

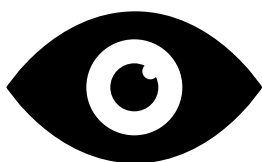
LEVO COMMUNITY

We Know There Is Racial Bias in the Workplace. Let's Stop Ignoring the Solutions.



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10



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BEST of 2017

Since I quit my New York finance job, I have been cautious of re-entering the full-time workforce. I was treated poorly and not supported well by my managers, and the toll it took on me has lasted well beyond my time there. For the past year and a half, I've turned to writing, about both my toxic professional experience and other difficult aspects of my life. Composing essays about my experience helped me face the feelings of failure I quietly struggled with after leaving my position.

I was overwhelmed by the number of positive responses I received from my Levo [essay on the microaggressions](#) I experienced at the New York private equity investment firm where I worked. They showed me I wasn't alone and I wasn't crazy—as victims of gaslighting are made to feel—but they also made me feel a little bit hopeless. If so many women had had the same experience I did, even in different industries and cities, what is the point of trying to work for anyone but myself?

Data shows that my fears are not unfounded. According to the 2017 Women in the Workplace report, Black women across a range of industries report receiving the least amount of support from their managers.

Only 23% of Black women surveyed said that their managers helped them navigate organizational politics, and 28% said their managers defended them or their work.

Studies by Catalyst and Harvard Business Review show that sponsorship is all but required for women's advancement and is more important than mentoring. With the lack of advocacy, Black women have the lowest promotion rate, per the Women in the Workplace report, just 4.9% compared to 7.4% for white women, and the highest attrition rate, 18.2% versus 15.4%.

I know that in order to be successful in any industry, I will need to change my outlook. I'll need to be able to trust again, and not *assume* that my employer is looking for ways to sabotage my performance. I'll need to ask plenty of questions to ensure that I am doing the best job I can do. I'll also need to keep a low tolerance for harassment, which I allowed to persist for too long before speaking up in my prior job.

The wealth of data on workplace diversity shows that structural changes need to be made, too. But deep-seated beliefs will not change until mindsets are changed. To facilitate this, unconscious bias training should be required of managers and HR directors.

Currently, fewer than 20% of companies report that employees involved in hiring and performance review decisions have received such training. Perhaps this will allow them to make more objective decisions rather than unintentionally relying on stereotypes that doubly affect Black women negatively.

Simulated real-life experiences may help managers see that these are real issues, not some things made up by people who just want to "game the system." I wish there were a way for someone to spend a day in the life of a Hispanic private equity professional who is asked in a grocery store where the cheese is because he was confused for the store manager. These experiences would, hopefully, awaken a necessary sense of empathy.

Managers should continue to actively recruit women and candidates of color to maintain a pipeline of leaders who may be inherently sensitive to these issues, and more likely to ensure fairness. But before that can happen,

we must eradicate the assumption that a female or minority candidate is less qualified than, and is taking the seat of, a more qualified white male candidate.

Any sense that a woman or person of color didn't earn their job or education through hard work needs to be eviscerated. Then there will be no need for managers to out them as "impostors" by not giving them necessary support.

One business lesson to be learned from the #MeToo movement is that employers need to listen empathetically when employees report negative behavior or harassment. When I finally reported a manager's racist comments in my previous job, I was told, "Well, he said that you said [x], and he was just responding to that."

Even his words were deemed more important than mine, making me feel worthless. Simply taking a report seriously and following up accordingly could change an entire work experience for a woman or a person of color. And if behavior like this has happened in the past, a sincere apology could go a long way to restoring trust.

Managers can hold town hall meetings or open discussions to be transparent about where the company stands on these issues. Given recent and historical attempts to normalize white supremacy and sexual harassment, employers should leave no question about what behaviors and attitudes are acceptable.

Ultimately, all of these initiatives will be futile if they do not have buy-in from the highest levels of management. Company leaders should recognize the *value* of a diverse workforce rather than seeing diversity programs as just another box to check.

This trivializes a deeply important matter and allows it to be seen as a waste of time. When managers take this view, they feel burdened, not inspired, and that attitude makes diversity matters worse instead of better.

For me, giving up hope entirely never felt like the right answer. It felt like I'd be admitting that my most negative feeling—that I would never be respected for my work—was right, and would somehow wind up being a self-fulfilling prophecy. And as much as I love writing, I began to crave the structure that comes with full-time work. I got an MBA because I wanted to solve complex business problems, and writing does not allow me to do that.

I wrestled with these questions in therapy and with my friends. When one of my friends asked me if I was looking for a job, I said, “No and yes. I'm in the throes of editing my book, but I've updated my resume and am scared to apply for anything. I'd pounce on a good opportunity if I came across one.”

I wasn't sure that was true. To be honest, I didn't feel confident that I'd know a good opportunity from a bad one, given my track record.

“Send me your resume,” she said.

I did, despite my doubts. And a month later, I found myself interviewing at my friend's company, a small consulting firm based just outside of Washington, DC, where I live.

The firm focuses on developing leadership who can readily face today's complex business challenges. Although it is management consulting, the advisory work leans more toward organizational behavior and psychology rather than strategic changes like costcutting or changing marketing positioning. The idea of helping managers become better leaders immediately resonated with me.

I've had several interviews with this consulting firm, and they might make me an offer. The old me would be overjoyed about this, thrilled to be considered out of so many qualified candidates. But the new me understands that asking a few questions now can save a world of heartache later.

I've researched the company's past employees on LinkedIn to see if they've made any drastic job changes or left after short stints (they haven't). I've asked to speak with more people who work at the firm because interviewing with eight people was not enough for me to get an in-depth view of the culture. I spent two hours with one of the partners, asking myriad questions about the performance review process and his management style, to all of which he responded patiently and honestly, to the best of my knowledge. I'm looking for future mentors and strong leaders who are introspective, aware of their own biases, and willing to overcome those biases to allow me to help them achieve their goals.

I'm still worried I'll relive my prior experiences—that, once again, I will not receive the support I need to advance in my career. Have I learned enough, by examining and writing about my experiences, to choose a good job and to advocate for myself in the workplace?

Although I am nervous, I have begun thinking about the impact a job like this could have on my life and my career. The company's emphasizes sharing a common purpose and empowering employees to execute their jobs without micromanagement—that's exactly what I lacked in my last job, and what I'd love to help companies fix now.

This opportunity could be more than a job for me—it could be a gamechanger. Especially if I can successfully help companies embrace and uplift women and people of color.

So, even though I'm nervous, even though I'm scared, I'm still hopeful. Perhaps there's a place for me in the business world after all—and perhaps the experiences that left me feeling wounded will serve to help me fly.