

“If you are an executive who intends to build an inclusive organization but doesn’t know where to start, *Leading Inclusion* will be uniquely helpful.”

DORIE CLARK, *Wall Street Journal*–bestselling author, *The Long Game*



# LEADING INCLUSION

DRIVE CHANGE YOUR EMPLOYEES  
CAN SEE AND FEEL



GENA COX, PhD

**I**N THIS groundbreaking book, organizational psychologist and executive coach Gena Cox delivers the message that humans vary, and human variation is normal. Yet true inclusion that embraces these variations remains elusive in the workplace. That traumatizing state of affairs will continue until executives lead inclusion from the top of the organization. Drawing on psychological science, interviews with corporate leaders, the work of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DE&I) experts, and her own experience in corporate America, Cox goes beyond the business case for diversity and answers the clarion call for human-centered organizational leadership.

*Leading Inclusion* is not a *how to* book; it's a *how to be* book—one that educates, challenges, and empowers you and your C-suite and board colleagues to lead a diverse workforce effectively. You'll learn the historical facts that created the racial inequities and systemic injustices that show up in the workplace, even today. *Leading Inclusion* shows the importance of taking the pulse of all your employees, so you can identify meaningful actions to build an inclusive, respect-first organizational culture.

Your organization can make a visible, tangible difference that employees will see and feel. *Leading Inclusion* will empower you to change your organization—and America—one employee at a time.

## **Praise for *Leading Inclusion***

“If you are an executive who intends to build an inclusive organization but doesn’t know where to start, *Leading Inclusion* will be uniquely helpful. Gena Cox uses an uncommon blend of storytelling, psychological science, and leadership insights to show how to lead inclusion for your company.”

**DORIE CLARK**, *Wall Street Journal*-bestselling author, *The Long Game*; executive education faculty, Duke University’s Fuqua School of Business

“This book stops you in your tracks and inspires you to be better. *Leading Inclusion* is an incredibly compelling and well-grounded call to leaders to lead inclusively.”

**DR. STEVEN ROGELBERG**, Chancellor’s Professor, organizational psychology, UNC Charlotte; past president, SIOP; bestselling author, *The Surprising Science of Meetings*

“In this ideas-packed and humane book, Gena Cox explains how we can overcome feeble excuses and cultural ignorance and take the bold steps required to change our workplace reality, one employee at a time.”

**DES DEARLOVE**, cofounder, Thinkers50

“Implementing Gena Cox’s well-researched practices and internalizing the deeply personal perspectives in *Leading Inclusion* will set your business up for success.”

**DR. TIFFANY JANA**, CEO and founder, TMI Portfolio; award-winning coauthor, *Subtle Acts of Exclusion*

“Gena Cox’s unique voice as a Black woman and organizational psychologist powers *Leading Inclusion* to reposition DEI as an executive leadership and corporate governance imperative.”

**DEEPA PURUSHOTHAMAN**, cofounder, nFormation;  
author, *The First, the Few, the Only*

“Painstakingly researched yet practical, and nuanced yet digestible, *Leading Inclusion* is a must-read for every leader eager to build a culture of respect, equity, inclusion, and belonging.”

**GORICK NG**, *Wall Street Journal*-bestselling author,  
*The Unspoken Rules*

“Gena Cox’s timely call to action is a clear road map for any leader to enhance the inclusion experience of their organization.”

**DR. GRACE LORDAN**, associate professor, behavioral science, and founding director, The Inclusion Initiative, London School of Economics; author, *Think Big*

“Gena Cox argues that DEI outcomes will change only when top-level leaders take action, and her powerful stories and insights show executives the way.”

**DR. THOMAS A. KOLDITZ**, brigadier general, US Army (ret);  
director, Doerr Institute for New Leaders, Rice University

“A no-nonsense approach for conversations, learnings, and policy development to improve inclusion.”

**TONYA JACKSON**, board director; SVP, Chief Product  
Delivery Officer, Lexmark

“A clear, doable playbook for top leaders to live up to their organization’s promises on DEI. Gena Cox sets out smart and commonsense steps every leader should take.”

**KEN BANTA**, founder and principal, The Vanguard Network

“A timeless arsenal of approaches that clarifies why we’re not progressing as we should on inclusion and offers guidance for speeding up the process. It will open your eyes and heart.”

**RON CARUCCI**, cofounder and managing partner, Navalent; bestselling author, *To Be Honest*

“This must-read book confirms that the inclusion journey does not have a finish line. Instead, it requires the C-suite’s endless pursuit of creating and sustaining cultures that truly value the lived experience, particularly for people of color.”

**RHONDA S. BRANDON**, MSOD, CHRO and SVP, Duke Health

“Gena Cox goes beyond standard DEI practices by explaining how top leaders can build an inclusive organization by using sound leadership practices that support and value each employee.”

**DR. PAUL E. SPECTOR**, professor, business and organizational psychology, University of South Florida; author, *Job Satisfaction*

“A fascinating book that challenges organizational leaders to act and advance DEI. A great resource for MBA students.”

**DR. LEON C. PRIETO**, professor, management, Clayton State University; coauthor, *African American Management History*

“*Leading Inclusion* will help you shift from inclusion intention to action. Gena Cox shares her lived experience as a Black woman executive navigating vastly differing corporate cultures. Highly recommended.”

**ELLEN TAAFFE**, clinical professor, management and organizations, Kellogg School of Management; board director; former Fortune 50 executive

“*Leading Inclusion* is a must-read for all leaders who want to build a supportive, sustainable, and authentically inclusive organizational culture.”

**TRICIA MONTALVO TIMM**, board director;  
DEI leader; author, *Embrace the Power of You*

“People of color are begging for the world of work to be reimaged. *Leading Inclusion* is our bold blueprint.”

**RHA GODDESS**, founder and CEO, Move the Crowd;  
cofounder, nFormation; author, *The Calling*

“*Leading Inclusion* provides the outline for leaders who seek to win the war on talent through transformative and meaningful action.”

**AMII BARNARD-BAHN**, JD, C-suite consultant;  
speaker; author, *The PI Guidebook*

“With plain talk, real-life examples, and thought-provoking questions, *Leading Inclusion* is a book of wisdom about how to be an extraordinary leader.”

**YOUNG MI PARK**, board treasurer and secretary,  
American Marketing Association New York; lecturer,  
Rutgers Business School and Columbia University

“*Leading Inclusion* isn’t just a book about diversity, equity, and inclusion; it’s a book about effective and inclusive leadership.”

**CHARLENE A. WHEELLESS**, speaker;  
executive coach; author, *You Are Enough!*

“*Leading Inclusion* is a must-read for business leaders who want to do more than ‘check the DEI box.’”

**AJ HARPER**, author, *Write a Must-Read*

**LEADING  
INCLUSION**



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CAN SEE AND FEEL**





**GENA COX, PhD**

# **LEADING INCLUSION**

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*To my daughter, Marin.  
You power my dream that women like us can  
thrive in a future, better workplace.*

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# Introduction

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*We hold these truths to be self-evident,  
that all men are created equal.*

## **US DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE**

“**H**IRE MORE people of color. Check! Provide implicit bias training for all employees in the company. Check! Hire a Chief Diversity Officer. Check! I’ve done all the things my advisors recommended, yet our employee survey results are tanking, and we are losing many of our ‘diversity’ hires almost as quickly as we can hire them. I don’t have more time to allocate this diversity, equity, and inclusion work, but my board wants better results. Help!”

Carol, the energetic, innovative, and socially aware technology leader who said this to me, is a product innovation and growth strategy wunderkind. Her leadership superpowers have pushed her company onto many “fastest-growing” lists; she is a leader to admire. And yet, she feels insecure about meeting stakeholders’ diversity, equity, and inclusion (DE&I) expectations. Despite her best intentions, her DE&I efforts are criticized and underappreciated, and her organization has very little progress to show for their year of action in this area. Carol is unsure what to do next.

I regularly hear similar frustrations from other well-intentioned corporate leaders who don’t understand *why* their DE&I efforts are missing the mark. Yet, when I analyze

the details, I often find that they did not diagnose their company's unique DE&I challenges before implementing the flavor-of-the-month DE&I solution. Or, they have superimposed DE&I recruiting and training solutions upon an unhealthy organizational culture in which manager and leader behavior is not inclusive. A small circle of employees may still be getting the prized promotions, and the board and C-suite may still lack diversity. Sometimes, executives' actions don't land because they lack an overall strategy for building an inclusive organization. And I regularly see executives approach this work from a safe distance, having lobbed the ball to the "DE&I experts," apparently hoping not to get their hands dirty if things don't work out as planned. No wonder employees of color are miserable and no real DE&I progress occurs!

The most accurate way to gauge DE&I progress is to understand the reactions of the stakeholders who matter the most: employees. Not just employees of color—all employees. If employees can't see and feel meaningful DE&I outcomes, they will not believe their leaders are building an inclusive organization. They will leave, and it will be hard to attract other employees of color. Effective inclusion leadership needs to start at the top of the organization. All employees will benefit: employees of color, women, men, LGBTQ+, the neuro- and physio-diverse, immigrants, those who struggle to speak English... everyone.

On Monday, May 25, 2020, a police officer in Minneapolis, Minnesota, knelt on George Floyd's neck for nine minutes and twenty-nine seconds, killing him. Television stations and internet channels continuously streamed videos of this ultimate act of inhumanity. Just two months earlier, police officers had fired shots into Breonna Taylor's apartment, killing her.



I watched corporate executives and board directors paying attention to these unjust events, but their responses often betrayed their unfamiliarity and discomfort with the work. Employees (of all races), customers, and investors were asking CEOs, “Do any of the concerns revealed in the public social justice conversations occur in your organization?” and “What are you doing to be part of the solution?” Executives could no longer avoid the issue. The calls for justice were *inside* the corporate walls, and stakeholders would not allow leaders to push these concerns back out.

I decided to use my unique training and experience as a PhD organizational psychologist, executive coach, Black woman, mother, and immigrant to help business leaders address this persistent inclusion challenge in America’s workplaces.

This book is the result of that decision. I wrote it to show leaders like you how to lead an inclusive organization, by setting a vision for diversity and inclusion and cascading it into the organization. The goal is to lead in a way that employees can see and feel the difference in their day-to-day work experiences. In this book I focus on the inclusion experiences of people of color, primarily Black people, in US workplaces. Nevertheless, the insights can enhance the work environment for *any* employee, regardless of their natural human variation.

Race and ethnicity classifications vary significantly across the globe, as do the histories and social forces influencing the human experience. However, race-based mistreatment is the most commonly reported form of workplace discrimination in the US, and racial equality is still elusive in broader society. Employees of color, particularly Black employees, continue to face occupational segregation that pushes them to the bottom of the workplace hierarchy.

Although racial diversity is increasing in the US, segregation, especially in big cities, was worse in 2019 than in 1990, and most Americans still live segregated lives. Our neighborhoods and churches are often more segregated than our workplaces. Moreover, racial and socioeconomic segregation seem to have hardened to the point that Americans have little contact with and do not understand one another across race and “class.” As a result, we are more likely to interact with people of a different race at work than in most other social situations.

Let’s take advantage of this relative “togetherness” that exists in the workplace. In the past, when racial justice issues have reached the headlines, some business leaders have done nothing or as little as possible. After decades of “as-little-as-possible” action, hiring rates have improved little for people of color, and fewer than expected people of color hold executive leadership roles in corporate America today.

This time can be different.

We likely have some things in common, since you are reading this book. We are looking for solutions to the racially based discomfort, discontent, and disappointment that pervades many employees’ experiences. What if workplaces could become havens of inclusion where employees work well together, despite their human variations? And what if those same employees spread that goodwill into the broader society? Maybe inclusion at work could translate into inclusion in schools, playgrounds, churches, and communities. Perhaps we could change America, one employee at a time. But where would we begin?

Until May 2020, I had been satisfied using my organizational psychology expertise to advise global corporate executives on building engaging work cultures. My clients wanted to drive innovation and productivity to meet the

demands of a changing world, and they demanded “data-based” recommendations. However, I knew that if we could toss aside the analyses for a minute and engage in straight talk, leaders’ actions might be more impactful. The real deal is that most of the employee engagement and employee experience problems organizations faced came down to one thing: weak manager capability and poor manager behavior. And often, employees of color were less engaged than other employees because their managers treated them differently than others they led.

So, in response to the angst I was experiencing after George Floyd’s and Breonna Taylor’s deaths, I pivoted to guiding leaders to strategic solutions to persistent race-based disparities in corporate employee experiences. For the first time, I believed leaders and other stakeholders were ready to engage in this conversation—and I was ready to give them some compelling insights to ponder. I started by pulling in insights from psychological science, other corporate leaders, DE&I researchers and practitioners, and my own experience in corporate America. Race-based disparities in organizations can only be solved if executive leadership drives the action, so I designed a strategic framework to help leaders act.

You are a well-intentioned corporate leader navigating a new landscape that requires a more in-depth understanding of DE&I issues. This book, a map for that journey, helps you reframe your thoughts so you can lead the other leaders in your organization (including a Chief Diversity Officer or Chief Human Resources Officer, if you have one). You will learn which key questions you should ask, the constituents you must address, and the actions you must take to be successful in your quest to build an inclusive organization.

The guidance in this book is organized into four sections.

**Part One, Skin in the Game**, explores the historical facts that created and reinforced many of the race-based social disparities we see in corporate life today.

Parts Two, Three, and Four lay out my three-step **Inclusion MBA** framework for leader-driven corporate inclusion: **Mindset, Boldness, and Action**.

**Part Two, the Mindset section**, frames the experience of a top leader regarding diversity and inclusion issues within the realities of organizational life. First, you need to explore what you believe about these issues. Your beliefs influence your decisions and actions, and sometimes that influence is outside your consciousness. Nevertheless, those around you—other leaders and employees at every level—will notice those actions. It is best that you, your executive team, and your board explore your beliefs before developing or implementing an inclusion strategy.

**Part Three, the Boldness section**, will help you get an accurate picture of the current experience of *all* your employees and the confidence to make sometimes unpopular decisions to address race-based disparities. This section reminds you to set clear expectations in your communications to the stakeholders you want to bring along on your inclusion journey, including direct reports, organization leaders and managers, employees, and board directors. They must all be on board.

**Part Four, the Action section**, provides science- and experience-based insights to help you identify actions that might work for your organization. By the end of Part Four, you should know what you will do next, depending on where you are in your journey.

I offer the guidance in this book from the perspective of my twenty-five-plus years' experience advising corporate

executives as an organizational psychologist and executive coach. I also use the frame of my personal experience as a Black woman in corporate America. As with most Black Americans, my professional identity has never superseded my racial identity. While I sometimes get extra points for being an organizational psychologist, I simultaneously deal with almost-daily race-based slights. I have lived many of the challenges discussed in this book. I know what it feels like to be gaslighted (when a leader, to assert their power and keep you hooked and hopeful, denies their actions that you have seen or experienced). I know what it feels like to be bread-crumbed (when a leader gives you small bits of communication and encouragement that never lead to the desired outcome, like a promotion or pay raise, for example). And I have been excluded in many of the ways authors Drs. Tiffany Jana and Michael Baran describe in their book *Subtle Acts of Exclusion* (SAE): through nuanced words and actions driven by conscious and unconscious bias. The SAEs I have experienced include conveniently “missed” invitations to networking and other career-building opportunities, being overlooked for promotions despite my ample qualifications, and having colleagues ignore my verbalized ideas as if I were invisible. Some of the other peculiar exclusions and avoidances you will read about in this book might surprise you. But, since I have dealt with and helped others deal with these experiences, I know they are commonplace in corporate life.

Although they have been discussed more frequently since May 2020, I realize that these experiences are neither universally experienced nor universally understood. And I recognize that you may not fully “get” the Black woman’s experience nor understand yet why this perspective offers valuable insights for your leadership inclusion journey. However, I hope the stories, science, and experiences shared in

this book will show you that Black employees' experiences are a uniquely informative microcosm of the overall employee experience. When Black employees have positive experiences at work, all other employees are also likely doing well too, because our experiences tend to be the least positive. Our experiences may reveal the hidden, bottom-of-the-barrel realities of the day-to-day employee experience in your organization, for all races. And of course, those revelations will point to the improvements you can lead.

In 1892, Black feminist scholar Anna Julia Cooper wrote that Black women suffer from “both a woman question and a race problem.” Almost exactly one hundred years later, in 1989, Dr. Kimberlé Crenshaw, a Black woman, lawyer, and scholar, coined the term “intersectionality” to illuminate the complex social factors (including identity) that determine power and powerlessness. Unfortunately, the intersectional experience of Black women in American workplaces is uniquely fraught. On one hand, Black women can be hyper-visible, leading to us being stereotyped as “threatening.” Yet on the other, as Lean In’s research shows, we can also be invisible, leading to us receiving less career development support in corporate America than women of any other race or ethnic group. That double bind gets some attention in this book.

Over the years, I have read every piece of research regarding the experience of Black people in the workplace I could find. I learned that my own experiences of exclusion are not unique. If anything, I have been fortunate. My education, accent, and practiced poker face garnered me more grace and privilege than many others who look like me.

It would be easy for me to write a book from solely my Black woman’s or industrial-organizational (I/O) psychologist’s perspective. However, I also include the view of those

on the other side of the corporate concrete ceiling: corporate executives. Between December 2020 and September 2021, I interviewed fourteen executive leaders (present and former Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) and Chief Human Resource Officers, and board directors). I asked them to share their goals, hopes, fears, questions, and advice about respect, equity, diversity, and inclusion (REDI)—the term I use instead of “diversity, equity, and inclusion” (DE&I). I will explain REDI in the coming pages. These leaders shared openly and were brutally honest. Some of them asked that these conversations be off the record, explaining that although they want to lead the REDI effort in their organizations, they had not yet done enough. Many said they were in the “listening and learning” phase and were not role models for other leaders. Some said they were afraid to talk openly about race in the workplace. Some leaders asked that their comments be incorporated into the book without attribution, because “race” is still a taboo topic in their worlds. These leaders voiced *questions and concerns* that I could address in the book, and I have provided answers from my research and experience and the research and experience of other psychology scholars, REDI practitioners, and executive coaches. **My extensive research about leading inclusion effectively is the basis for my conclusions and recommendations in this book. Rather than provide traditional in-text note callouts, I’ve provided detailed Notes (by page number) and Further Reading sections (by chapter) for those who want to use this book as an education or research tool.**

I want you to feel empowered to act not just to improve diversity but also to enhance feelings of inclusion for all who work in the companies you lead. This book is your partner as you work to make America better, one employee at a time.



# The REDI Outcomes Model

**R**espect  
**E**quity  
**D**iversity  
**I**nclusion





PART ONE

# SKIN IN THE GAME

.....

*The Skin in the Game Precondition*

*My respect, equity, diversity, and inclusion journey  
starts with my willingness to listen.*



# 1

## CEOs Can Change America, One Employee at a Time

.....

*Those who tell you “Do not put too much politics in your art” are not being honest. If you look very carefully you will see that they are the same people who are quite happy with the situation as it is... What they are saying is don’t upset the system.*

**CHINUA ACHEBE**, *Conversations with James Baldwin*

SUSPECT YOU think your biggest diversity and inclusion challenge is hiring more people (of color or other human variation). But if you are struggling to establish a truly diverse and inclusive workplace, the key is actually defining behavior expectations for all leaders and employees in your organization.

On June 19, 1865, Union soldiers informed the last enslaved Africans in the US of their emancipation. Black Americans celebrate Juneteenth, on June 19, each year to commemorate this highly significant historical event. So, I stopped in my tracks when, in June 2020, I heard *several* CEOs say, “I didn’t know anything about Juneteenth! I don’t know what to say or do about Juneteenth! Should I celebrate

it in my company or not? How *should* I celebrate it? Should I give employees the day off?” And so on.

That was my aha moment: CEOs and employees did not know how to respond, at work, when race-related issues surfaced.

But why not?

I agree with Satya Nadella, the CEO of Microsoft, that being a “learn-it-all” is better than being a “know-it-all.” Still, in my more than twenty years of advising executive leaders, I have seldom heard an executive say they did not “know.” This time was different. A pandemic was raging, social injustices were fomenting, and the mood in the country was darkening.

The uncertainty I was hearing in leaders’ voices was a good sign; a sign of self-awareness and necessary vulnerability. For the first time, leaders were publicly acknowledging their unfamiliarity with the experiences of people of color in the US, and in their organizations. They realized that the same old rules of avoidance and silence would be insufficient for this new day.

## **Not Knowing about the Black Experience**

According to the US Census, the overall US population is about 76 percent White and 13 percent Black. However, data from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics indicate that about 86 percent of chief executives in the US labor force are White and only about 6 percent are Black. It is, therefore, not surprising that a CEO might not know about Juneteenth. He (71 percent of US chief executives are men) would likely only know about Juneteenth if, while growing up, he regularly interacted with Black people. Or if he attended a school where the teachers were Black. Or if he was lucky enough

to have been specifically taught “African American” history in school (unlikely, since even now, many US school boards exclude books from their curricula that cover this subject). And although Black History Month celebrations are commonplace, they tend to highlight the same well-known Black leaders each year, glossing over the ugly underbelly of slavery’s impact that is more visible in the stories and lives of “ordinary” Black Americans. Black History Month is itself a sign of the problem. As actor Morgan Freeman noted, “I don’t want a Black History Month. Black history is American history.”

I didn’t grow up in the US, but I “officially” became a “Black American” about a year after moving here. It happened the day someone called me the N-word; you never forget your first time! After that, I began to read voraciously about the Black experience in America because it would now be *my* experience. That study is how I learned about Juneteenth. However, it was not until 2020, forty years later, that I understood why this uniquely evocative commemoration of American history is not well known outside the Black American community.

Since I was now a Black American too, I needed to catch up on all the things I would now experience for which I had no precedent; I needed to know how to “be.” I needed to understand why I should not walk alone at night in certain places, and the significance of the unfamiliarly negative reactions I experienced when I walked into a room. I needed to understand why my graduate school internship coordinator referred me to a clerical assistantship at a national burger chain rather than a research assistant role at the Naval Air Warfare Center Training Systems Division, as she did for my classmates. Indeed, I didn’t want to study war, but surely she knew I could do better than the clerical job!

On my former island home, Barbados, people encouraged and celebrated me and told me regularly that I would excel. But, when I came to the US, it seemed as if a veil of low expectations dropped in front of me. Suddenly, I was being disregarded instead of encouraged. I was the same Gena, but the people around me only saw and responded to an avatar of “Black Woman.” If society’s mirror consistently reflected a distorted, fun-house version of me, was I still “Gena”?

These experiences engendered complex feelings, and I quickly became adept at handling them. And by “handling,” I mean internalizing. I seldom spoke about the experiences or the emotions. Looking back, I should have found a more effective way of dealing with the racial trauma I was experiencing. But all paths to better seemed paved with high risk! I felt powerless to hold accountable those who perpetuated the racism. And while the powerful *might* have been able to help, they seemed uninterested in even talking about these issues, never mind taking action to solve them. So, I never spoke of my troubles at work, and leaders never noticed the problem.

I am not the only one. That pattern of ineffective avoidance and silence is one of the reasons why racism persists in the workplace. Racial discrimination and the resulting trauma are like a national medical mystery; the pain is real but the source is often not known or acknowledged. And yet, whether you experience it or not, racism exists in America, and the trauma it inflicts is omnipresent and very real for those on the receiving end. Healing from racism requires action and support, including from those who have not experienced it and don’t understand it. Healing from racism requires people of color to change how we show up at work, but it also requires action from those who have the power to change workplaces. Healing from racism is difficult but necessary for all of us to be psychologically healthy!



REDI is a “respect-first” model because if leaders don’t first ensure that underrepresented employees feel respected, none of the other outcomes will matter, nor will they be sustainable.

## **Social Segregation, Street by Street**

I live in a lovely little town in Tampa Bay, Florida. I noticed many years ago that part of the town is somewhat cut off from the rest. That section has smaller homes, and some of the streets lack sidewalks. A seemingly required railroad track runs through the town, dividing one area of that smaller-house neighborhood from other larger-house sections. The topography is low and prone to settling water. One portion of the community is a large cul-de-sac for which there is only a single point of entry and egress. And then, there is a unique touch, which even most locals might overlook: many of the streets in the smaller-house neighborhood are named after trees (for example, Elm and Maple). Those tree-named streets are in the “Black” neighborhood. The street names inexplicably change when you cross the large road separating this smaller-house neighborhood from the larger houses.

Locals created that naming convention (also seen in many other Southern US towns) as a convenient line of demarcation between White streets and Black streets, so White people could avoid the “Black” neighborhood by avoiding the tree-named roads. It’s an elegant solution to a hateful, inelegant problem!

Social segregation is such a well-oiled and pervasive tool that we don’t notice it unless it negatively affects us. Many Americans have no friends of another race and, therefore, may not realize how much the quality and experiences of day-to-day life in America vary by race and ethnicity. But the fact is that many people of color experience racial harassment every day, often starting as early as grade school. Segregation powers misunderstanding, underestimation, and subordination of “others.” Black Americans are among the “others,”



and this social segregation is a primary reason a CEO might not know about Juneteenth or the Black experience writ large.

If you don't have that connection, you might not know what Black employees experience every day in the company you lead. You might be unaware of the trauma and pain your Black employees carry. Or that some of that trauma is being exacted and exacerbated by managers within your company. Finally, you might not know that Black employees need *your* help to function with *ease rather than dread* in your organization.

Thinking more clearly about this issue blew my mind, but it also revealed how I could best contribute to the "struggle." I could take a cynical approach and say, "How come you don't know these things, Mr. CEO?" Or, I could use my knowledge and experience to share a more nuanced understanding of the Black American experience and how it affects our daily lives at work. I chose the second path. I want to inform your understanding of this unique leadership challenge and build your confidence about infusing inclusion into your business strategies, organizational culture, and leader behavior.

## **Caged Bird**

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My company gave employees a day off on June 19, 2020, and asked that we use the time to learn about the Black experience. The following week my colleagues recited their "epiphanies" much like one would describe a compelling piece of museum art. While my colleagues described their learning as "history," to me, these "ahas" sounded like the naive retelling of my own contemporary experience. I reached my limit when one young man related vivid details

about a movie that depicted grotesque deaths on trees. I didn't need to know any more about lynching! The racial divide felt like a chasm that day.

At the time this scenario played out, I was a seasoned professional and a culture “expert” at the company. I had a PhD in organizational psychology and decades of experience that powered what our clients wanted to buy. However, I felt totally disconnected from my colleagues. Their “storytelling” made me feel they had just “discovered” Black people for the first time. But I, the Black person, felt like a caged bird in a system that was clearly not built with my emotional needs in mind. Plus, I had been there all along, hidden in plain sight!

The following Sunday, June 28, 2020, I felt fidgety. Twelve-year-old Keedron Bryant was singing a song of lamentation on the 2020 BET Awards show, “I Just Wanna Live.” I wasn't looking forward to going to work the next day, and the video accompanying this young man's wailing just added to my pathos. I cried, for about twenty minutes. In that moment I realized I had to stop faking it.

So, I “came out as Black.”

I acknowledged that for the decades I had been advising corporate leaders, very few of my clients understood how difficult it had been for me on days when I showed up with the painted-on smile. I had done such an effective job of pushing down my feelings of exclusion at work that I had become a numb hypocrite. I advised executives how to build engaging and satisfying work cultures, while simultaneously feeling invisible, undervalued, excluded, and dissatisfied in my own jobs!

## **Feeling Unprepared to Deal With Racial Justice Issues**

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As a business leader, you are accustomed to setting a vision, defining a strategy, and releasing the full power of employees' efforts to execute that shared vision. You do that every day, with your product or service offering strategy, with your marketing and sales strategies. But you don't usually get deeply involved with REDI issues. Instead, you typically hand off these issues to your Chief Human Resources Officer (CHRO) or Chief Diversity Officer (CDO), getting involved only to provide funding or political approval of their initiatives. But unfortunately, that approach will not work in this "Future-Now" work world.

Much of the REDI work done in organizations for the past fifty-plus years, since the US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) was created, has had only minimal impact relative to money and time invested. This work is typically handled like a "check the box" obligation, focusing more on administrative procedures than enhancing employee experiences. Professionals responsible for managing REDI programs often have minimal clout and few resources. This reminds me of the Dutch boy who stuck his finger into a hole in a dyke to stop the water from entering his town. The villagers treated him like a hero the next day, but he almost froze overnight, waiting for someone to come up with a permanent solution to the leaky dyke. In that story, villagers eventually devised a solution, but REDI professionals seem to be perpetually stuck trying to plug the hole! They get little support for sustainable solutions and their contributions are not highly valued.

You may have underestimated the scope of the race-based disparities that play out in larger society and in your

organization, too. These disparities result from a long history of slavery and a general intolerance for differences in the US. But, if you have never heard these facts discussed openly or if they have not been part of your education, you might be oblivious to the scale of the problem.

You might even believe your organization is already doing all it can or should to address REDI issues. Your CHRO and CDO have likely implemented actions meant to minimize disparities based on race, ethnicity, gender, LGBTQ+ status, disability, age, and other protected human variations. But, unfortunately, those actions likely have not had the desired impact, at least not from the perspective of those whose opinions matter most: employees!

Research shows that White job applicants receive 36 percent more callbacks than Black applicants and that hiring rates for Black Americans did not improve in the twenty-five years between 1990 and 2015. People of color, especially Black women, continue to be underrepresented in leadership roles and persistently report less positive day-to-day experiences at work than their colleagues of other races and ethnicities. Although highly represented in technology jobs, Asian Americans are the least likely to be promoted to leadership roles in those jobs.

Your stakeholders are popping up with questions about these issues because they want your company to be a place where all employees can thrive, and they want to be on the right side of history when the dust settles. As a leader, you must be informed about these issues—especially when they could be happening in your organization. And if you delegate the solutions, you must maintain oversight; *you* need to lead the conversation to ensure your organizational culture supports inclusion. So, let's take that journey together!

## **What to Do When Something Bad Happens**

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When leaders ask me what to say or do about calls for social justice, I know exactly how to direct them. “Race” has long been on some imaginary list of “The Top Five Things We Should Never Talk About at Work” (along with sex, money, politics, and religion)! I made up that list, but research shows that talk of race is taboo, especially for people from traditionally subordinated groups. Many people of color minimize their negative experiences at work simply by keeping silent, and although there are legal protections against workplace discrimination, most people do not use them—the risk is perceived to be too great. Mr. Floyd’s death provided incontrovertible evidence our society had reached a new low point that required major change. Government leaders, business leaders, and Black people cannot deny it. That is how I frame my guidance to leaders; this is a new day.

In this new day, you *can* do things that will help with healing and forward movement.

You can start with my REDI 10/4 model, which suggests ten actions you can take to make a positive difference and four you should avoid. These are short-term tactics; ultimately, you need to build scalable solutions that will stand the test of time. We’ll discuss more about the “how” in upcoming chapters.

### **REDI 10/4 Effective Actions**

When a social justice and diversity and inclusion issue occurs, do this:

- 1 **Get out front.** You may think of it as an “HR issue” to delegate to your CHRO. Resist that temptation, especially

if you have not previously discussed race matters in your organization. As a CEO, C-suite executive, or board director, you must take the lead. Employees are waiting for you to soothe their anxieties and support them. They are also waiting for you to “own” the conversation. If you do anything less, you will lose credibility.

- 2 **Communicate with employees first.** Before you communicate with the press or other public media about the issue, communicate with your team.
- 3 **Communicate as soon as possible.** Employees may interpret a delay as a lack of concern, or worse, a lack of leadership courage.
- 4 **Acknowledge your feelings.** Share that you too have feelings about the situation and that your feelings likely mirror theirs. Their feelings are not alien. Empathize.
- 5 **Communicate with *all* employees.** All employees, regardless of their human variation, are likely to be aware of the issue. Individual opinions and levels of empathy may vary, but you should let *all* employees know that you recognize the significance of the moment. Don’t address your communications just to the victim’s identity group.
- 6 **Provide quick, sensible support.** Do not wait to provide support, which could include mental health or financial support, and so on. But talk to your employees to decide on the fine-grained actions that may be necessary. Let your employees tell you what they need.
- 7 **Give employees a forum.** Provide mechanisms for employees to express their feelings and to tell you and their managers what they need. Focus groups, town halls, and

other group forums work well for this purpose. Make it easy for employees to individually connect with you, their manager, and human resources leaders.

- 8 **Develop a “crawl-walk-run” communication/connection strategy.** So that employees don’t feel cornered and have time to think about what they want to say, use a gradual yet consistent approach, especially if this is the first time employees have been given “permission” to talk about race at work.
- 9 **Listen and analyze.** You may be champing at the bit and your first instinct might be to implement implicit bias training, to educate about diversity, and to make enterprise-wide proclamations. Avoid this approach. After your initial communications and support, look at data that can inform your subsequent actions. That data will come primarily from the listening sessions, focus groups, surveys, and your human resources information system. Your employees will respond more positively if your actions are driven by data and insights that align with their experiences. And you will be more confident and less reluctant to make the necessary bold moves.
- 10 **Use employee surveys to get fine-grained data.** Employee opinion surveys allow employees to express their opinions anonymously. The other significant advantage is that they allow you to slice the data in meaningful ways for your organization (for example, by business unit or division).

## **REDI 10/4 No-Nos**

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When employees are coping with social justice and diversity and inclusion issues:

- 1 Do not talk only to the employees of the group directly affected.** It may be tempting to talk only to the Black people or the Asian American people, and so on, in your organization. That approach further “otherizes” those employees. Some people who look like the victims may not want to talk about the issue at all. Additionally, employees *not* from that group will have been impacted too and will also need support. Assume that all employees, not just those who look like the victims, want to be part of the solution.
- 2 Do not assume that employees from the targeted group will share their experiences unprompted.** These are highly emotional experiences. Employees may need time to process their feelings and to deal with the recurring trauma. Employees may also worry about job security and about being labeled as troublemakers if they express their true feelings. Give them space to talk, but let them decide when the time is right.
- 3 Do not ask the most senior person from the targeted group to be the company’s spokesperson for the issue.** The CEO should be the first person to speak to employees and anyone else on behalf of the organization, even if the most senior person from the targeted group chooses to lead employee-focused solutions. The well-worn tactic of having the most senior person of the targeted group speak first telegraphs that this is an issue for “them” and does not concern the entire organization. And although that



leader may want to help, they will need space to process their own emotions.

- 4 **Do not ask the marketing department to highlight the targeted group in ways that seem performative or inauthentic.** If you haven't previously included the target group in your advertising or collateral materials (for example, your website), you should certainly do so. However, an abrupt 180-degree turn in which you put the target group front and center in all visuals will likely generate a skeptical response from employees and other stakeholders. Better to acknowledge the deficiency and then ask marketing to ensure that all future marketing materials are inclusive, as they should have been all along.

## ESSENTIAL DEFINITIONS

Some of the terms I use in this book may be unfamiliar, so before we go too far, I'd like to take a few minutes to align on the language.

**REDI:** This stands for respect, equity, diversity, and inclusion. I use this acronym in place of D&I (diversity and inclusion) or DE&I (diversity, equity, and inclusion). REDI is a "respect-first" model because if leaders don't first ensure that underrepresented employees feel respected, none of the other outcomes (equity, diversity, inclusion) will matter, nor will they be sustainable.

**Respect:** My definition of "respect" is this: the degree to which you acknowledge another human and treat them the way you would want to be treated, regardless of their station in life. Aretha Franklin sang about "R-E-S-P-E-C-T" because respect is the



Humans vary,  
and human  
variation  
is normal.

word Black Americans use to express the emotion of being accepted. The term “belonging” is similar but less evocative and requires a longer incubation period. Respect must be immediate and automatic, like justice. Black people want to be respected and given the benefit of the doubt, unless there is some logical reason we should be disrespected. Therefore “respect” is first in the REDI acronym: it is the primary outcome that Black people seek in corporate spaces.

**Equity:** The E in REDI stands for “equity.” It is about “each of us getting what we need to survive or succeed—access to opportunity, networks, resources, and supports—based on where we are and where we want to go.” Equity and equality are not the same. Equity aims to provide the support each person (or group) needs to get to a valued outcome. Equality is about establishing processes to ensure that all people (or groups) get *the same* outcome. In some situations, getting to the same outcome does not make sense.

Let’s say an organization analyzed its talent mobility data and identified a systematic pattern where one group of employees (for example, women) moved into its executive jobs less often than men. Through an equity lens, an appropriate response would include talking directly to both men and women to determine if they value the same or different things, and how those values affected their career choices. The women might be intentionally avoiding the traditional career paths, because those roles don’t support their *life* expectations! In that case, it would be better to redesign new, equally well-regarded career paths so that there are multiple points of entry to executive roles. Success might mean that the women get executive roles via different paths than the men.

Examined from an equality lens, one might automatically steer the women toward the “traditional” path, thinking that success means having equal proportions of men and women in those roles. Some women might take the roles because that is the only route to the career outcomes they seek, even if at odds with their personal desires or obligations. And they might be miserable the entire time! As with many talent processes, an equality-based solution might work for the company but be less effective than an equity solution.

**Diversity and inclusion:** The words “diversity” and “inclusion” often appear as twins because neither term, independently, encompasses the breadth of the challenge each seeks to define. Diversity is about the degree to which your workforce reflects the demographic characteristics of the available labor force. Inclusion is focused on organizational systems and processes that factor in social support for all employees, including traditionally subordinated groups. I like to say that diversity is about counting the numbers of people of color (or other human variation), while inclusion is about whether those people feel respected, seen, heard, and empowered, like all other employees. The two elements are complementary.

**Race:** This term is a social construct, not a biological fact. I use the definition from the National Human Genome Research Institute: “Race is a fluid concept used to group people according to various factors including ancestral background and social identity... [or] people that share a set of visible characteristics, such as skin color and facial features.” The 2020 US Census identified the following race categories: White; Black or African

American; American Indian or Alaska Native; Asian; and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander. According to the US Census, “Hispanic/Latino” is an ethnicity, not a race.

**Ethnicity:** I use the definition from the American Psychological Association: “Ethnicity refers to shared cultural characteristics such as language, ancestry, practices, and beliefs.” The Hispanic/Latino ethnic group comprises people from a variety of races.

**Traditionally underrepresented or subordinated groups:** I use these terms in place of “minority” because “minority” can be equated with being “less than,” while “underrepresented” or “subordinated” gets to the central concern. Since this book is focused on race and ethnicity, I include Black/African Americans, Hispanic/Latinos, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI), and Native Americans in this category. Note, however, that “Native Americans” prefer to be called by their specific tribal affiliations. It is best to ask individuals how they prefer to be addressed, regardless of race or ethnicity.

**“Black” or “African-American”?** In this book, I use the term “Black” to describe people who might variously be identified as “Black,” “African American,” “of African descent,” or in other ways. None of these terms is universally acceptable to the people they are meant to identify. I have chosen “Black” because it includes both descendants of American slavery and immigrants of African descent who came to the US from a continent other than Africa. “Black” is more inclusive because it creates a connection between people who look similar in terms of skin color, even if they did not grow up in the US. I also prefer these terms to not be hyphenated

with “-American” at the end, because some perceive hyphenation to be a barrier to being fully “American.” If you listen to singer, songwriter, and producer Smokey Robinson in a 2022 ABC News interview, you will understand why terminology matters.

**“White” or “white,” “Black” or black”?** I use the capitalized version of each word throughout the book, unless quoting a source in which the words were not capitalized.

**“Difference” or “variation”?** I avoid using the word “different” to describe people because “different” implies there is a reference group (White people?) against which all others are compared. I use the words “human variation” and similar derivatives wherever possible because humans vary, and human variation is normal.

## **Off You Go!**

The rest of this book will accompany you on an empowering journey to infuse inclusion into your business strategies, organizational culture, and leader behavior. My promise is that by the end of the book, you will feel less frustrated and more confident about handling this challenge.

My client Bill is the CEO of a financial services organization, and he is one of my favorite clients. He called in late 2020 to say, in an atypically halting voice, that he wanted to do more to support his employees after thinking about the social injustices that were driving public protests. Employees had become vocal in sharing their experiences at work, and some of what they shared was alarmingly negative. How did

he not know, he wondered? His corporate board, which was usually stoic, had become animated. Not only did they want their employees to have a positive experience, but they did not want to see employee mistreatment stories popping up on social media. And managers were wringing their hands because Bill had not (yet) addressed these issues.

I gave Bill a virtual hug, shared my REDI 10/4 model, and then helped him quickly collect employee feedback to pilot his actions. When he stepped out a couple of weeks later with a clear and empathetic message, his managers were grateful. They now had a North Star guiding their responses. We later implemented a series of information-sharing and education sessions to connect all employees and make them part of building the new experience they desired. Bill went from “deer-in-the-headlights” to “stoked” in a matter of months. Employees sang his praises, and he became more confident about these issues.

This wasn't a “one and done” thing, though. Duke University and Columbia Business School professor, world-ranked communication coach, and thought leader Dorie Clark advises in her book *The Long Game* that transformative change requires a mix of strategic patience and rethinking failure to achieve the goal. Inclusion strategy requires a long-game approach too. Meaningful change requires intentional and persistent action from leaders. REDI strategy must be placed at the core of a business strategy and the organization's cultural expectations. This is how leaders can make corporate America better, one employee at a time.

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- George Floyd's and Breonna Taylor's killings illuminated racial injustice and disparities in the US as never before.
- Stakeholders, especially employees, expect business leaders to address these issues.
- Since persistent racial segregation has isolated Americans from people who do not look like them, leaders may need to study history and current social trends to understand these new leadership expectations.
- Only when leaders infuse REDI (respect, equity, diversity, and inclusion) into the core of their business strategy will they drive the kind of meaningful change that employees and other stakeholders can see and feel.
- REDI requires a long-game approach.

## **REDI QUESTIONS**

Has the volume of the conversation about race in the workplace become louder in your organization since May 2020? How are these conversations going? What are you doing to support those conversations? What do you need to understand about these issues that you do not today? Would employees and other stakeholders say you have handled these issues effectively?





**GENA COX** is an organizational psychologist, executive coach, and speaker. She coaches corporate leaders,

start-up executives, and board directors to enhance their leadership impact in disrupted workplaces—and build the inclusive organizations their employees deserve. Cox is active in leadership roles in the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology. National publications, including *Harvard Business Review*, *Fortune*, and *Fast Company*, have featured her ideas. Cox holds a PhD in industrial and organizational psychology.

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**PAGE TWO**

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