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Silence on Societal Racial Tensions Carries Costs for Businesses, According to Study

NEW YORK, June 8, 2017 – When employees of color feel they cannot talk about race relations at work, the business suffers, according to a new report published today by the Center for Talent Innovation (CTI). Race discrimination outside of the workplace affects the majority of minority employees: seventy-eight percent of black employees, 52 percent of Asian employees and 50 percent of Hispanic employees say they have experienced discrimination/bias outside of work and/or are fearful of it for themselves or their families, compared to 28 percent of white employees. Yet, while employees carry this pain to work, they cannot unburden themselves: more than two out of three are currently uncomfortable discussing race relations, and 29 percent feel it is never acceptable at their company to speak about experiences of race-based bias. *Easing Racial Tensions at Work* measures not only the cost of this silence, but also offers a trove of tactical ways to break it—and quantifies the benefits of doing so.

The study, based on a nationwide survey of 3,570 white-collar professionals (374 blacks, 2,258 whites, 393 Asians, and 395 Hispanics), reveals how silence undermines engagement and elevates quit rates among minority employees. Employees who say it is never acceptable to discuss race relations at work are more likely than those who say it is to regularly feel isolated and/or alienated: thirty-five percent of black employees, 28 percent of white employees, 20 percent of Asian employees and 17 percent of Hispanic employees. As the group most impacted by racial discrimination, black professionals are nearly three times as likely to have one foot out the door when they say it is never acceptable to discuss their experiences of racial discrimination, at work.

“For organizations committed to the retention and advancement of all professionals, silence comes at a particularly hefty cost,” says Tai Wingfield, senior vice president of communications at CTI. “There are business and brand imperatives to speaking up and out.”

Conversely, companies that address societal racial tensions at work gain business and brand benefits. Employees who currently feel comfortable discussing race relations at work are more likely than those who are not to feel that their ideas are heard and recognized (70 percent as compared to 47 percent) and feel free to express their views and opinions (76 percent as compared to 56 percent). Additionally, 69 percent of professionals who are aware of companies that have responded to societal incidents of racial discrimination say that the response made them view those companies more positively.

In revealing which circumstances employees would feel comfortable discussing race relations, the study highlights the need for leaders and managers to intervene. More than one quarter of employees would feel comfortable talking about race relations at work, for example, if a manager or team leader initiated a one-on-one discussion. Black employees are 2.6 times as likely as white employees to say that an employee resource group gathering would make them feel comfortable talking about race.

“Employees are more inclined to have this conversation if they see their leaders model it,” says Melinda Marshall, executive vice president and senior editor at CTI. “These conversations take courage, and courage is what we look to our leaders to show in dire times. Employers have an opportunity to create candid and honest conversations on race that will benefit not only their workforce and brand, but also nudge all of us as a society to a place of greater understanding.”

The report details initiatives from organizations that are creating the circumstances for conversations that ease racial tensions. Examples show companies how to enable one-on-one dialogue, empower small group discussions, facilitate a company town hall, or host a discussion within employee resource groups. Also included are examples of communication from organizations that have taken a public stand on race relations.

For more information on *Easing Racial Tensions at Work*, please visit www.talentinnovation.org

Research Sponsors:

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About the Research:

The research consists of a survey, Insights In-Depth® sessions (a proprietary web-based tool used to conduct voice-facilitated virtual focus groups) involving 97 people from our Task Force organizations, and one-on-one interviews with 44 men and women in the US.

The national survey was conducted online or over the phone in October and November 2016 among 3,570 respondents (374 black, 2258 white, 393 Asian, and 395 Latino*) between the ages of 21 and 65 currently employed full-time in white collar occupations, 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.

The 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.

About the Center for Talent Innovation:

The Center for Talent Innovation (CTI) is an NYC-based think tank that focuses on global talent strategies and the retention and acceleration of well-qualified labor across the divides of demographic difference including gender, generation, geography, sexual orientation, and culture. CTI’s research partners now number more than 85 multinational corporations and organizations.

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