

What Is Anti-Racism And How Can Workplaces Promote It?

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Addressing issues of race is often regarded as a corporate taboo. For those business leaders fortunate enough to have never suffered at the hands of racial injustice or prejudice it's an awkward conversation to have; there's a fear of saying the wrong thing and causing greater offence along with a stigma as to whether speaking out is the right thing to do.

We all know racism is wrong, as is any kind of discrimination. We have laws in place to prevent prejudice at work. Still, leaders often let awkwardness and personal discomfort prevent them from speaking out about this vocally as if being anti-racist may cost us business.

With the recent tragedy of George Floyd's murder bringing racism and discrimination into the spotlight once again, it's no longer enough for business leaders to say that they are against racism and promote a diverse culture. **Racism is a pandemic.** The world is changing before our eyes. It's becoming increasingly clear from social media activism and large-scale protests that both your employees and future candidates will no longer stand for inequalities and a passive approach to racial injustice. As political activist and author Angela Davis said; "It's not enough to be not racist, you must actively be anti-racist." And this translates to our businesses. Regardless of industry, we must work to promote an anti-racist workplace if we wish to encourage an inclusive culture.

What is anti-racism?

What many people often get so wrong is that they think racism is an issue of hatred; there must be some anger, expression, or offence caused. It's undeniable that hate does play a role in racist behaviour, but racism is about so much more. Speaking out about a racist offence doesn't make you an anti-racist workplace.

Systemic racism or institutional racism refers to "how ideas of white superiority are captured in everyday thinking at a **systems level.**" Reni Eddo-Lodge author of *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race* defines institutional racism as "a form of collective behaviour, a workplace culture supported by a structural status quo and consensus – often excused and ignored by authorities."

To bring it into perspective, an example of systemic discrimination that has been widely discussed is female representation and gender equality in the workplace. While it's undeniable there is still a long way to go in addressing gender issues including pay gaps, female leadership and representation in industries like STEM; it's a much more open dialogue than issues of race. Businesses are making a conscious effort to represent women in the workplace

To be anti-racist, business leaders must recognise and address institutional or systemic racism within their organisation just as they have with gender politics. The approach and anger towards injustice should be the same. Identifying a lack of representation, lack of opportunity, and structural issues is the first step in instigating change.

So how do we promote an anti-racist culture?

Be Real

If your organisation is going to promote Black Lives Matter or equality publicly, your actions must be mirrored behind the scenes. It's great to express desires about anti-racism loudly on social media, but for many, there is considerable conflict between words and actions. It's the same as promoting yourself as an eco-friendly company dedicated to fighting climate change and not recycling the enormous amounts of paper you use. Hypocrisy will be called out eventually, and in matters as crucial as fundamental human rights, will stain your employer brand forever.

Take **Loreal as an example**. They posted online to support the Black Lives Matter movement with the phrase "speaking out is worth it" to show solidarity. It then came to light that just three years earlier they dropped black transgender model and activist Munroe Bergdorf from a campaign for speaking out about racism and white supremacy. Loreal was accused of jumping on the bandwagon when it came to Black Lives Matter, their support regarded as superficial. The issue has since been resolved, and Loreal has donated to a black transgender charity, and Bergdorf has taken up a seat on their Diversity and Inclusion Panel, but it proves – with social media and influencer culture giving everyone a voice – there's no place for hypocrisy or double standards within a business; the truth will always be uncovered.

Be real, be compassionate and be unapologetically anti-racist or you run the risk of looking insincere to future candidates and existing employees. Businesses and brands can influence culture but make your internal actions match what you're standing for online. Ensure you're not only promoting diversity when it's a popular talking point. Racism doesn't go away when it's not a trending topic. Confronting it should be standard practice for businesses rather than just something to do when it's fashionable.

Hold yourself accountable

One of the biggest realisations that many of us have had in the Black Lives Matter movement so far is that we could and should do better when it comes to issues of racism. The movement has opened the eyes of many. It's alright to accept that businesses have made mistakes and should have been publicly condemning racism for a long time before George Floyd's murder or that leaders should have educated themselves more on issues of race.

The first step in initiating change is to identify and address any issues regarding both racial prejudices and institutional racism within your organisation. Business leaders must acknowledge the presence of white supremacy in their company if they ever wish to

change: look at the leadership team, review your last few hires and analyse every part of your business to understand where improvements are needed. As long as you apologise and commit to change, it will not damage your reputation. Anti-racism is a journey; it will be uncomfortable, and mistakes will be made, but it's how we address these errors and learn from them that matters.

Invest in inclusivity

Employers need to focus on inclusivity at work. Your end goal may be a diverse organisation and leadership team, but starting with diversity in mind could lead to tokenism and belittle your anti-racism efforts.

Think about how job descriptions are worded; is the language you use neutral and inclusive to all? Evaluate why minority employees aren't progressing in your organisation and what you can offer to all employees to improve their position. Consider how you can remove barriers like unconscious bias in your recruitment process and make sure that all voices are heard, valued, and opinions are acted upon. To recruit a diverse workforce, everyone in your organisation must feel comfortable and happy at work. Talk to your BAME employees to gain a first-hand view of what needs to change for them to feel included.

An internal investigation has recently found that a large unit within the NHS's blood and organ transplant division **is "systematically racist" and "psychologically unsafe"**. BAME employees have discussed being ignored by white managers, poor management of race-related issues and even discrimination in recruitment. Talking to your team honestly or conducting a survey can help identify issues like this and give you a starting point.

Positive discrimination

Some workplaces may benefit from positive discrimination to encourage inclusivity. As **Eddo-Lodge said**, "we don't live in a meritocracy and to pretend that simple hard work will elevate all to success is an exercise of wilful ignorance." If your senior team are primarily white males, like most are, making a conscious effort to diversify your leadership will have a significant effect on inclusivity in your business. You'll see things from new perspectives, increase profits and promote a better workplace culture for all.

To fight structural racism, it's sometimes essential to meet a quota. Some find them controversial, as hiring or promoting regardless of experience simply to tick a box is not a progressive step forward. However, no organisation would hire an unsuitable leader to meet a target. In the pursuit of equality, businesses need to give their talented people of minority backgrounds additional opportunities to be seen when they may have been overlooked previously.

It is worth remembering that having a diverse leadership team will provide a voice for others, help with future diversity and will be a huge step into an inclusive workplace culture.

Refine your EVP

Promoting an anti-racist workforce in response to Black Lives Matter is a significant step forward, but you must ensure its impact lasts. Any changes you make now must stand the test of time, rather than just being a focus while it's in the news, which is why amending your EVP shows long term commitment.

Start by applying a human lens to your EVP to fight injustice at work. The world is evolving before our eyes, and your EVP must do the same. With the Black Lives Matter movement opening people's eyes to injustice, diversity and equality must become one of the main pillars of every company's EVP. It's something candidates will be looking for in future employers, and existing employees will no longer accept a passive attitude towards discrimination at work.

Your EVP must address your attitudes to diversity and commitment to building a more inclusive business if you wish to succeed. Having human-centred values was predicted to be an EVP trend in 2020 with an emphasis on employee perspective. A rise in anti-racist culture means this desire has been amplified, and now both candidates and existing employees will expect a fair and compassionate workplace with no space for discrimination. It's not just about the employee perspective, but the perspective of all employees from all backgrounds and areas of your business.

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