit for my ideas in meetings
I have been excluded from meetings relevant to my job
Others have mischaracterized me as “angry”
I have been excluded or passed over for growth opportunities
My manager has met one on one with others on my team, but not with me

MICROINVALIDATIONS

Colleagues have asserted that they are “color blind” (e.g. “I don’t see race”)
I have to explain what it’s like to live as a person of my race/ethnicity
I have been mistaken for someone else of the same racial background
Colleagues have told me they have friends of my race/ethnicity
Colleagues have asserted they’re not racist

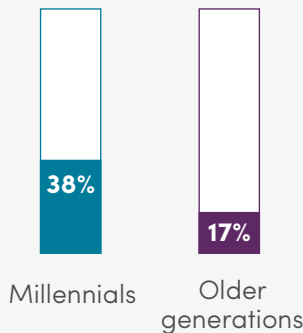
MICROASSAULTS

Colleagues have used racially insensitive language around me

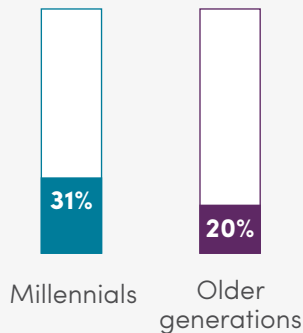
Black Millennials are frustrated

The attitudes of Black Millennials show a significant shift from prior generations. In our interviews and focus groups with Boomers and Gen Xers, we heard stories of barriers similar to those Millennials face, but we also heard a measure of resignation—the attitude that, “This is how things are, and I just have to navigate them.” Not so with Millennials, who may finally be the generation to say, *enough*.

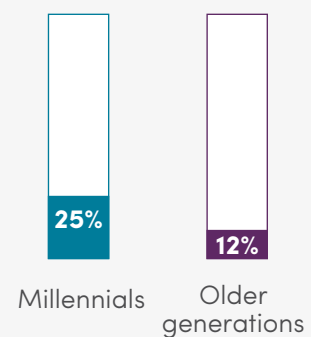
Black professionals who are planning to leave their jobs to start their own ventures*



Black professionals who spend a great deal of energy to be very authentic at work**



Black professionals who are expected to be a representative for their entire race/ethnicity on their primary work teams†



*This question was only asked of those who are not already business owners

**This analysis is only of those who are very authentic at work

†This question was only asked of full-time employees

Intersectional differences arise within all the identities explored in the full report

In our [full report](#), we explore other identities that intertwine with race. Our intersectional findings—from Africans’ entrepreneurial drive to LGBTQ professionals’ strong connections to senior leaders—stress the need for employers to understand the many nuanced stories within the Black experience.

First to attend college

Gender

Generation

HBCU attendance

Heritage

Job level

Region

Sexual orientation

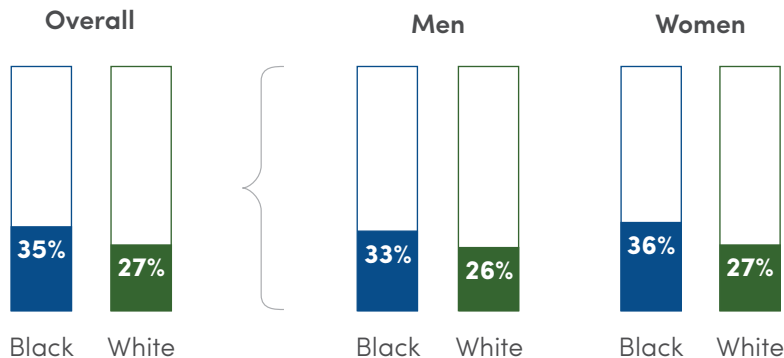
“There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives.”

Audre Lorde, feminist LGBTQ writer and civil rights activist⁷

Over one in three Black employees intend to leave

The prejudice and microaggressions carry consequences. In addition to low representation and slow advancement, we also find a bigger risk of attrition among Black professionals: more than a third of them intend to leave their companies within two years. Black employees are 30% more likely to intend to leave than White employees are.

Professionals who intend to leave their current companies within two years



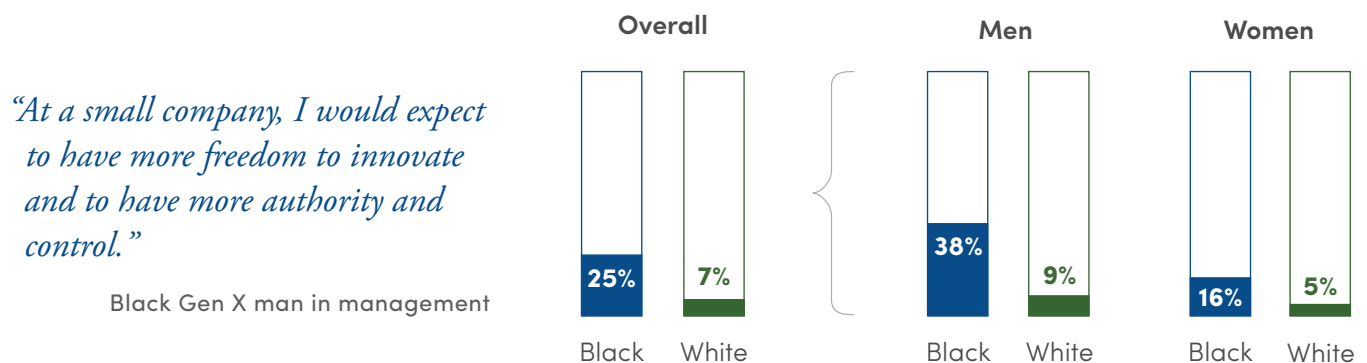
"I think about leaving my current company every day nonstop."

Black LGBTQ woman

Black men are more likely to be interested in their own ventures

Many Black professionals are thinking about leaving corporate jobs to become entrepreneurs. Among those who do not currently own businesses, Black employees are 3.6 times as likely as their White colleagues to be planning to start their own ventures. Entrepreneurship offers a tempting opportunity to unlock authenticity, flex skills, and gain autonomy over one's work.

Professionals who are planning to leave their jobs to start their own ventures*



"At a small company, I would expect to have more freedom to innovate and to have more authority and control."

Black Gen X man in management

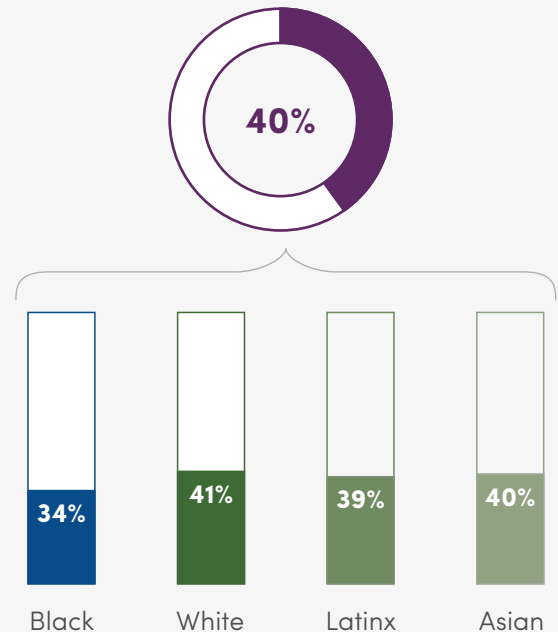
*This question was only asked of those who are not currently business owners

Less than half of *all* professionals think their companies have effective D&I efforts

Regardless of their race or ethnicity, few feel their employers' D&I efforts produce satisfactory outcomes. Black employees are even less likely to have faith in D&I. In focus groups and interviews, we heard exhaustion and cynicism. Black professionals told us that they are often asked to explain and solve workplace issues of racial inequity.

Yet, as we highlighted earlier, White professionals rarely think Black professionals have a tougher climb. It's easy to see why Black professionals might feel they've been handed an impossible task: to identify solutions that will deliver the workplace equity they deserve, in an environment of White colleagues who don't even recognize that there is a problem in the first place.

Professionals who say their company has effective D&I efforts*

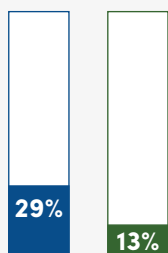


*This question was only asked of full-time employees

White women are not seen as advocating for others

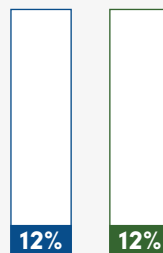
Black full-time professionals find another flaw in D&I's design: they are far more likely than White full-time professionals to see White women as the primary beneficiaries of D&I efforts. At CTI, we've heard many times from D&I leaders that their company must "solve for women's challenges first" because there are more established solutions there, and it is easier to gain C-suite buy-in. Yet there is consensus across race and gender that White women do not pay those gains forward.

Professionals who believe White women are the primary beneficiaries of D&I efforts at their companies*



Black White

Professionals who believe White women use their power to advocate for other underrepresented groups at their companies*



Black White

"The primary beneficiaries of affirmative action have been Euro-American women."

Kimberlé Crenshaw, Professor of Law, Columbia Law School⁸

*These questions were only asked of full-time employees

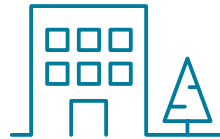
PART 2

SOLUTIONS

Small companies deliver belonging, trust, and respect

Black professionals find that large employers offer good benefits, higher—and more stable—salaries, opportunities to travel, and perks. The advantages of being at a small company are more abstract, but of immense value: most notably, a sense of belonging, trust, and respect. Large organizations that can replicate these unmet needs while still delivering on traditional promises of corporate employment may have a unique edge in retaining Black talent.

Top five advantages for Black professionals **at small companies** over large ones*



- 1 A sense of belonging
- 2 Ability to implement your ideas
- 3 Trust with colleagues
- 4 Respect for your contributions
- 5 Direct access to clients

Top five advantages for Black professionals **at large companies** over small ones*



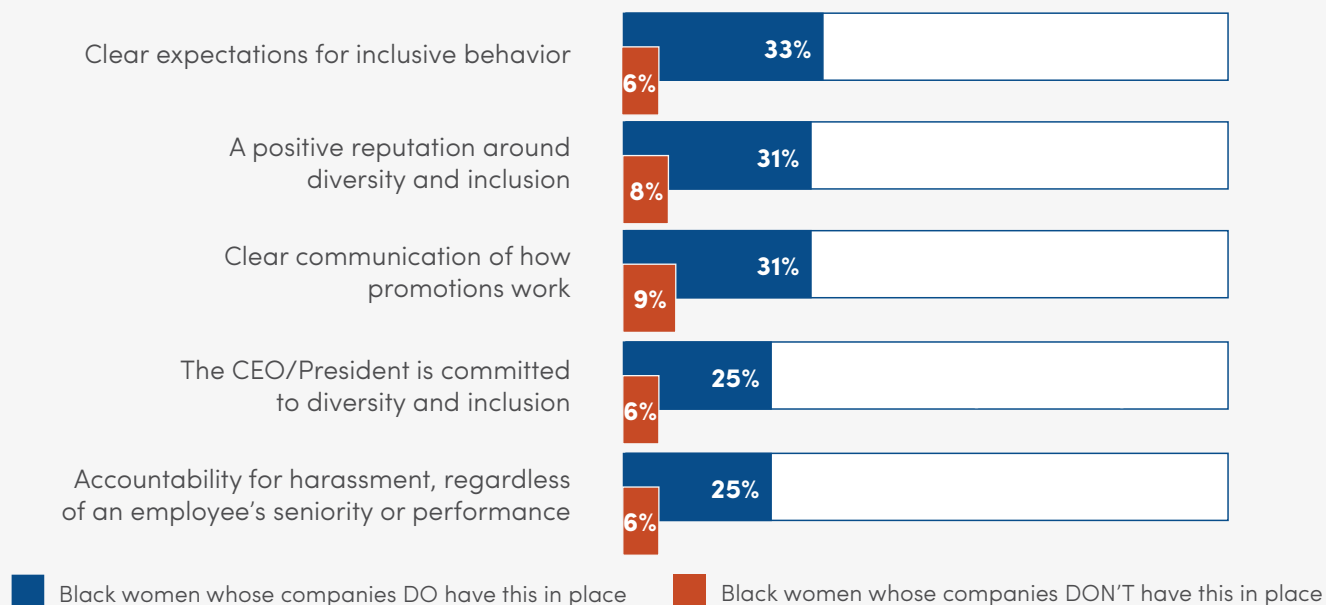
- 1 Good benefits
- 2 High income
- 3 Opportunities to travel
- 4 Stable income
- 5 Amenities (e.g., dry-cleaning)

*These questions were only asked of those who have worked at both large and small companies. Small companies have fewer than 100 employees, and large companies have 100 or more employees.

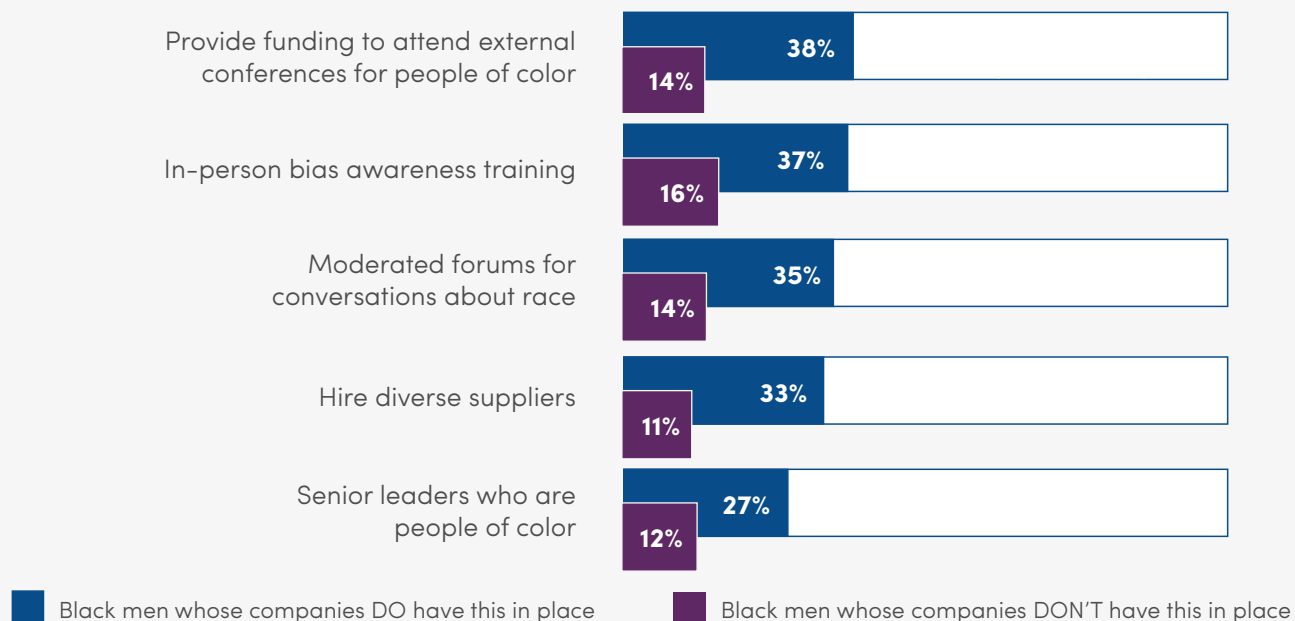
Unique sets of D&I staples improve outcomes for Black men and Black women

Of a long list of interventions that companies are using to engage and retain Black professionals, these solutions produce the largest increases in the likelihood that Black women and men are satisfied with their advancement, and intend to stay at their companies. Even the most impactful of existing efforts, however, leave most Black employees unsatisfied or intending to leave.

Black women who are satisfied with their advancement and intend to stay at their companies



Black men who are satisfied with their advancement and intend to stay at their companies



Transformative solutions will be required to generate meaningful change



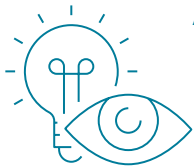
AUDIT



Understanding the current state for Black employees at your company—through interviews, focus groups, surveys, etc.—will allow all leaders with a stake in the D&I conversation to get an accurate picture of their workforce's attitudes about systemic racism, privilege, and Black identity. When CTI has performed such audits for clients, we often discover big gaps in trust and belonging that top leaders hadn't realized existed. Seeing those gaps allowed them to understand the need for change and champion awakening and action for others.

What can an audit provide?

- Reveal mismatches in perceptions of racial equality
- Identify populations most open to education
- Underscore where the “myth of the meritocracy” is most alive
- Gather honest answers to burning questions or concerns
- Spotlight champions



AWAKEN



Awaken first through introspection:

Reflect

Consider the culture you grew up in, get in touch with your own experiences of “othering,” assess your own privilege, check your mindset and motivations, and commit to speaking up.

Absorb

Learn through a variety of available media; organizations can foster learning through book clubs, film screenings, panels, fireside chats, talks from experts, etc. (see [full report](#) for a resource guide).

Then awaken through conversation:

Scale the conversation slowly: Start with conversations about difference at home with family and friends. Work up to leading dialogue with colleagues and direct reports, and evolve to becoming an influencer in the organization.

Set the ground rules: Operating agreements must be in place for these conversations. Some examples include: Get comfortable being uncomfortable; Don't interrupt; Use “I” statements.

Go in depth: Host virtual, anonymous, moderated conversations with CTI's *Insights In-Depth*® tool to surface tougher conversations about race at your company or on your team.

Generate awareness and empathy: Practice acknowledging the validity of others' experiences and recognizing how you may be able to identify with certain feelings others have, even if you can't relate to their experiences.



ACT

At this stage, it is about collaboratively achieving outcomes—co-creating solutions with the influence and insight of White, Latinx, Asian, and Black voices. Start with the findings from a culture audit, and leverage the awakening you have achieved in the organization to build solutions and commitments specific to your environment. Forums for safe creative thinking spaces include innovation labs (run by organizations like Imaginal Labs), a retreat with key stakeholders, or a hackathon.

Core components of co-creation

- Organizational readiness after foundational education
- Fair representation of identities and roles from across the organization
- Mutual respect and acknowledgment of difference
- Divergent thinking preparedness and a “both/and” mindset
- Equality and a level playing field for all voices to be heard

Methodology

The research consists of: a survey; in-person focus groups and Insights In-Depth® sessions (a proprietary web-based tool used to conduct voice-facilitated virtual focus groups) with over 150 participants; a qualitative questionnaire with responses from nearly 200 participants; and one-on-one interviews with more than 40 people.

The national survey was conducted online and over the phone in June 2019 among 3,736 respondents (1,398 men, 2,317 women, and 21 who identify as something else; 520 identify as Black, 1,783 as White, 549 as Hispanic, 674 as Asian, 135 as two or more races, and 75 as another race or ethnicity) between the ages of 21 and 65 currently employed full time or self-employed in white-collar professions, with at least a bachelor's degree. Data were weighted to be representative of the US population on key demographics (age, sex, education, race/ethnicity, and census division). The base used for statistical testing was the effective base.

This survey was conducted by NORC at the University of Chicago under the auspices of the Center for Talent Innovation (CTI), a non-profit research organization. NORC was responsible for the data collection, while CTI conducted the analysis. In the charts, percentages may not always add up to 100 because of computer rounding or the acceptance of multiple responses from respondents.

Throughout this research, "Latinx" refers to those who identify as being of Latino or Hispanic descent.

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ENDNOTES

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