Companies are speaking out against racism, but here's what it really looks like to lead an anti-racist organization

Black Lives Matter supporters carry placards as they march from Newport Civic Centre to Newport University on June 11, 2020 in Newport, Wales United Kingdom.

Huw Fairclough | Getty Images

As the world protests the killings of Black Americans, systemic racism and police violence, companies large and small are coming out with their own statements against racism and are pledging donations to civil rights groups.

Some organizations, meanwhile, are taking it a step further and are committing to being anti-racist as an employer, and for good reason. Research has shown that the way a company responds to diversity-related events that receive widespread media coverage can either help employees feel psychologically safe or contribute to feelings of racial discrimination and mistrust of authority within the organization.

CNBC Make It spoke with experts and leaders about what it means to be an anti-racist employer and what it actually looks like in practice.

What it means to be an anti-racist employer

While many organizations have promoted diversity and inclusion over the years, the idea of being explicitly anti-racist may be a newer concept to some.

"To be anti-racist is to acknowledge the permanence of racism through organizations, industries and communities, and to recognize that racism is a system of disproportionate opportunity and penalties based on skin color," says Laura Morgan Roberts, a University of Virginia professor, author and speaker.

"This isn't always obvious," she adds. "It can manifest in policies, procedures, unspoken norms and routines that push people into different paths of opportunity, where some individuals have greater access and others have less, due to race."

An anti-racist organization will acknowledge systemic racism within the workplace, from individual workers to C-suite leaders, as well as the ways wealth inequality in society may impact their bottom line through their consumer base. Leaders then take this critical assessment to examine where in the work experience — from hiring to performance recognition to promotions — they can actively make existing systems of oppression more equitable by opening up paths of opportunity to workers who previously didn't have access to them.

Owning up to systemic racism in the workplace

Company leaders and workers may be reticent to talk about racial inequality in the workplace because they fear saying the wrong thing. But these conversations are critical and can't be ignored, experts say. Leaders should start by critically acknowledging how they sustain inequity in their own workplace.

"Just come out the gate and own it," Roberts says. "This is not the time to try and couch it in vagaries and flowery language. People are going to pull up your data and look at the number of representation in senior leadership, and they're going to call you out on your commitment to stand with Black workers and with Black people. If not, it comes across as generous charity, but it won't transform or restructure society in any way."

It's also crucial that leaders avoid being defensive about experiences that challenge their world view of racism and inequity. Robin DiAngelo's research on white fragility highlights this phenomenon.

Mandy Price, co-founder of the company review platform Kanarys, says leaders are beginning to view it as a sign of strength, not weakness, to admit that there are things they can work on in diversity, equity and inclusion at their organization. "It proves you're committed to creating that equitable work environment," she says.

What anti-racism at work looks like

Roberts says the strategies to dismantle inequity in the workplace already exist and points to recent examples, including Reddit co-founder Alexis Ohanian's resignation from the company's board to make way for a Black candidate, as ways anti-racist principles can actually be carried out.

"We approach this as though we're operating from a blank slate and we have no idea how to remedy social inequality," Roberts says. "We know what we have to do. We just have to be more targeted and focused and say racial diversity is an imperative to us for a moral reason. We cannot substitute diversity of thought for racial and cultural diversity in our organizations — certainly not for our leaders and board members."

Five years ago, Fractured Atlas, an organization that supports artists, changed its company values statement and committed to being anti-racist and anti-oppressive in everything they do. The executive leadership team at the time consisted of all white men, and through a series of workshops and discussions, they realized their ideas of building a great place to work catered specifically to white male workers like them.

"Some great places to work are still racist," says Tim Cynova, the company's chief operating officer.

A group of 14 employees and outside consultants helped the organization examine every aspect of the work experience, from the way they wrote job descriptions, to the candidate pools they hired from, and even to their travel and expense policy.

"Assuming people have the money to front a plane ticket on behalf of their organization — that's oppressive," Cynova explains.

They analyzed who was making decisions about policies and procedures; how that power and information was shared; who was missing from the conversation; and how decisions were impacting workers to varying degrees.

Vaneeta Sandhu is a leadership trainer with a focus on diversity and inclusion at LifeLabs Learning, a leadership training company. She says companies can break out five areas to assess if they're working in an anti-racist and anti-oppressive manner: recruiting and hiring; benefits and work conditions; assessments and promotions; meetings and social connection; and learning and growth.

"We got some things right and had to back up and do some things over," Cynova says. "We realized early on it's a journey, one where we're going to make mistakes along the way, but it's the right journey if we truly want to have a great place to work."

Today, Fractured Atlas employees are encouraged to join race-based caucuses to connect around identity. Cross-racial group meetings happen regularly to directly address how certain company guidelines, actions or decisions may impact members disproportionately.

White and non-Black managers lead conversation and education on how to be a better ally. And anti-racism and anti-oppression values are upheld through a four-person non-hierarchical leadership team so executive decision-making can be distributed more evenly.

Price adds it's also essential that the person or people in charge of leading equity efforts in the workplace report directly to the CEO rather than a human resources executive. This way, equity leaders will have direct access to the funding and resources to examine existing problems, develop ways to address them and actually put new systems into place.

How workplace training can help, and where it falls short

Successful anti-racism training moves beyond awareness of the problem and how to take action against it, Sandhu says. For example, instead of educating employees about microaggression in the workplace, give them tools for how to respond to the behavior.

Making diversity training mandatory can also backfire, she adds. Research has shown compulsory diversity training can actually activate bias among workers who resent being told what not to do. By letting employees "opt in" to equity training, they may come to the table with a more open mind to learn and change. Additionally, companies should ensure other voluntary professional development courses, such as on how to give and receive feedback effectively, are guided by anti-racist principles.

With that said, "our trainings are two hours," Sandhu explains. "We say we're not going to fix bias in two hours."

Companies can make sustained progress by including anti-racism training and principles in employee and company goals. That also means building in measurable outcomes and working against a set timeline so workers and employers can be held accountable.

As Lauren Ruffin, Fractured Atlas's chief external relations officer, puts it, anti-racism is "not just a policy. It's a set of principles we measure every aspect of our work against."

A new workplace contract between employers and employees

While a lot of the conversation and work around anti-racism in the workplace may seem like it needs to come from the top down, employees play a large role in calling out where systems foster inequity and holding leaders accountable to address them.

"I absolutely think it's important for leadership to take a bold stance, make a commitment to being anti-racist and make sure they're looking at these issues from institutional basis,"

Price says. "But I also think it's important for employees to be involved in process. The widespread change we're seeing now is because people are speaking out and saying, 'This is important to me. We want to make sure we're living in a fair and equitable society.'"

That's the reasoning behind Price's and co-founder Star Carter's Kanarys, which invites employees to anonymously share ratings, reviews and feedback on diversity, equity and inclusion to help company leaders address potential issues. Leaders can then review data analytics collected from reviews and AI-powered surveys to make informed decisions about how to improve the culture directly based on employee feedback.

The work of being anti-racist will be difficult and ongoing, Ruffin adds, since it's not so much a matter of what people do but the values they hold and how they live and work according to them.

"How do you change your entire way of being to challenge systems and recognize your participation in those systems? That's hard work," she says. That said, if employers don't take responsibility to address their participation at all, workers will hold them accountable in one way or another.

"People vote with their feet," Ruffin says. "So many talented people of color, if you're making their lives miserable, they can go somewhere else."

Cynova says some organizations may be afraid to confront and fix their systems of power and oppression in the workplace because they worry employees, board members and donors will leave or discontinue their support.

"That attrition of staff leaving is probably good attrition," Ruffin says. "Someone who can't step out of their own shoes to empathize with others is probably a bad colleague."

Article Credit: CNBC
https://www.cnbc.com/2020/06/15/what-it-means-to-be-an-anti-racist-company.html