



Research Report

Engaging White Male Middle Managers in Advancing Diversity & Inclusion



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Why We Need to Get White Men on Board Right Now

We assess and advise organizations at all levels of diversity proficiency. A key factor we notice that often stops the good from being great and the beginners from advancing is lack of enthusiasm from white male middle managers.

We usually see support from men at the top, especially when first implementing a D&I initiative. We also often note strong interest in D&I from white men at the lower levels, especially those just getting started in their careers.

But what about those middle managers? They are critical to implementation of initiatives and building consensus. We decided to investigate the reasons they often aren't fully engaged in making their workplace as inclusive as possible. Our Culture@Work division conducted seven 60-minute anonymous online Employee Voice Sessions with 147 white male middle managers earlier this year. The results, both quantitative and qualitative, show some encouraging trends that lead to real solutions corporations can use to get this critical demographic on board.



We found these men almost unilaterally care about D&I and believe it beneficial to their organizations. However, they are very uncertain about how to get involved, if their involvement is really wanted, and how to lead inclusively. This research pinpoints the issues and concerns that are slowing down their commitment to inclusion and to being an upstander (not a bystander) when they see incidents of bias and discrimination. It goes one step further, however, by pinpointing critical ways employers can build a bridge toward this key demographic and turn them into D&I ambassadors.

Our solutions deal with understanding this workforce and their peers, subordinates and superiors through Employee Voice Sessions, training and reinforcing managers to value and support inclusion and become allies, and methods to hold these managers and senior management accountable for their involvement.

This report is just the beginning of a deep dialogue we hope to have at each of your organizations on engaging your white male managers. Having every group at your organization on board with inclusion is essential to your business success.

Subha V. Barry
President
Working Mother Media

Introduction

As diversity and inclusion initiatives have taken root across corporate America in the past two decades, one limitation in creating an inclusive culture has been lack of active support from white male managers, especially mid-level. Most of them aren't opposed to D&I—they just don't understand it, why they should be part of it, and, especially, what's in it for them.

The lack of inclusion of this key group by many well-meaning organizations prevents D&I initiatives from achieving desired results. There is often support at the top, but those middle managers who are the keys to communicating with lower levels and implementing strategies are inadvertent roadblocks. They aren't actively against D&I; their organizations haven't managed to convince them why they should advocate for it.

The goal of this research is to specifically provide organizational solutions that engage middle-management white men in D&I efforts and help them build D&I support among their peers and subordinates.

This research addresses:

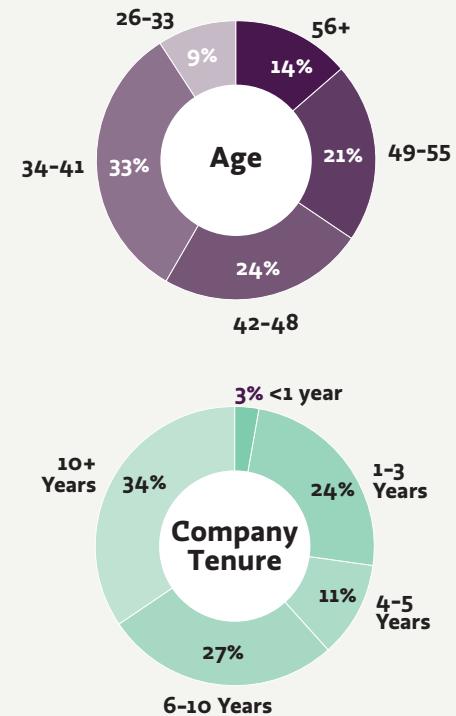
- **What are current levels of awareness and buy-in among white male managers around the business case for D&I and the value of inclusive corporate cultures?**
- **What is needed to gain their trust and support?**
- **What systemic changes would increase white men's engagement and commitment to diversity and inclusion?**

METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted through seven 60-minute anonymous online Employee Voice Sessions with 147 middle-management white men from sponsor companies from Feb. 13-Mar. 6, 2020. It includes both quantitative and qualitative findings as well as developed solutions.

Respondents were primarily straight (95 percent), not veterans (93 percent) and did not have a disability (90 percent).

The percentages calculated in this report were generated using the total base of participants, meaning all participants in the session instead of all those who submitted responses. During the sessions, participants were instructed to not respond if none of the options applied to them or if they preferred not to respond. Any non-answer was interpreted as a "prefer not to respond."



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Why This Research

White men still hold the majority of power positions in corporate America—they are 90 percent of CEOs and 80 percent of board members.^{1,2}

There have been significant shows of D&I support at the top levels at many organizations, such as the [CEO Action Pledge](#)—73 percent of US CEOs last year say D&I is a top priority vs. 56 percent in 2015. White men represent the majority in the middle as well. In the S&P 500, middle managers are two-thirds male and 73 percent white.^{3,4}

What we know from previous research is that affirmative action and D&I have been perceived by some mid-level white men as a “zero-sum game,” in which white men lose out (jobs, status, income) when people from under-represented groups are hired and promoted.⁵

Companies have not done enough to proactively address these feelings and get the white middle managers on board with their D&I initiatives. In one study, white male respondents identified their own “exclusion” as the primary challenge to D&I goals and initiatives. In addition, 70 percent of white male respondents and 60 percent of women and multicultural leaders were not clear whether diversity initiatives are intended to include white men.

Research by the University of California at Santa Barbara found that diversity programs made white men feel threatened; many white male participants further expressed concerns that diversity initiatives would undermine their role and accomplishments, and diminish the opportunities that were available to them.

“Pro-diversity messages signaled to these white men that they might be undervalued and discriminated against. These concerns interfered with their interview performance and caused their bodies to respond as if they were under threat. Importantly, diversity messages led to these effects regardless of these men’s political ideology, attitudes toward minority groups, beliefs about the prevalence of discrimination against whites, or beliefs about the fairness of the world. This suggests just how widespread negative responses to diversity may be among white men: the responses exist even among those who endorse the tenets of diversity and inclusion.”⁶

The organization White Men As Full Diversity Partners, founded in 1996 and active today, has noted the need by white men for self-awareness, dealing with feelings, understanding the scope and dimensions of D&I, gaining support from systems, and the urgency in envisioning the personal benefits of equity, the perennial “what’s in it for me?”

D&I efforts that focus on every group except white men often lead to backlash, such as the growing number of anti-affirmative-action lawsuits, or anger over “tokenism” and the belief that people from under-represented groups are being unfairly promoted.⁷

In this research, we found four critical imperatives around engaging white male middle managers:

Inclusion: A Sense of Belonging; Bridging: Ongoing Learning, Becoming an Upstander; Reinforcement: Continuous Engagement; and

Rewarding. These constitute a roadmap toward getting these valuable employees on board with diversity and inclusion.

Inclusion: A Sense of Belonging

Bridging: Ongoing Learning, Becoming an Upstander

Reinforcement: Continuous Engagement

Accountability: Business Results

Inclusion: A Sense of Belonging

1. Inclusion: A Sense of Belonging

While diversity has traditionally focused on the needs of under-represented groups, inclusion has been the key to unlocking the power of difference. Over the past five years, organizations have begun to increasingly emphasize the inclusion component of the D&I equation. This is reflected in the nomenclature of the corporate diversity function itself, as companies have rebranded their Chief Diversity Officers and Offices of Diversity to Chief Inclusion Officers and Offices of Diversity & Inclusion. They have embraced an array of other terms such as belonging and engagement. Examples include Netflix and Airbnb. In addition, metrics and accountability are expanding to incorporate measures and frameworks for tracking inclusion.⁸

In order to realize the true benefits of inclusion, behaviors and skills must be embedded at the middle-management levels. Most companies embark on the inclusion journey with a spotlight on leadership levels. This research indicates that leadership level inclusion is insufficient. Inclusive leadership matters, but inclusive management matters even more.

Time after time, we discover an inclusion gap between the experience of employees, especially those in under-represented groups, in feeling that they are not heard and valued in corporate culture.⁹ And as we find in our data, it is not for want of intent. Rather, it is for want of a range of practical solutions that comprise the roadmap for engaging white male middle managers. Not only is this cohort highly attuned to the business importance of diversity and inclusion within corporate America, they are immersed in its experience in their own daily jobs.

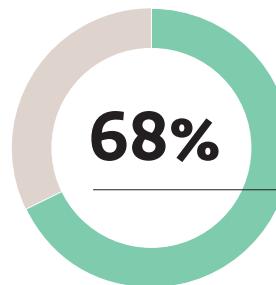
**RESPONDENTS
TELL US**

“Given our clients’ focus on diversity, it is essential to provide diverse teams to continue to grow our business and remain competitive with our peers. I am aware of specific clients asking for evidence of diversity in the teams staffed on their matters.”

“Diverse teams allow us to think differently and strategically in our business and for our customers.”

WHAT THE DATA SHOWS US**They Care About Diversity But They Don’t Know How to be Part of D&I**

White male managers in our survey believe in D&I efforts and understand that it is good for business and their teams. **Almost three-quarters advocate for teams that represent their marketplace and almost all see D&I as a positive for the future.**



of respondents believe that their teams should reflect the diversity of their customers and market.

Past D&I efforts have positively **impacted business results**.

61%

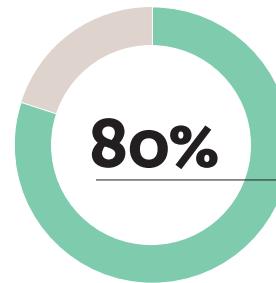
Past D&I efforts have positively **impacted my team**.

60%

Future D&I efforts can have a positive impact.

92%

These same managers are noticing when their workplaces aren’t inclusive. **Eighty percent say they have witnessed at least one incident**, such as mispronouncing a foreign-sounding name, perception of favoritism for one group with education or job experience underestimated.



have witnessed one form of bias.

Significantly higher rates in the belief that others are marginalized are reported by respondents who have experienced (59 percent) or witnessed (49 percent) bias than those who have not experienced (29 percent) or witnessed (23 percent) bias.

Top 3 Forms of Bias Witnessed

Colleagues mispronounce or avoid saying their name.

44%

Colleagues think that they are shown favoritism.

35%

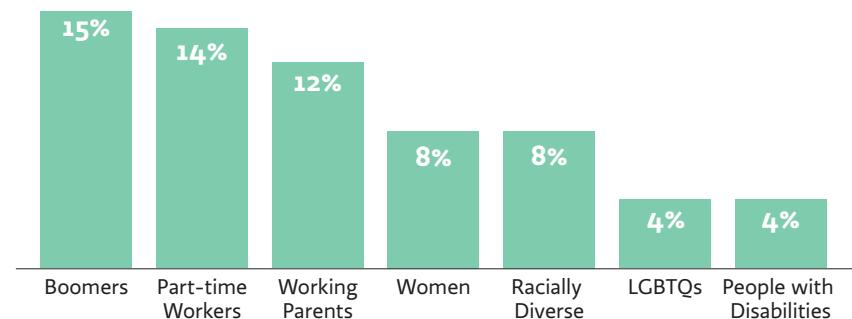
Their education or job experience is underestimated.

32%

But the organizational divide occurs when we ask these respondents whether lack of inclusivity is an issue in their organizations.

Unlike people from under-represented groups, who see that their organizations are often unfairly skewed toward the majority, 56 percent of the white male middle managers believe that advancement at their company is “extremely” or “very” meritocratic and almost half say everyone has equal opportunities.

While 42 percent of the white male middle managers say some groups are marginalized at work, when asked which groups have workplace disadvantages, few see examples of bias or discrimination or unfairness.

**Percent That Believe Each of These Groups Are Marginalized**

Bridging: Ongoing Learning, Becoming an Upstander**2. Bridging: Ongoing Learning, Becoming an Upstander**

Diversity training programs only go so far and all too often are a one-and-done effort to check a box without sustainable results.¹⁰ Training done right, however, can be a game-changer. This research shows white male middle managers are eager to learn and be equipped with the right skills. And they want and need the tools to be involved and help when they witness bias.

For most white men, bias is something that occasionally happens to other people. Even when they see repeated instances of bias, they don't perceive them as systematic but, rather, individual cases.

And that represents a huge educational opportunity for organizations to turn these managers into real advocates and catalysts for inclusion and change through ongoing learning. In order to mitigate pervasive bias, one needs to first understand that it exists at all and that the system needs to change for the individual to change.

**RESPONDENTS
TELL US**

“Targeted, individual training helps those that need it.”

“Unconscious bias training was a great course. I would like to see it available to all employees.”

“We need more training for people leaders to ensure awareness and promote best practices.”

**RESPONDENTS
TELL US**

“I am afraid I may offend someone or say the wrong thing ... the backlash can cause massive ramifications even if it’s said by accident. There’s no grace given. I’ve personally witnessed great managers being taken to HR over the wrong use of a word.”

“With politics and the world today, anything related to benefiting a white male would be considered racist.”

“My employer consistently gives preferential access to those with ties to senior leadership or who come from similar demographic backgrounds.”

“Minority groups are routinely denied opportunities that majority groups are given. I know that minority-group members have routinely lower representation on high-potential lists.”

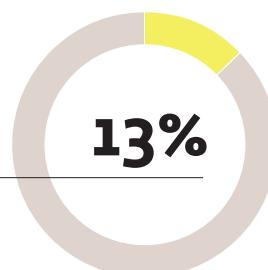
“I was denied the opportunity to work at another company because I was not diverse enough. The recruiter told me directly it was because I am a white male. This opened my eyes to the affects others regularly see.”

WHAT THE DATA SHOWS US

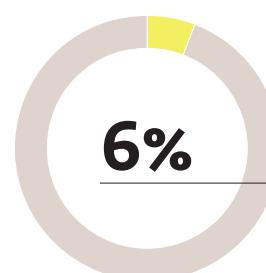
They don’t know how to get involved and they are unsure of how to address D&I concerns they have or see.

Be an Upstander, Not a Bystander

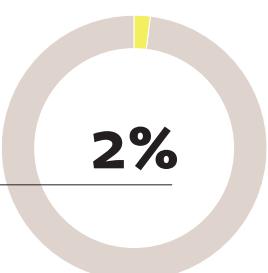
Feel comfortable standing up for women, multicultural people or LGBTQ colleagues at work.



Say they do not know how to stand up for others.



Have had a negative experience standing up for others.



Do not feel it is their place to stand up for others.

For many of these managers, there is tremendous fear of saying or doing anything about these incidents.

Reinforcement: Continuous Engagement

3. Reinforcement: Continuous Engagement

Inclusion training is most effective when it is viewed as a long-standing change-management exercise, one that engages the head, the heart and the hand. What do we mean by this? The principles of effective inclusion training need to be first grounded in data and appeal to the rational, metrics-driven business lens people managers adopt and use for evaluations. A combination of external research data and internal findings from auditing the employee population reinforces the realities of inclusion not as an abstract concept, but a reality in which managers themselves have an active role to play. This might include quotes and case studies of employee experiences of inclusion, exclusion and bias drawn from an inclusion audit, which, in turn, also initiates awareness and mindset change, i.e., impacts the second component of training, the heart.

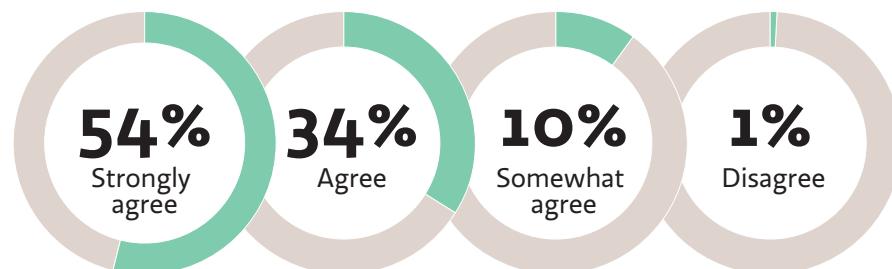
The head and the heart together help establish “informed empathy,” which is a critical precursor to action and behavioral change. The third learning principle for effective training is “the hand,” which translates to accountability and commitment to action.

WHAT THE DATA SHOWS US

They want to understand and incorporate diversity into their workplaces, but they need to continuously see the relevance.

Most respondents in our survey want their organizations to take steps to ensure equal access to opportunities and advancement, regardless of demographics.

My company should take steps to ensure quality in access to opportunities.



While 43 percent of people say they believe there is equal access for everyone, 88 percent say their company should take steps to ensure access to opportunities and advancement for everyone.

**RESPONDENTS
TELL US**

“The more it is front and center and the more it is discussed, the better the results.”

“They have a responsibility to level the playing field for all and root out anything that encourages one group over another.”

“There is still significant work to be done to ensure folks with the courage necessary to lead are in positions where they are willing to change status quo inequities and effect broader, much-needed change.”

“We have extremely smart and successful colleagues who would not be here if they did not have a leg up in some way, such as mentorship, additional training, or a chance to prove themselves when on paper they may not have been the absolute best choice.”

The personal commitment to advancing D&I is deep for these managers, at least verbally. They need continuous learning to understand how best they can get involved.

Talk the Talk:**How committed are you to advancing D&I at your company?**

Not all respondents answered

But Do They Walk the Walk?**Do you do any of the following?**

Support team members who participate in D&I efforts.

77%

Try to integrate D&I efforts into way I manage team.

59%

Encourage members of my team to participate in D&I efforts.

48%

Attend ERG or D&I-related events.

44%

Am member of an ERG.

33%

Look for ways to be involved with D&I at company.

19%

Plan/sponsor D&I events.

7%

Top 3 Reasons White Male Managers Hesitate to Support or Engage in D&I

- 1 It is not where I prioritize putting my time.
- 2 I don't know what I could do.
- 3 I am afraid I may offend someone or say the wrong thing.



RESPONDENTS TELL US

“It is extremely hard to participate because of time constraints. As a new leader, I am unsure of my role in promoting ERGs. I hate to make assumptions or come off as pushy.”

“I try. Our firm isn’t very clear on the involvement it wants from white males.”

“I am somewhat committed. It can be difficult to scale these efforts and they are most often thankless or open a target in such a feedback-driven organization.”

“Over time, my demographic has been pushed to the back of the line, so I’m not going to waste time trying.”

“I am committed in theory, but feel there are relatively few opportunities to put these ideas into practice.”

“It seems like any little misstep in terms of saying the wrong thing will automatically discredit me from participating in

D&I initiatives. I’m not always going to get it right, but I want to learn and grow and help my company be more inclusive.”

“As a white male, sometimes I feel like I’m taking up space at events that would be better offered to diverse colleagues.”

“I’m always concerned that my involvement in D&I activities is unwanted.”

“There is a specific diversity group for every demographic except white males.”

“It feels awkward to join and meet up with groups that feel like they are exclusive to a particular race or gender, even though I fully support them.”

“As long as incentives are not aligned with supporting time dedicated to supporting D&I, it is easy to not make them a priority. The focus is on the work, not the collective agenda.”

**Accountability:
Business Results****4. Accountability: Business Results**

This research reveals an eagerness among middle managers to be recognized, rewarded and held accountable for diversity and inclusion goals at the organization.

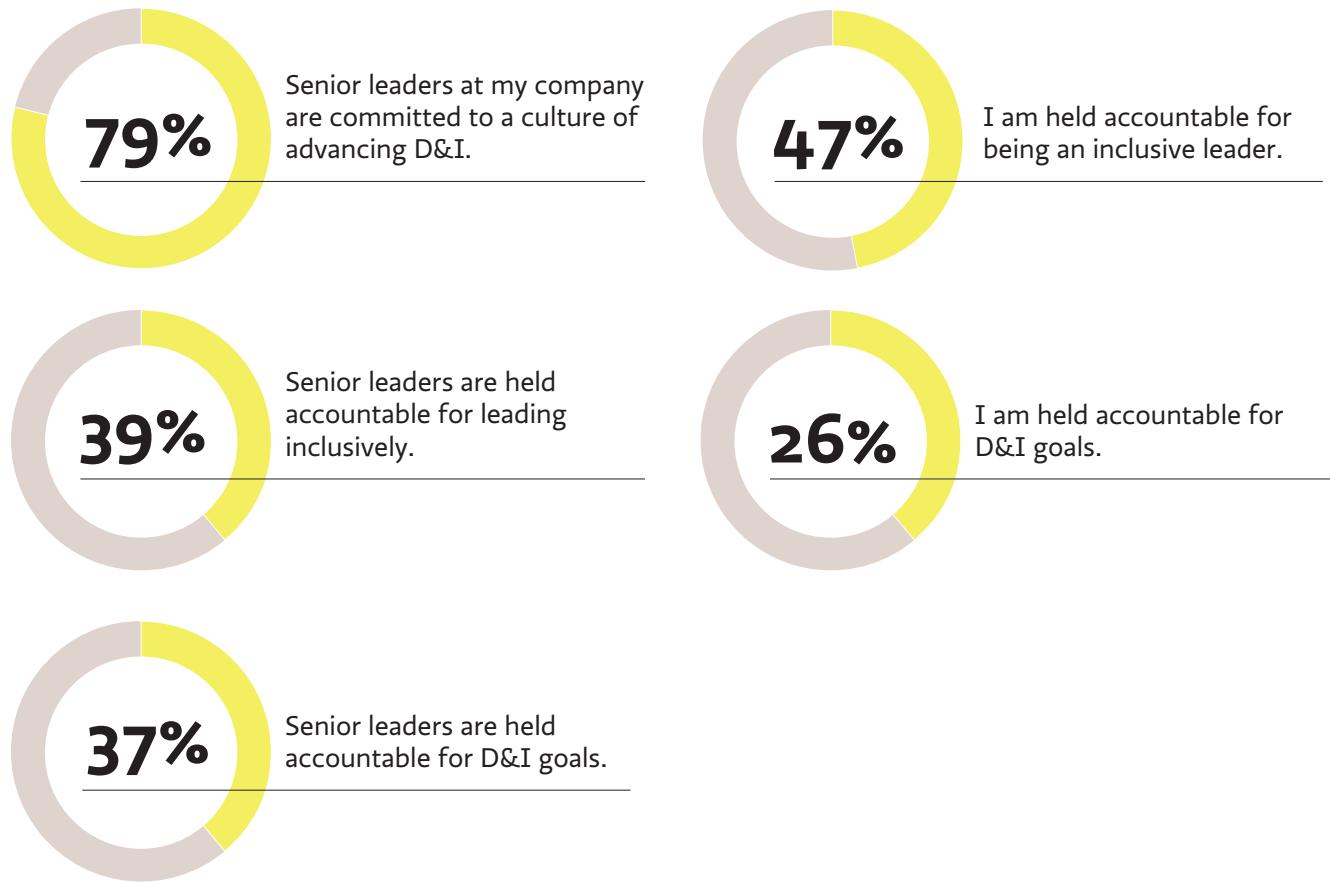
The respondents see commitment to D&I at their organizations, but little accountability.

One respondent notes: “I need to understand just how committed my management is and what the ultimate goal is for me and the company. Is there a finish line? What does D&I success look like?”

What could this look like? Introducing accountability for diversity and inclusion is often, like efforts around inclusion overall, limited to the “top of the house.” Expanding accountability for D&I can be done first at the individual level through commitments and peer learning through training channels. At the organizational level, manager accountability can be a component of diversity and inclusion business plans, measured through leading indicators such as engagement in sponsorship and mentorship of diverse individuals, active engagement, e.g., taking on a role in employee-resource groups, spearheading corporate social responsibility efforts, etc. It can also be assessed through hiring and promotion demographics as well as procurement efforts.

WHAT THE DATA SHOWS US

Middle managers want clear definitions of how they are held accountable for D&I participation and results.

Accountability

Solutions

The solution set involves a combination of expanded empathy-building, access to training and enhanced engagement opportunities.

1. Conduct an Inclusion Audit

The first step in engaging white male middle managers is to listen to their experiences of diversity and inclusion as part of an overall inclusion audit. What we heard in this research was a two-fold desire to be heard and to learn.

An inclusion audit provides a means for both hearing from white male middle managers and capturing data on differences in the experience of inclusion at their company from which they can learn. Such an audit involves the creation of a rich portrait of the experience of inclusion by cohort—that of diverse talent groups and how these experiences compare to that of the majority—well beyond that of traditional engagement surveys. Although many traditional engagement surveys contain a few targeted questions on inclusion and diversity, we find that they are insufficient in unpacking the experience and needs around inclusion revealed by an inclusion audit.

An inclusion audit captures a detailed set of quantitative and qualitative data from samples of all talent cohorts and should involve anonymous online focus groups.

2. Curriculum and Continuous Training

We have found two effective approaches in conscious inclusion training: creating a commitment plan with a commitment partner on specific inclusive actions and behaviors the manager will act on over the course of two days, two weeks and two months; and also training managers to lead inclusion dialogues of their own with their team members. This involves developing discussion guides, on-demand or real-time training to skill up managers to lead conversations with their teams and providing mechanisms for managers to learn from each other in the course of these conversations through coaching from HR and subject-matter experts.


**RESPONDENTS
TELL US**

“I think just the fact I got included is a testimony that the company is making efforts!”

“Thank you for encouraging dialogue and making it a safe place to share.”

“I am actively identifying my own bias, through training and continual self-reflection and peer/direct report feedback.”

3. Reinforce Through Engagement

We recommend companies offer a series of learnings for managers without ambiguity about their roles and whether they “belong.” Creating mechanisms for engagement can be as simple as using the existing D&I infrastructure, such as ERGs, and earmarking events to which participants are urged to invite their managers.

Our respondents tell us: “Be clear about how straight, white persons can assist with initiatives. *Invite them.*”

Programmatic interventions geared to managers are another means of reinforcing inclusion, including critical inclusive workplace dynamics, sponsorship, mentorship and allyship. Our findings indicate a desire among middle managers to establish trust and psychological safety in their interactions across differences.

A. Sponsorship and mentorship:

A dynamic sponsorship increases sponsor satisfaction with career advancement, and also qualitative findings around sponsorship as a means for majority managers to gain insight into diverse talent experiences. The majority of sponsorship programs are at the top of the house. There is a critical opportunity to build awareness and skills around sponsorship in the middle ranks.¹¹

B. Initiatives focusing on white men as allies:

White men can make strong contributions as D&I champions and allies, but first they need to understand where they fit in the D&I process. Effectively engaging white males in diversity initiatives requires that white male voices and perspectives are heard, understood and included.

White males can also take their own proactive steps to get involved in the D&I effort. This can be as straightforward as becoming an ally to an employee-resource group, or volunteering to be a sponsor or mentor to a woman, multicultural employee, or another marginalized member of the workforce.¹²

Today there are many white men who are waiting on the sidelines simply because they aren’t sure whether they should participate in the diversity effort, and if they should participate, how they should go about getting involved. When white males understand D&I means them too, they are more likely to participate; many are simply waiting to be invited in.

4. Create Methods of Accountability

Accountability in any training program is primarily at the individual level. This brings us to the organization accountability we heard managers seek in order to more effectively engage in the D&I agenda.

What could this look like? Introducing accountability for diversity and inclusion is often, like efforts around inclusion overall, limited to the “top of the house.” Expanding accountability for D&I can be done first at the individual level through commitments and peer learning through training channels. At the organizational level, manager accountability can be a component of diversity and inclusion business plans, measured through leading indicators such as engagement in sponsorship and mentorship of diverse individuals, active engagement, e.g., taking on a role in an employee-resource group, spearheading corporate social responsibility efforts, etc.

What Does Being an Ally Mean To You?



RESPONDENTS TELL US

“Putting yourself in others’ shoes before judgment, always assuming positive intent and asking questions prior to judgment.”

“Elevating the voices of those who might be marginalized. Promoting/ supporting events for their group. Speaking up when I hear comments that are insensitive. Dispel misconceptions.”

“Having a heightened awareness of the challenges these folks may face, being a vocal advocate when I see their rights or needs being ignored.”

“Standing up for others and showing support, especially when it’s the hard/unpopular thing to do.”

“Speaking up to the larger organization about what changes we should make to support this group. Trying to be an influencer on a larger scale.”

“Creating an environment that allows opportunities for everyone on my team, regardless of background. Making sure that everyone is able to have their voice and perspective heard.”

“Recognizing my own unconscious biases, being keenly aware of when I may be disparaging or making a joke at someone’s expense. Speaking up to others when they are disparaging and prompting people from these groups to speak up and share their ideas.”

“My boss has made comments that are offensive to women. I don’t say anything, but I let the female colleague know I think it’s inappropriate. It’s not worth making waves with the boss.”

“After Charlottesville, there was a truck in the parking lot with a huge Confederate flag. I asked our management if hate symbols were allowed on our campus. Since then, the flag has been banned from all our campuses. ”

Millennials: Help Us Get More Involved



RESPONDENTS TELL US

“I once attempted to stand up for a woman at an outside-of-work event. I later found out that after I left, the group we were with proceeded to then make jokes about me. I never hung out with them after work again.”

—Millennial

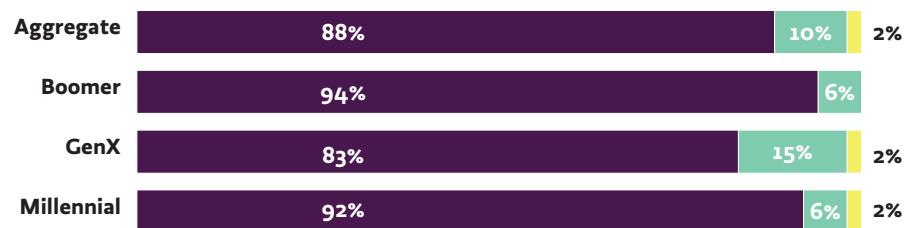
“I stood up to a senior leader regarding a video she showed me and a colleague disparaging people of color. She made it a point to trash my reputation and impede my career for three years afterwards. I would have left my company but couldn’t due to personal finance issues. I felt trapped and it was the worst time of my life.”

—Millennial

Numerous studies have shown that for Millennial and younger workers, corporate commitment to social responsibility and inclusion is more important than it was to previous generations. While our research shows white, male middle-management Millennials care more about D&I than their older counterparts and are more likely to get involved, they still express concerns and admit they need help understanding what it's about and why it matters to them.

Everyone wants to see equality in the workplace, most of all Boomers and Millennials.

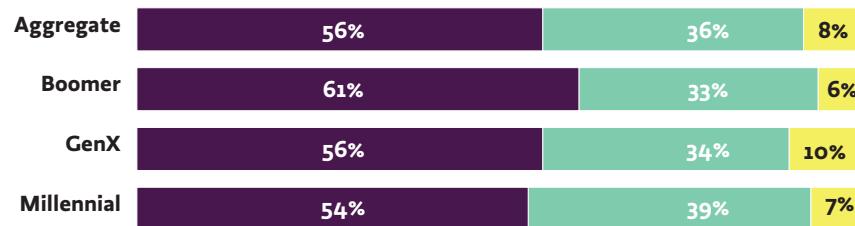
My company should ensure access to opportunities.



■ Agree or strongly agree ■ Somewhat agree ■ Disagree or strongly disagree

Millennials are less likely to believe that everything is fair, meaning they are beginning to understand issues are systemic more than just individual. That comprehension positions them as key actors in implementing culture change.

Advancement at my company is meritocratic.

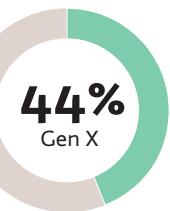
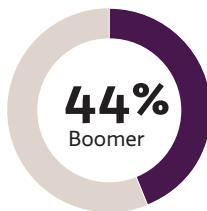


■ Extremely and very meritocratic ■ Somewhat meritocratic ■ Not very or not at all meritocratic

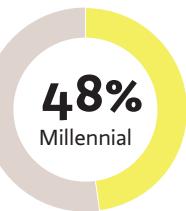
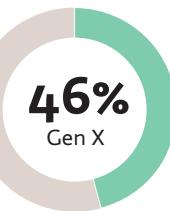
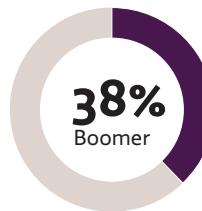
Millennials: Help Us Get More Involved

Standing Up

Said Comment Was Inappropriate

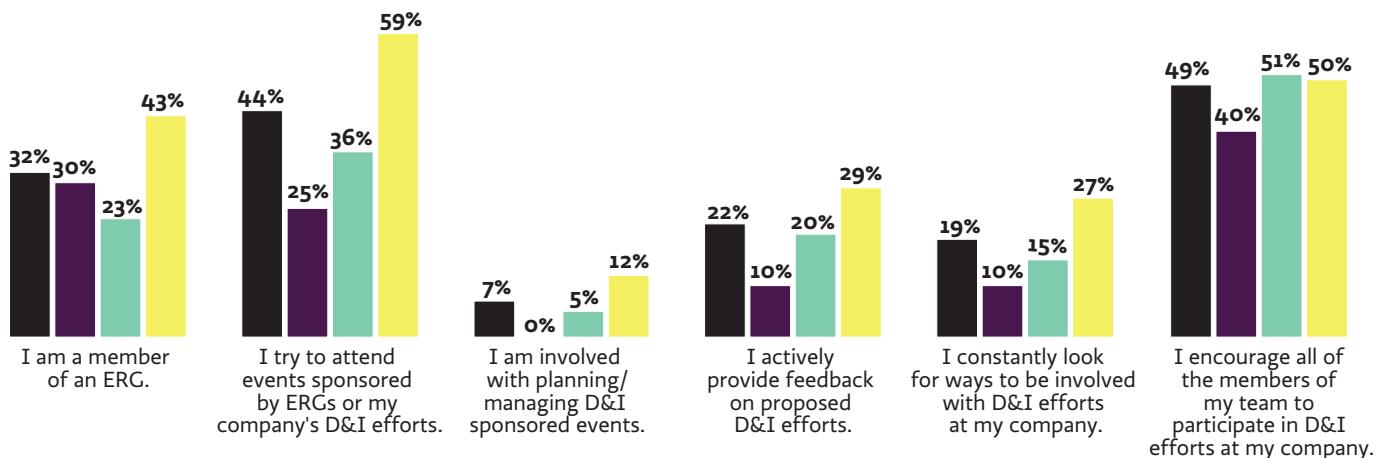


Feel Personally Offended When They See Bias Toward Others

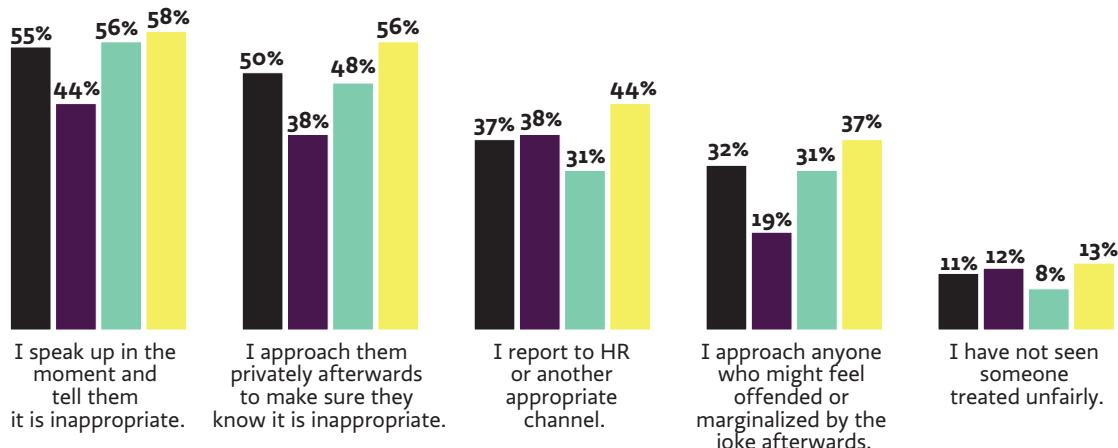


**They do, however, walk the walk more than just talk the talk.
They are far more likely to join ERGs and be part of D&I initiatives.**

Aggregate Boomer GenX Millennial



And they are far more likely to speak up when they see actual bias.



Standing up means acting when someone is treated unfairly because of their background.

Endnotes

1. Hinchliffe, Emma, "The Number of Female CEOs in the Fortune 500 CEOs Hits An All-Time High," May 18, 2020 <https://fortune.com/2020/05/18/women-ceos-fortune-500-2020/>
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