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How the Lack of Self Awareness Supports Performative DE&I



Leah Smiley, CDE®, IDC-EIE®

President of The Society for Diversity Inc. & Institute for Diversity Certification (IDC)®

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October 5, 2021

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Predominately-White Institutions (PWI's) have been establishing "Black-themed engagement communities" via residential dormitories on college campuses across the U.S. The idea is designed to celebrate Black culture, as well as create a safe space where students can engage and connect. Nevertheless, the [controversial practice](#) has been touted as "segregation" and promoting a race-based world-view.

I want to probe the concept from a different lens. For example, how will the university guarantee a safe space for Latinx, Asian American, LGBTQ+, or other student groups? What is the institution doing to actively prevent campus sexual assaults? How will the university tie this housing into other initiatives such as ensuring professors are culturally competent? How will residential life staff certify that facility

maintenance is sustained on the same level as the other dorms? How will the university differentiate itself from a Historically Black College or University (HBCU)? What do students say they want? Is it possible that the dorm gets defaced multiple times like the [George Floyd memorial](#), or will it develop "a label" in the future like: the party dorm, the (insert a racial slur) dorm, etc.? How will the diversity leader guarantee that administrators won't disengage because "the Blacks have a dorm now"?

Performative Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) efforts can cause all sorts of problems-- but it solves none, nor does it operate to eliminate barriers to inclusion. In fact, performative efforts do not go far enough to *realistically* ensure Equity, Inclusion or safety **for all**. [According to Carmen Morris](#), a former Forbes contributor, "The problem with performative allyship, is that it maintains the status quo and renders illegitimate, any attempts to change processes that support structural racism, and other barriers." Folks like me ask: *what could possibly go wrong?* Look no further than the current imbalance between males and females on college campuses in regard to admissions, graduation rates, etc. The Wall Street Journal reports, "[A generation of American men give up on college](#)." Essentially, after decades of devoting programs and initiatives for women, universities must now focus on engaging men. My question is: did we eliminate discrimination and exclusion, or did we shift who experiences it?

This is where DE&I leaders can't have our minds full of initiatives that are not sustainable. Instead, we must enhance sustainability with mindfulness. Let's not get so overwhelmed with the desire to do something-- anything-- that we neglect to be purposeful. I propose [developing self-awareness](#). In fact, there are symptoms to indicate that a DE&I champion lacks personal awareness because our minds are full of other stuff such as:

- **Being "always on"**: giving advice and instructions even when no one asked for your opinion; being used to shining in the forefront instead of taking a seat in the background

- **Feeling invincible:** believing that you are unstoppable or you should not experience difficulties
- **Lacking strategy:** neglecting to design a forward-thinking plan that connects your DE&I goals with the organization's objectives
- **Believing that "you've arrived":** preventing the organization from changing or improving your interventions because you've discovered something that works. There's no need to refine or build on your efforts because it is perfect as it is
- **Becoming overly ambitious:** assuming that you should be promoted and experience all of the fanfare that is associated with doing your job well. Sometimes over-ambition results in frequent job hopping so that you can make more money and have more power. In this instance, change isn't about the organization or the system, it's about you.
- **Following the crowd:** trying the next new thing without determining whether the idea is sustainable
- **Flying solo:** attempting to change a 5,000 or 10,000 or 75,000-person organization on your own is impossible! Collaboration is required, but you can get creative in how, and with whom, you collaborate
- **Forgetting the stages of cultural competence:** assuming that everyone should be as mature and/or knowledgeable as you; being impatient with people who are growing
- **Insisting that you get your way all of the time:** labeling people who don't agree with you as racist, sexist, ageist, homophobic, etc., because they question you or have different opinions
- **Fearing that you are an imposter:** doubting yourself and feeling incompetent despite your education, credentials, experience, and accomplishments
- **Ignoring the red flags:** jumping at an opportunity without asking enough questions or considering whether the organization is serious about doing business better

- **Neglecting innovation:** using research-based strategies to build upon and pilot new interventions

It is not my intention to bring you down; it is my hope that you will be pushed into your destiny-- one that is filled with greatness and positive impact. I'm not saying that the "Black-themed" dorms are right or wrong. Nevertheless, for the sake of this relatively new DE&I field, we should be accountable for our positive and negative outcomes. So what are you *really* trying to accomplish? Regardless of your title, fulfilling the role of an Equity and Inclusion leader requires a vision. Your vision should motivate you to be intentional and strategic about moving the needle forward. Your vision should also inspire others to take meaningful actions.

Self awareness entails being honest about who you are and where you're going, as well as what you're doing. It's important that we distinguish between purpose and passion to ensure that we are taking a balanced approach to DE&I leadership. If we fast-forward 5 or 10 years, what will you be remembered for? Certainly, with everything that we are responsible for doing, we must be mindful about the impact that we have on others--now and in the future. Therefore, we should regularly ask ourselves: is my mind-full or am I being mindful?

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*Leah Smiley, CDE®, is the President of The Society for Diversity. For more information about its membership or certification programs, visit [www.societyfordiversity.org](http://www.societyfordiversity.org).*

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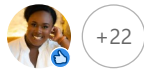


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I have recorded a podcast episode on self awareness for DEI and people managers as well! Thoroughly agree with this

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**Leah Smiley, CDE®, IDC-EIE®**

President of The Society for Diversity Inc. & Institute for Diversity Certification (IDC)®

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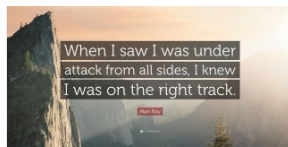
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