The Root Cause Of Diversity, Equity And Inclusion Burnout, And How To Fight It

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Aug 16, 2022, 07:00am EDT

Entrepreneur, Certified Diversity Executive & Biz Strategist using an equity lens to help achieve business outcomes | The Diversity Movement

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Remember that chief diversity officer you hired two years ago? Or maybe you called them your director of culture, chief people officer or head of supplier diversity. Everyone was so excited when you

first brought them on board—eagerly signing up for training, joining employee resource groups (ERGs) and getting involved in company-wide efforts to change.

Flash forward to now. Your diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) budget isn't as big as it used to be, and learning opportunities are few and far between. Your company ERGs haven't met in months. Virtually nothing has changed with regard to how you operate and communicate with colleagues on a day-to-day level. It seems like your DEI practitioner—and frankly, half of everyone else in your organization—is burned out, feeling disconnected and tired of hearing the word "diversity."

How did we get here? And perhaps more importantly, how do we get back to a place of being energized for our company's DEI efforts?

What do the numbers tell us about DEI burnout?

A recent survey from Work Vivo found a staggering 98% of human resources professionals have felt burned out at work in the last six months, with almost four in five (78%) open to leaving their jobs. Meanwhile, a majority of workers report a "lack of meaningful progress" on racial equity, despite increased investment in DEI.

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DEI leaders are experiencing mass burnout driven by low engagement, low budgets, lackluster support from management and a general sense of performative activism that can be extremely discouraging.

Identify root causes to identify real solutions.

In my experience as a certified diversity executive and business growth strategist, there are six main "umbrella causes" of DEI burnout. While these issues may present differently across different organizations, DEI burnout can generally be chalked up to one of the following structural problems.

• **Lack of resources and authority.** I hate to break it to you, but an effective DEI strategy isn't free! Leaders need the right resources in order to implement change. That means allocating appropriate time and money, investing in necessary tools for implementation and also affording DEI leaders the authority to effect change.

• **Working in a silo.** Your organization can only hope to operationalize DEI as part of its DNA when all teams are committed to doing the work together. Placing 100% of the responsibility onto DEI employees, and only DEI employees, is unfair and ineffective. Also, it often creates an unreasonable workload for DEI hires.

• **Lack of community.** Keep in mind that DEI practitioners are often facing the same issues as all other employees, including microaggressions, harassment and discrimination. The difference is that DEI leaders frequently lack a network they can turn to for support. Encourage your diversity leader to connect with a cohort of fellow practitioners for idea sharing and support.

• **Lack of training.** Some organizations don't realize that DEI roles require specialized training and a high degree of expertise. You can't just expect someone to perform well in a DEI role because they are the only multicultural person on your team. Put some real thought into what you need to look for when hiring a DEI leader.

• **A disconnect between values and operations.** What's the point in making your leadership team sit through all those diversity courses when women are still being interrupted in meetings and managers are still showing unconscious bias in their treatment of employees? When it comes to DEI burnout, there's often a missing link between strategy and everyday implementation.

• **Too much focus on optics over change.** Social justice movements have fueled a reactive urgency and pressure for DEI initiatives, forcing many diversity leaders to focus on vanity metrics and social media messaging over sustainable, long-term change. This isn't to say your company can't engage in public-facing DEI work, but keep in mind how demoralizing DEI work can feel when leaders act more like PR agents than internal changemakers.

Re-energize your organization's DEI efforts.

It's never too late to renew your commitment to diversity and inclusion as organization-wide values and reinvest in programs that will benefit your business through greater innovation and stronger bottom lines. Here are my best solutions for stopping DEI burnout in its tracks:

• **Be proactive, not reactive, about social justice issues.** Don't just wait until an issue makes headlines to start caring about it. Take a look at the current socio-political landscape and decide which hot-button issues your company may need to address.

• **Develop a DEI strategy that aligns with your corporate strategy, and integrate DEI initiatives into your everyday flow of work.** Start thinking about DEI from a business growth perspective, rather than as an independent channel of your business. For example, how might unconscious bias be showing up in your promotion process? Looking at things from this perspective will enable you to better operationalize DEI in the day-to-day workflow.

• **Bring the data (not the drama) to ask C-suite leaders for appropriate resources.** If you are the DEI leader, come prepared with key talking points, data and metrics, and positive outcomes that align with corporate goals. Develop your executive presence, and build a powerful case to describe what's in it for them.

• **Facilitate opportunities for DEI practitioners to join a larger community of like-minded individuals.** Gaining a sense of community, as well as valuable training resources, will go a long way in preventing burnout.

A final note to DEI leaders: As important as it is for your company to provide the right support and resources, it is equally important you commit to practicing self-care. DEI is challenging and high-stakes work. You deserve to take a break from it every now and then. Remember, taking care of yourself—and having an employer that takes care of you—is not a luxury. It's a necessity. Focus on the long-term goals and celebrate short-term wins! You'll do a better job remembering how important self-care is all along the way.

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