

HOW DO WE SUSTAIN THE MOMENTUM OF DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION?, *SPORTS BUSINESS JOURNAL*

By Grace E . Speights and Kerry Chandler

January 4, 2021

The NFL approved a resolution to incentivize the development of minority coaches or senior personnel by rewarding teams with draft picks. NBA players heightened the league's long history of fighting for social justice, using their platform to champion the Black Lives Matter movement. The Miami Marlins hired the first woman to run a major league team's baseball operations.

These very public developments highlight the discussions and proactive efforts regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) that are happening throughout the national leagues, the sports industry more generally, and all of corporate America.

As two Black women in leadership positions in our respective organizations, these discussions are not new to us. One of us has worked in the sports industry for years; the other advises leading sports retailers and broadcasters, as well as many Fortune 500 companies. For decades, many companies have been talking about DEI. They have developed comprehensive strategies, invested time and resources, conducted training, developed policies and procedures, and hired DEI officers. An entire cottage industry has developed to support these efforts. Yet when we speak with Black employees, they often tell us these DEI initiatives have failed them. What they tell us resonates with us, as we, too, have seen the failures.

They tell us these efforts have failed because they have not held people accountable as individuals. They have failed because they tried to address all aspects of diversity, equity, and inclusion generally, without focusing on the experiences of Black employees or other underrepresented groups specifically. They failed because they focused on equality (treating all employees the same) rather than equity (providing specific employees the specific resources they need to do their best work, to thrive and to advance in these organizations).

But that is changing.

What feels different this time is that the discussion has become more personal. Leaders are being forced to lean in and address these issues head-on as individuals, rather than solely relying on the tireless efforts of human resources organizations and DEI leaders. Employees are being more outspoken and calling out both leaders and colleagues on the more subtle forms of micro-aggressions or implicit biases. It can be uncomfortable, but it is causing necessary conversations to take place and holding a mirror up to those who lead to confront their own areas of bias and their own areas for growth.

While these are important first steps, changing the deep-rooted, day-to-day operations of the sports industry — and corporate America more generally — cannot be accomplished through just discussions. There has to be action and accountability. We are at a point where people are expecting definitive changes.

Policies, procedures and programs are never sufficient on their own to establish a diverse and inclusive workplace free of bias, discrimination and harassment. But they are important building blocks in creating and enabling such a workplace, which then supports the recruitment, retention, development and advancement of Black employees, other people of color, women, and other under-represented groups.

Companies and organizations stand at different points today in how wide ranging their DEI efforts are and how embedded those efforts are in their structures and strategic plans. Regardless of where a company or organization stands, however, there is usually more that can be done.

Successful DEI work requires a combination of focused efforts, effective messaging, awareness of legal requirements, but also the willingness to be thoughtful and creative within those legal confines.

Every organization is different. Some are starting from the beginning, providing implicit bias training for the first time or creating the necessary policies and procedures. Others are advancing efforts already put in place by looking at every hiring, promotion, and performance management practice through a DEI lens, seeking to see if there are any impediments to the retention and promotion of diverse individuals.

Some employers are assessing their current demographic makeup and creating aspirational goals and communicating these goals with transparency. This has historically been a tricky area as international laws are varied on what employers are allowed to request and collect. And in the U.S., employers must be careful not to establish quotas. But companies are encouraging voluntary self-identification so companies can establish a global baseline and are creating goals that they can aspire to when it comes to hiring, retention and promotion.

Other companies are providing open forums for global conversations that didn't used to take place at work. Along with leadership accountability, this safe space to share experiences is giving all people an understanding that they are part of something bigger, part of the creation of an inclusive culture.

Now the challenge for all of us — in the sports industry and beyond — is what happens next. How do we keep up the momentum? How do we turn these conversations into action? What are we doing as individual leaders to make a difference? The past few months have shown the power of individual and concerted action. Each person has a responsibility to help create a safe, respectful, diverse and inclusive workplace. And each company has the responsibility to do all it can to ensure this not just a fleeting moment, but the beginning of lasting, sustainable change. As sports players and leaders have long been icons to be emulated, we hope their example sets the stage for long-lasting change for other industries around the world.

Grace E. Speights is a partner at Morgan, Lewis & Bockius, and Kerry D. Chandler is chief human resources officer at Endeavor.

This article was first published in [Sports Business Journal](#).