

A
BUSINESS LEADER'S
GUIDE TO



BY
DONALD THOMPSON

A Business Leader's Guide
To Driving Diversity And Inclusion
In The Workplace

By
Donald Thompson

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INTRODUCTION

Imagine a playground with a sandbox, full of kids from all backgrounds, having a good time and simply playing together. When we're young, we think more about the things that make us the same rather than think about the things that make us different. Children tend to be inclusive and pose a single question to those around them: "Do you want to play?".

As we get older, our thinking changes. Cliques develop. Instead of those similarities, we start noticing and looking at the differences between us which creates unnecessary gaps.

To me, diversity and inclusion should be like that sandbox, where everyone can play. There's so much opportunity in the world today that we don't need to be as segregated as we are. In terms of growing and chasing our dreams, diversity is an opportunity for all of us to get better together.

It's been on my heart to write this book for a long time. I've been very fortunate over the years to have a lot of people that have helped me achieve success. Individuals from different backgrounds, ages, and ethnicities have given me many opportunities to shine. So, as part of my give back, I'm writing this book.

While I'll continue to mentor and give advice individually, I wanted to create a platform of communication to share what I've learned to help more people faster. My goal in creating this platform is to give readers actionable steps for creating a more diverse workplace.

So how will this information be shared? Let me tell you a little about that.

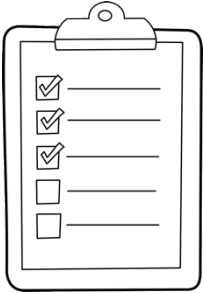


You probably have some experience with vinyl records, right? Either you enjoyed them when they were the primary way music was shared and distributed or you were recently introduced to them during the recent vinyl resurgence. Either way, you'll understand when I say there's an A side and a B side to a record. Well, there's also an A side and a B side to this book. The information I'm sharing is really for everyone, but some of it is geared towards a specific audience.

If you are an influencer, entrepreneur, executive, or current leader, then the A side is for you. Right now, you have the ability to influence change and you have the power to open doors for the right group of diverse people. You simply need a different point of perspective so that you can make that change in a positive way.

If you are younger in your career and are chasing your dreams, then the B side is for you. You need more knowledge on behavior and how to select the right organization that deserves your talents. You represent the "up and comers" who are ready to open new doors in order to achieve success.

When I'm coaching or seeking advice, I'm not big on theory. I like to focus on clear takeaways that provide you with information to help you be better tomorrow. In today's accelerated business cycles, you need action steps that you can implement immediately.



While I encourage you to read the entire book, no matter where you are in your career, there may be advice that's targeted differently between the A side and B side. Let's call it a remix. In each chapter you'll find a theme, a real-world example, and action steps that you can apply to your career and life right away.

THE A SIDE

This is dedicated to the people of influence with the right heart and the power to open doors but may need an alternate perspective in order to make positive change.

Building Diverse Leadership Teams

One thing that I've learned over the years in building companies and hiring people is that if you have a “one size fits all” mentality, your business is not going to be as successful as it could be.

Having a diverse team gives you the power of a complete thought around any topic or problem and the opportunity to compete. To compete at a high level in today's global marketplace, you need the ability to understand the entire landscape of a problem. As diversity of thought has a huge impact on your bottom line your leadership team needs to incorporate all aspects of diversity, from gender to ethnicity, backgrounds and beyond.

Here are some stats that speak for themselves:



When employees “think their organization is committed to and supportive of diversity and they feel included,” there's an 83% increase in their ability to innovate. (Deloitte study)



67% of candidates say that a “diverse workforce was an important factor when evaluating companies and job offers.” (Glassdoor study)



“Inclusive companies enjoy 2.3x higher cash flow.” (Teamable Blog)

How do you build a diverse leadership team?

Let's start with a couple of excuses I've heard as challenges to hiring a diverse team.

"I want to build a diverse team, but there just isn't a good pipeline of African-Americans in sales and marketing."

"I'd like more women on my team, but there aren't enough females with computer science degrees to have the best and brightest in our company."

Maybe you've said something like this or heard something similar from others on your team who are in a position to hire.

You might call this a *challenge*, but I call it *bullshit*.

Why? Because leaders exist to solve problems. It's just that simple. If you are a good leader and you have good leaders on your team, any diversity challenges you have is just another problem to solve.

The first thing you have to do is make it a priority. Don't allow your team to provide you with a bunch of excuses on why it can't be done. If you have an attitude that diversity is a priority for your company, meaning it's a corporate imperative and something your leaders are measured by, then your good leaders, your *great* leaders, will get it done.

*"Prioritizing diversity and sharing these efforts with your employees may also be key retention strategies since **57% of employees** want their company to do more to increase diversity."* (Teamable Blog)

If you really want to make diversity a priority at your company, ask yourself these three questions.

Question #1: How is diversity measured at your company?

Think about this from a selfish standpoint, in job preservation mode. If your team has performance metrics related to creating diverse teams and they are measured on it, their thinking will change. If there isn't a clearly defined measurement of

diversity at your company, then it's not a priority. And that priority is set from the top.

Question #2: Where and how do you search for talent?

This is simply about outreach. If you don't have a broad range of diverse places to search, you are probably missing a lot of opportunity. Building a diverse leadership team means you have a wide range of up and comers in your organization to choose from because of the different viewpoints from all walks of life.

Studies by the Social Mobility Commission show numerous industries are failing to hire talented young people from less advantaged backgrounds because they recruit from a small pool of elite universities and hire those who fit in with the culture. (Social Mobility Commission)

One way to do that is by recruiting your entry level folks from a diverse set of universities. Having formal summer internship programs or other ways that students can be exposed to your company are good ways to search for strong talent.

Question #3: Who does your recruiting?

Make sure that the people doing your recruiting are from a diverse population. We all have unconscious biases and have a natural comfort level with people similar to us.

Think about gender. If your recruiting team is all male, they might not even think to attend a job fair at one of the many all-female colleges in the country. Similarly, if a young, bright, talented student at an all-female college never sees your company at any of their recruiting events, she may not apply for a position at your company that she is extremely qualified for. To attract diverse talent to your company, you need a diverse team representing your company.

Action Steps for Building Diverse Leadership Teams



- 1 Facilitate open dialogue.
- 2 Spend time outside of your comfort zone.
- 3 Challenge your team's thinking.
- 4 Vary what you read and watch.

1 Facilitate Open dialogue

As a business leader, I want good participation from the people in the room.

Here's an example:

I was at a board meeting once with about 25 people in the room. I was sitting next to this young lady who was trying to make a comment, but she just wasn't able to be heard. I decided to direct the discussion and acknowledge her. I asked the team to hold tight just for a minute to see what she had to say. And of course, her idea was amazing. After the meeting, she thanked me for helping to slow the conversation, so she could voice her opinion.

As a business leader, if you see this happening to someone, it is part of your duty to aid in their voice being heard. When I'm in meetings, I want the full breadth of everyone's ideas so that I can be better and be smarter. I want the goals of my company, organization, or initiative to get to the winning element faster. And for me, everything is about getting to the winning elements faster.

2 Go Outside of Your Comfort Zone

As a leader, start spending time outside of your own comfort zone. If you're leading an organization and everyone on your leadership team is a white male, you may have a challenge.

I'm not saying your business isn't strong or that you're not a good person. What I am saying is that you don't have great optics to attract diverse talent, or you haven't grown diverse talent in your organization like you want.

Start spending time with leaders in your industry that have different backgrounds. You will naturally be exposed to different ways of thinking and different ways to lead your team. Finding others who don't look like you but are in the same industry gives you unlimited opportunities to learn about embracing diversity as a leader.

3 Challenge Your Team's Thinking

This one is really important. The next time a big decision about a hire is being made and you are given the top 2-3 candidates to review, ask your team a few questions about their selection process. *How many people of color were considered for this position? How many women?*

If they can't easily answer those questions, then you haven't made diversity a priority. If they know that every time they bring you a set of candidates you'll be asking these same questions, their thinking will change a little bit. This doesn't mean you need to have a quota of candidates from any demographic. It just means you need to know who was considered.

92 percent of tech founders know about unconscious biases in hiring. But, only 45 percent are doing anything about it. (Techstar)

If diverse candidates are consistently not even considered, then you might have a problem in the way that you are looking for them and where you are recruiting talent. Again, great leaders know how to solve problems, but it starts with knowing that a problem exists.

4 Read and Watch Something Different

Once you start, this one is fairly easy to do. Let's say you are a conservative who only watches Fox News. Guess what? You only get what Fox News delivers to you - one perspective from one viewpoint that is already similar to yours.

If you only watch romance movies or if you only read sci-fi novels, it's the same thing. YOU are fully in control of how much diverse information gets into your thinking.

Instead of someone with a narrow way of thinking, be someone open to dialogue and discussion. To make yourself more open and sensitive to different points of view, I encourage you to integrate different cultures and different experiences into your life.

As a business leader, I'm often faced with tough problems. I'm a believer in diversity but I'm also a believer in winning. Literally, I want the best idea to win.

When I have diverse points of view, I have better choices. And with better choices, I make better decisions. When I make better decisions, my business grows. It really is that simple.

No More Walking On Eggshells

If you feel uncomfortable talking about diversity, take a number. Most people feel the same way. When you're talking about something that's new or different (politics, religion, race, etc.), people often walk on eggshells because of fear. I think this is something we can overcome personally, professionally, and as a team.

You've probably heard the popular definition of fear:



It's so true.

Most of the time, what holds you back from your goals is not even material. It's usually all about perception and how others will see you.

Ask yourself: *Why am I scared?*

Here are some common reasons I've heard from people who fear discussions about diversity:

"I don't want to come across as inappropriate or offensive to anyone on my team."

"I haven't practiced having tough conversations about things that make me uncomfortable, so I don't know what to say."

"I've grown up believing it's best to not discuss difficult topics (such as politics or religion) at work."

You can't overcome fears without realizing that you have them. It's critical to realize that there are certain subjects that you may or may not feel comfortable digging into. You also can't overcome these fears without trying to improve yourself along the way.

Sometimes, the most important things to talk about are actually the things that we are afraid of talking about the most. But when you avoid talking about things that matter, it does a disservice to everyone. So, let's alleviate and break down some of these fears with tips on how to talk about diversity in a way that doesn't make you (or others) uncomfortable.

People are naturally afraid of being judged or criticized for saying something wrong. No one wants to be labeled as insensitive or offensive. The root of most of our fear is how others perceive us, especially when it comes to speaking about diversity.

Let me give you an example. As an African-American leader, I feel like you can ask me anything about any topic. Just don't use a bunch of modifiers. Here is what I mean:

"I want to ask you something but I'm not really sure how to ask it."

"I want to let you to know that I'm very sensitive to your perspective."

Listen, I'm a busy guy who likes it when people get straight to the point. Save us twenty minutes of awkwardness and let's use that time to have a real conversation. Those modifiers actually make me more uncomfortable than the question or topic at hand. But that's what fear does. It gets in the way of good discussion and inclusiveness.

You need to find someone in your life who can educate you on sensitive topics. A great tool for that is LinkedIn. If you search for diversity and inclusion on LinkedIn, you will definitely get a lot of results. I guarantee it. If you send a message to a diversity consultant with an honest question on diversity, they will answer you back.

Don't be fearful. If you ask for a book recommendation for being more inclusive in your organization, I bet you will get a response.

To learn, grow, and be a more inclusive leader, you have to make changes to yourself and your behavior. No one can do this for you. If you are open and willing, there certainly will be people to help you on your journey.



Action Steps for Discussion Tough Topics

- 1 Practice asking the tough questions.
- 2 Spend time outside of your comfort zone.
- 3 Be aware of your tone.
- 4 Ignore cultural norms.

1 Practice Asking the Tough Questions

Most leaders want to be empathetic, authentic, and courageous. Yet many leaders fear having tough conversations or asking tough questions simply because they don't have practice doing it. Anything that's hard to talk about needs to be practiced. But where can you practice? You can really get practice anywhere.

First, practice asking tough questions during meetings. Use this time to be direct, but professional, and bring up questions around people that you are comfortable with. If you are a leader, you may also inspire your team to feel safe to do the same.

Second, you can practice during your one on one time with your direct reports. You can use this opportunity to ask questions that you haven't had the courage to ask before, and to get to know more about your team members that may be different than you.

You've heard the phrase 'practice makes perfect'. As a leader, you need to take advantage of every opportunity you see to practice asking tough questions to prepare you for any difficult conversations down the road.

2 Spend Time Outside of Your Comfort Zone

Remember in the last chapter that I told you to step outside of your comfort zone? I'll say it again. Stepping out of your comfort zone is both fun and scary at the same time. But, you have to be OK with being a little uncomfortable so that you can be exposed to people a little different than you. In order to grow, you have to get out of your same routine and try things that are new and different.

Here's something you can do right away:

Let's say you're a white female. Pick up a magazine like Black Enterprise, whose target audience is African-American. Simply read the articles; nothing major, right? But by reading those articles, which are written from a different perspective and for a different audience, it may shed some light and answer some questions you have about African-American businesses.

Another way to do something different - if you are a church goer - is to visit a different church. Visit a church of a different race or denomination. Interact with them, not so you change your beliefs but to get a better understanding of what other people believe and how others worship. I encourage you to go out and meet new and different people that are outside of your current zone of influence.

Over the years, I've found that the overwhelming majority of people in our country (and world) are nice people. We all have similar goals - we want to have a good job, create a better life for our kids, take care of our family, and have a great reputation. It's common to hear a lot of negativity in the press that may lead to division and separation, but in the end, just like in the sandbox at the playground, most people are good people and want to get along with each other.

Keep in mind, when you go into an environment where you see different people who don't look or talk like you, there is a good chance they will welcome you.

Once you start to explore new people and places, you will have more opportunity to learn and ask questions. But a caution when asking questions - I've found that both the *content* of your question and the *sensitivity* of your tone are equally important.

3 Be Aware of Your Tone

Being a direct person, I don't shy away from a tough conversation or question. But to make sure my intent is understood, I may use a different tone, referring to the phrasing I use and my voice inflection.

An Example with Good Tone:

Hey, I'm struggling with something and I need your help. My intent is to help our organization grow in a diverse way, and I want to ask you a couple of questions about diversity.

If that person responds negatively, does not want to help you or answer your questions, they have to be a total asshole. If they take offense, they can't help you anyway. You want to seek out people who are willing to help you improve the diversity of your workplace culture and help educate you as well.

4 Ignore (Some of) the Cultural Norms

You hear it all of the time. The things we're not supposed to talk about at work or the dinner table or wherever. These so called "cultural norms" hold us back from having the tough conversations we need to have in order to start breaking down barriers and eliminate fears.

Let's talk about the workplace.

I'm pretty sure you have people from all political parties at your job and on your team. And somehow the work gets done, and no one holds protests at the office. Isn't that interesting? It's because regardless of their political affiliation, the people on your team share a common goal. They want to do well professionally, and they want the company to do well. At the end of the day, who cares who someone voted for if everyone is working towards the same goal? This also means that a person shouldn't take offense if a coworker asks a personal question about politics. They might just be trying to get to know their colleague.

Sometimes it feels like these cultural norms were established for a really small part of the population. In my mind, it's the silliest thing ever. Remember my tips about tone? And when I said most people are good people? As long as the tone is right, I really believe that two people can talk about anything, and good discussion can take place about any topic, no matter what each agrees (or disagrees) on.

By and large, I've always found that these unfounded fears limit us from interacting with and helping each other grow.

Realizing that we're all more alike than we are different will continue to reduce these barriers and fears. As our country begins to go through drastic cultural changes, overcoming some of these fears when speaking about diversity needs to happen so that we can all work together as a country and as a team.

The Best Ideas Always Win

I spent most of my career in sales. If you are any good at the sales process (and if you're selling anything of significance), you know that you can't do everything by yourself. You need a strong support team. When I led a technology company, I worked with a team of very strong technical people. Currently, I have a very strong creative team to build out digital services solutions. But I've been honest throughout my career - I can't do it by myself and I need to make an effort to always have diverse teams working with me.

When you're dealing with significant problems, the other thing I've found is that you need different points of view to attack them. To solve problems quickly, your goal should be to find solutions that are lasting and gain insights that can be shared with your clients.

As a leader or executive, creating a culture where the best idea wins will set you up for success. You'll serve your clients better while creating a more inclusive environment where diverse people of all backgrounds and disciplines can work well together. This kind of culture will help you recruit and retain great people.

"The worst thing you can do as a leader is have talented people in your company that you don't listen to." – Donald Thompson

So how do you create this kind of culture? Let me start by telling you what **not** to do.

People should not be scared to bring new and innovative thinking to the table. Organizations driven by fear, although they can be very successful financially, is not the type of culture that I recommend you create.



First of all, that type of culture doesn't bring people together. I decided as I was building teams that I wanted to foster a culture that allowed everybody to participate in their areas of strength. Remember, diversity isn't just about gender or race, it's also about experience and skill sets. Some people are brilliant technical minds; some people are good with branding; and some people have great sales acumen. You're rarely the strongest or the smartest person in the room on everything about which you have an opinion. But if you can bring people in their collective strengths together, you and your team can do great things.

Let me share action steps that you can do today. These are tips on how to create an inclusive culture where people are comfortable sharing their ideas and believe that the best idea really does win, regardless of where it comes from.

Action Steps To Ensure The Best Idea Wins



- 1 Have more effective meetings.
- 2 Lead by example.
- 3 Lead by walking around.

1 Have More Effective Meetings

As a leader, all of your meetings should be well run. For me, there are a few basic items you need for an effective meeting:

An agenda. Sounds like a no brainer, right? I'm always surprised at how many people send out meeting invites with no agenda. How can you get prepared for a meeting if you don't know what will be discussed? And why would anyone accept an invite and attend a meeting with no information about its purpose? Having a simple agenda drives who needs to attend, what needs to be discussed, and how people can prepare for the meeting. The agenda emphasizes the meeting's importance and that, as the leader, you respect everyone's time and input.

An excellent facilitator. The facilitator, not always the leader or the highest ranking person in the room, is like the meeting conductor. They can lead the discussion, encourage people to share their ideas, and make sure everyone in the room has a chance to contribute to the discussion.

A deliberate attendee list. Do you know why people hate meetings? Because there are so many meetings and very few are run well. People feel their time isn't being valued and therefore their opinions probably aren't valued either. Most people want to do well and be productive, which can be a challenge if you attend meetings that are a waste of your time. Encourage your team to be very deliberate with meeting attendee lists. If people are invited into the room where invitations are very thoughtfully made, they know they are important and that someone wants to hear their feedback. As a leader, I try to get everyone involved in meetings because quite frankly, I know from experience that the best ideas will come from your team members.

If done correctly, these three steps can save you and your team a lot of time while encouraging people to openly share their ideas.

Reading Recommendation: *All Hats On Deck: Implementing A 360° Decision Framework For Ideas, Challenges And Opportunities*

I encourage you and your team to read this book that is available on my website at donaldthompson.com. In this book, I share the foundation of a decision making process that I've implemented for the last twenty years. It's very helpful for leaders who want to encourage ideation among teams, and it provides a framework for people to communicate and attack problems without attacking individuals.

The principles in the book are based on the Six Thinking Hats methodology originally defined by Edward de Bono. Each hat represents a different theme and a different way of thinking. The concept is to use different hats to think collectively all the way around an idea or challenge. As the meeting facilitator, you call a hat to everyone in the room and then it's their job to discuss the situation from that specific perspective.

The process allows people to think outside of their natural biases and really contribute to a 360 degree view of problem solving. This process has been great for me as an individual and as a leader.

2 Lead by Example

People watch you as a leader more than they listen to what you say. Most leaders think that people listen, but unless what you say lines up with your actions, they don't. All leaders should lead by example, independent of the size of their

organization. If you say that you care about your people, you've got to demonstrate that, right? Leaders have to treat their people like they are more than just someone hitting the keyboards.

At one of the companies I'm leading right now, we're working on the handoff between our internal teams of business development, client services, and delivery. I've taken on the action of bringing in a handful of new accounts, and while I have a great business development team, these were not accounts they had worked on.

By integrating all the teams in the company for business that I brought in, it creates a stronger impact than just me talking about how I think it should be done. Now this doesn't mean that my way is the best or only way. I simply provided another option and showed that we're all in this together.

3 Lead by Walking Around

By simply walking around, leaders can encourage ideation. Pretty easy, right? Asking people questions about what they are working on or where they feel things can be improved, helps to break down walls with leadership. You will be amazed at what you find out about your company just by walking around and talking to your team.

Most people won't share their ideas unless they're asked into the conversation. One of the greatest compliments that you can pay to your employees is to sincerely ask what they think and genuinely care to understand and process what they say. It doesn't mean you're going to take advantage of all their ideas or do everything that they suggest, but you create a dialogue. It's one of the ways that I learn something new every day and built rapport with my employees.

This is especially important for new hires. Let's say you hired a new communications specialist. You should want to get to know them, find out about their background and once they are settled into the job, understand what they are doing for the company. Doing this helps to break down any uncomfortable walls. If you get to know someone and have a positive interaction while the stakes are not super high, you'll get the best out of them when there is an issue or problem. Because the relationship is built, they're already used to sharing ideas with leadership and know there's no judgment for what they say.

One of the best examples I have of a great idea coming from an unlikely source happened about a decade ago when I was running a software company. We were working on a set of software challenges with a client in Europe. We heard from a lot of different people but the individual that gave us the best opportunity both in their idea and their execution of the solution was one of our interns, who was also a senior in college. His insight into this problem was so critical that we quickly hired him full-time, got permission from his professors to take time out of school and flew him to Germany to represent our company in solving this problem. Our client was comfortable having him solve the problem because his idea, implementation, and quality assurance made him the absolute best person to do the job.

As a firm, we didn't care who led the initiative as long as the client was happy and the problem was solved. It didn't matter that the answer and execution came from a 19 year old intern. This is a perfect example of where a lot of people gave their opinions and the best idea won - regardless of where it came from.

Understanding and Appreciating Differences

If you're trying to build a team that moves the needle in the marketplace, you need high performers. When people feel comfortable in the environment they're in, they can perform at a high level. It's not about you as a leader being comfortable – it's really about your people. As a leader, you have to move out of your own comfort zone and ask simple questions to get to know your employees. Asking questions builds relationships and helps everyone understand each other better. It helps you identify and appreciate the uniqueness that each person on your team carries.

You have to relate to people at a level that they feel comfortable and valued. There's an old saying, 'People do business with people they like'. It's the same for employees – employees stick with companies when they have leadership that they trust. And in order to develop trust with people, you need to get to know them.

Let me give you a quick example:

There's a young lady at one of my companies who I found out is from Pittsburgh, and I had actually lived there for five years. We had a point of connection because we knew some of the same locations, the cool things to do downtown, the terrible potholes, and those crazy hills. A little bit of trust was built when we started talking because I was familiar with her hometown and she was comfortable discussing that with me.

This can be applied to any topic that an employee is passionate about – athletics, community service, or women's issues. I may not be the subject matter expert on certain topics, but if I understand what makes people tick, I can find a point of connection that creates a foundation for real conversations.

If you're not comfortable with finding the points of connectivity, you should really look within yourself and ask what you are in business for every day. If it's just the dollars and the bottom line, then you will never move outside of your comfort zone and build that trust with your employees.

And another (longer) example:

At one of my firms, I recently had a meeting with a group of new hires who were within 60 days of joining the company. I not only talked to them about the history of the company, but we all shared information about ourselves. We simply sat around the table and had a conversation. And what did I learn? I can now identify where to get the best blueberry pancakes in Raleigh, N.C., I know which of my employees loves EDM, who on my team is a cowgirl, and who has a green thumb.

The lesson here? I found out different things they were each passionate about that I would never learn if we were just talking about work-related tasks only. Yes, we talked about our business and improvements they'd like to see for on-boarding. But the most important parts of our conversation were discussing their passions because we were starting to build our relationship from a place where they are the most comfortable.

New hire meetings are something I recommend doing regularly. I'll admit, sometimes I get busy and it doesn't happen as often as I would like. But it's something I know works and that I am working on prioritizing. Leadership is not about perfection as much as it is about progress. These meetings are not a huge time commitment and are a lot of fun. Like other leaders, I have more than enough to do. But to me, it is important to slow down and take the time to get to know the people behind the work product.



Action Steps for Understanding and Appreciating Differences

- 1 Build personal relationships with your employees.
- 2 Build trust with your employees.

1 Build Better Personal Relationships

As a leader, it's critical for you to build better personal relationships with your employees. Every leader, no matter how busy, can take some time to ask a few questions and show that you are interested in your people as *people* and not just workers.

Leaders in larger organizations can still have the same kind of conversations that I have in an organization of 50. You just can't have as many or as often. To me, there

really is no excuse for not making this kind of effort and finding a way to implement these types of conversations.

Here's how you make it important if you have a large team (50+):

While you may not have opportunities to speak with every new hire in your company, you have leadership team meetings, right? Take a few minutes during each meeting and have your people tell you something interesting about a new hire in their department. If your leaders can't answer that question, you know that you have a challenge. If they can't brag about their team, something is wrong.

At some level, trust must be built with your employees for them to feel comfortable working in your company's environment. When you are working with people that have backgrounds different than yours, barriers already exist. Before you can have real, authentic relationships, you have to break these down.

2 Build Trust With Your Employees

Right now, we are living in a time where it's 'us versus them.' No matter what your beliefs are or political affiliation, we've collectively created an environment where people don't think in commonalities. When you focus only on how to beat the other side, you create a negative overtone that can seep into your entire company if you allow it. In order to counterbalance this, you have to be a very strong leader and have a very strong presence of why you're different.

Here's what I mean:

Within the companies I lead, we are very active in our community and encourage it amongst our employees. This isn't exactly work-related, but it can help build trust within your teams. If we, at all levels of leadership, demonstrate activity that is generally good, and community based – and do it together as a team– it allows us to find commonalities within our teams. People in my organization see us doing things for and with people who are different, but we are all working towards a common goal of helping others. Building trust is about exhibiting the behaviors that you want emulated in your organization.

Another thing you can do is highlight the behaviors of others that you want demonstrated in your organization. Meetings are a great place to grow your business and educate your team but also to highlight behaviors you want to see

duplicated. For example, I was in a meeting recently where a young lady was bragging on her teammate and it was really cool. She talked about an artist on her team, and how amazing she was at doing infographics. She mentioned how her teammate loves taking facts and figuring out how to put them into a creative package. I knew this employee was a good designer, but I had no idea about her infographic-making skills. I found out something new but only because one of her peers was bragging on her in a public setting.

Most people know that if you want to get in my good graces, don't tell me how amazing you are, tell me something amazing about one of your teammates. If you recognize your teammates in a group setting, by default I think highly of you because that means you noticed the contribution your teammate is making. Praising someone for praising someone else is a good way to encourage the behaviors that you want to take place in your organization.

The last thing I'll leave you with:

In getting ready to write this book, I had a number of conversations with peers, mentors, and employees on my team. I wanted to get a variety of perspectives to help shape the advice I wanted to give to you. About a month ago, I had a round table discussion with some younger people at my firm followed by a separate discussion with my leadership team, where I learned a very valuable lesson that you sometimes have to be reminded of as a leader.

Anytime you talk about diversity or inclusion and there are different groups represented in the discussion – it will be an emotional topic. You have to remember that this topic hits people in different ways that you might not understand. Even with folks that work together every day and trust each other in their work relationships, there will be divergence in opinions and perspectives because everyone is different. We were raised differently. We are ethnically different. We are different genders. So, we all think and feel differently.

As a leader, you must work towards having a performance-based focus by creating an environment where you understand and appreciate everyone's differences. In order to win, you should want the best players on your team, **no matter how different each might be.**

Final Thoughts

FOR THE LEADERS WITH INFLUENCE

As leaders, we have a responsibility to shape the culture of a company, to make sure that ideas are not only welcomed but that the best idea always wins. In my opinion, creating a strong support system with diverse points of view is the best way to creatively tackle problems and set your team up for success. The best ideas come from group thinking so by creating a culture that allows everyone to participate: **everyone wins.**

THE B SIDE

This side is dedicated to the youth of the world, who are looking for advice on how to win in a diverse marketplace.

Don't Let Your Past Dictate Your Future

As an emerging leader, your future doesn't have to equal your past.

Why do I say that?

Because no one cares about your past. So why should you? Reflect on the fact that you can either do a job or you can't.

As I've grown in my career, it's not obvious whether I graduated from college. My lack of a degree didn't matter to anyone once I was able to sell a million dollars of technology related services. My success was so loud, nobody gave a shit that I didn't have a degree.

I knew there was a certain amount of production I could achieve to make it easy for my lack of pedigree to be ignored. Not by everyone, but by most people. Some companies turned me down because of it, and that's fine. But there will always be enough people that say, "Wait a minute, you sold a million dollars' worth of this stuff? We'd like you to sell three million dollars' worth of stuff for us."

Let me share a quick story from my past. Actually, it's a long story, but important for this point.

As I get older, sometimes I get a little nostalgic and I remember leaving school without a degree. I had a lot of big dreams, but no degree. So, as you can imagine, I had a lot of interesting jobs. One of these jobs was as a security guard. I was guarding a warehouse. There was nothing in this warehouse. Literally the dumbest thing ever.

So, I'm basically walking around a one mile facility of empty warehouses. It's dark. They had rats. It was pretty scary. Black man with a flashlight. Empty warehouse. It was like I was the star of the intro to a horror movie every night.

I did that job for a while and during my shifts I would read. I'd read overnight and get paid for it. More importantly I did a good job, whatever that meant, guarding an

empty warehouse. I got promoted to guarding corporate buildings. I always requested to guard the executive floor and I would even take extra shifts to make more money.

When I was making my rounds, I would always look at the larger rooms and larger offices. The bigger the office, the more books I saw on the desks, the more magazines and periodicals I saw. I would also see some of the executives working late. Depending on their mood or their demeanor, I'd sneak a question or two in. I'd ask them about success and how they achieved their success. I was always encouraged and was always given advice and a recommendation on something to read.

The reason I always say your past doesn't equal your future is that I realized in these late nights as a security guard that my destiny wasn't set in stone.

I was doing a job that I hated at the time. But it was fuel to get me moving toward by dreams. It was just part of my journey - it wasn't my end state. This is very important to remember when you are growing, because we all have missteps and take paths that may be a bit unique from time to time, but I really focused on the fact that my current situation didn't dictate my future goals and my future state.

"My success is heavily based on my addiction to learn more". - Donald Thompson

I'm reasonably intelligent and a fast learner but I also know a lot of smart people that are willing to answer my questions. It's all about your mindset and attitude.

There is something to be learned from everyone, proved by the story I just told you about. It doesn't matter who I'm with or what situation I'm in, I'm always open to new ideas or ways to think about things and better ways to relate to people.

So how do you make an impact when you have very little experience, or your pedigree isn't like everyone else's?

Action Steps To Focus On Your Future (And Not The Past)



- 1 Take advantage of being 'the only'.
- 2 Dress the part and ask questions.
- 3 Surround yourself with people that matter.
- 4 Be a team player.

1 Use Being ‘the Only’ to Your Advantage

It's really tough when you're “the only” in the room. This applies to all things: race, gender, age, religion, etc. I've been “the only” African-American in the room more times than I can even recall or care to really think about.

Women represent 45% of the S&P 500 workforce, but only 4% of the CEOs. (Institute for Women's Leadership at Nichols College)

Two thoughts that I've had while being “the only” in the room:

Number One - Your mindset should be to use it to your advantage. Quite frankly, when I hit a room and am the only African-American, I get a lot more credibility. People in their subconscious are like, “Whoa, how did he get here? He must be really smart. He must be really talented.” And I don't ruin that potential perception by saying dumb things out loud.

I've learned how to ask a lot of questions and not make a lot of statements. Using a basketball metaphor, be a point guard and pass the ball to others in the room. Extend the comments and the thought process of others to get comfortable in the conversational flow.

Number Two - Being “the only” is a very significant responsibility. Oftentimes, I break the mold. But it is MY responsibility to do well, to articulate well, and to be very prepared for any meeting that I ever attend. That doesn't mean I take over a conversation or assume I am the best in the room. It just means that I am always able to give my best effort because I am prepared.

You have to realize that if you portray an image that is excellent, you begin changing hearts, minds, and begin to combat unconscious bias. You are able to change others' mindsets in a positive way. Because they met you, interacted with you and had a good experience, you were able to change their subconscious reaction to other “onlys” in the room – not to mention, you probably taught them something or changed their ideas on a topic by sharing your point of view.

Being “the only” should never deter you from bettering yourself, your future, or achieving your goals. There is a reason why you're in the room that you're in. When you have a positive mindset, it will reflect in everything that you do. Always ask

questions to continue learning and try to make it a goal to learn something new every day.

2 Dress The Part & Ask Questions

When you're the youngest person in the room, you have to dress up and work hard. People seriously underestimate young people. Millennials especially get a bad rap. *You don't want to work. You're flighty. You don't really appreciate the past*, and all these things that the older generations assume to be true. In my opinion, younger workers are just more cause-focused. In order for you to believe in and put your full self into something, you have to believe in the organization and people you're with.

When you're young and starting out in the business world, it's important that you lead with questions and you learn powerful phrases. For example, say things like "I understand your point. I'm not sure I fully agree yet. Can you help me better understand from your perspective?."

This signals to the person that you want to have more dialogue, but it's expressed in a way where you're not necessarily overtly challenging. You're simply asking for additional information, so you can better understand a particular point.

If you come across as somebody that's hungry and eager to learn, you will find that many people are willing to help you because successful people want to pass on knowledge. Initially, don't try to be the leader in the room. Try to be the sponge and the one that asks the best questions.

3 Who You Surround Yourself With Matters

It's easy to pick your first and second job solely for the starting salary or the company benefits. Yes, it is important that you're not underpaid or taken advantage of. But that's definitely not the most important thing. The most important thing is your portfolio, who your manager is, and if they are willing to teach you. Who you spend time with and the thought process you develop is where your money's at.

Having mentors that really wanted to add value to my life were a blessing to help me, as they really accelerated the work that I did. If you choose your manager and your manager's manager wisely, your career is going to be much better off than if you simply pick a great company. If you have a great company, but you have a bad manager, you can still fail and have a horrible experience. The ability to surround

yourself with mentors should be the most important factor in your selection process.

Search for exposure to people that are above you or a part of different organizations. When you put yourself in these different groups, you will be able to listen to leaders and maybe even ask them questions. Put yourself in the position to be around positive, strong, growth-focused people. When asking for people's time, know that not everyone will say yes. But, you only need one or two people that you click with to really be a great asset to help grow your career.

4 Be a Team Player

I look for people that are professionally ambitious but also excellent team players. I very much value people that brag on their teammates and I expect them to want to help and encourage each other. But how do you become a great team player while making sure you still get the recognition that you deserve? Well, it really comes back to knowing what you are trying to accomplish.

Your main goal is to be valuable up the hierarchical chain and across the ladder. Remember, to be valuable is to be helpful. Even before the recognition, you start to get information and understand the organization that you're working with. It also shows who can help you, which is very important.

Once you begin to get established at your job, I would ask to be on the interview teams. Even if you're not going to be critical to the hiring decision, simply be a fly on the wall. Interview skills are one of the weakest, most critical skills of people in businesses. The ability to gain insight by having dialogue with others is important in growing your career, if you're going to become an entrepreneur and really in every aspect of your life.

Your future can be whatever you want to create. Your past has nothing to do with it. If you stay focused, surround yourself with the right people, and be excellent in everything you do for your team and company, you'll be on the right track to make a positive impact in the workplace.

Be Too Good To Ignore

Let's talk about being too good to ignore. It's important. Do you think anyone ever made history by being average? The answer of course is no. Let me give you some tips that have not only helped me in my career, but also helped me choose my staff.

Let's start from the beginning of the hiring process. If you are interviewing with me, you can assume I've read your resume and agreed to chat with you. I don't *really* care about all of the past things you've done. I only care about the past things you've done to the degree that you can tie them to the things that I need. If you seem like the person that can get things done, then congratulations, you just might have a job.

Now here are the things to always keep in the back of your mind while trying to be that person.

DNA Level Greatness

When I'm interviewing younger employees for my organization, I look at two things: their resume and track record. Both of which can't be expected to be tremendously long and that's actually a good thing.

Most hiring managers look for certain basic capabilities, but I'm interested in your skills at the DNA level. These are things that are hard-wired based on who you are as an individual and what you learned from your parents, mentors, and friends.

Here are some DNA level skills that I look for when interviewing candidates:

Do you have the ability to learn?

I look for candidates that can learn new skills quickly and apply those skills to their jobs. If you can demonstrate to me that you know how to take in new information, learn it quickly, and apply it to my business, you will stand out from the crowd.

Do you do your homework?

I always give more credit to people that do research prior to an interview with the company and the people interviewing them. It shows that you're not only prepared but that you're dedicated, and that you care.

Do you ask the right questions?

Pay attention to the depth and quality of the questions that you ask. It's not enough just to show up with questions - anyone can do that. Ask thought provoking questions like, "What are your measurements of success that you, as my manager, would be really proud of if we achieved together?." THAT will help you stand out.

Do you care?

Finally, and most importantly, care enough to be genuinely interested in a company. If that sounds like too much work for you, then you don't care enough, and you need to look for a job elsewhere.

These things are extremely important in an interview setting and will ultimately prepare you for success in the business world. And that's great. I'm happy for you. But now you have a job to do. How are you planning on making that great too?

Recognizing Greatness In Others Makes You Great

I want people that are professionally ambitious and excellent team players. I value people that brag on their teammates and encourage their teammates to pursue their area of expertise. Teams that work together throughout the whole process are more likely to share the credit when they do something big together.

By being helpful initially with different parts and aspects of your organization, this will give you information of the inner workings of the company. Because you have taken the time to gain this insight, you will therefore be more intelligent and will be able to make smarter decisions. These smart decisions make you a desirable candidate to mentor and people will start watching. After you've done that, all you need to do is keep an eye out and wait for doors to start opening.

Action Steps For Being Too Good To Ignore



- 1 Put in more effort than everyone else.
- 2 Earn credibility at your job.
- 3 Be confident in what you do.

1 Put In More Effort Than Others

Effort is a personal choice. How much effort do you give to the job every single day? How early you start? How late you stay?

This is old school, but I would never leave the office before my boss did when I was early in my career. I just wouldn't do it. If I finished everything I had, I would drop by and say, "Hey listen, do you need a hand with anything?." Once I got done with those tasks, I would read up on what I needed to prepare for the next day. I was always craving to get smarter and smoother. I know, old school techniques. But I always asked for extra.

You can start by making sure that you're operating at the best of your ability at the job you are assigned to do. After all, you can't expect to be asked to do new things if you're not doing your current job well. I made sure I learned my current responsibilities, what the goals were for the week, and then exceeded them.

I earned the right to go interrupt my boss and ask for an extra task, or to grab lunch and chat, or simply ask for some learning time. Being excellent at what you do is critical. If you are, you will be able to open the door to opportunities.

Go read up on whatever profession you're in. I started out in engineering and let's be very clear - I knew *nothing* about engineering. But I knew if I wanted to be the best, I would have to learn about it. So, I would read stacks of books and magazines on CAD, on engineering work process, and product development, and then I would highlight the words that I didn't understand. Once I had some questions, I would have lunch with my mentor and he would go over those words with me to help me learn the industry faster.

After 2-3 years, I became conversant in a field that originally, I knew nothing about. I was able to become a leader and grow. When you are excellent at what you do, your performance starts to supersede your gender or color.

I decided if I was bringing revenue to the company, the color green would be more important to anyone I was working for than the color of my skin. And guess what? I was right. When I demonstrated that I was putting in more effort than everyone else, they stopped looking at superficial things and started caring about things that matter.

2 Earn Credibility

You can't make changes in your workplace if you have zero credibility. And you're not credible if you think you know something and have done *absolutely no research*. Credibility is created when you're a world-class employee and you're speaking on a subject where you're proficient. You **earn** credibility in the workplace to the degree that you bring cash to the business.

It's pretty simple. Doing an excellent job gives you the ability to educate, correct, and encourage behaviors that you see.

Let me give you an example:

I was deciding whether or not to write a large check to this investment group I've been working with. The time came for me to have a conversation with the leader about making my investment a priority. I explained to him that by writing this check, I would be putting a lot of my eggs into one basket that was focused on more traditional venture capital funded investment opportunities. This meant that I wouldn't have the flexibility to invest in underserved entrepreneurs, such as minorities and women. If I put my investable income into their portfolio, I knew I was limiting my opportunities to help the underdogs.

I wasn't trying to be negative about their businesses and the investment choices they make. I was just bringing attention to facts. My ability to invest additional income gave me the opportunity to share that concern with somebody that is working with some of the wealthiest people in my environment, that may not typically invest in a diverse portfolio of entrepreneurs.

But if I'm not successful, who hears that?

Everything to me is about winning in the lane that you're in. When you are winning, you can create change. If you're not winning, you rarely impact anything.

When you're young, credibility is performance driven because you don't have any kind of track record in business. If somebody is going to meet with me now, it's completely different than meeting with me 25 years ago. Back then, it was about the heart and hustle. What I sold that week or the sales revenue I brought in was focused on bare bones results.

Now, I have earned credibility. I'm a successful CEO, sold many companies and I'm on the board of numerous startups and successful firms. But that credibility has been built up over 25 years.

As a young person in business, you don't have that yet. So, the question I'll ask is, "What have you done for me lately?"

What internships have you done?

What books are you reading?

What seminars are you going to?

What are you doing to better yourself?

You should focus on how you are going to better yourself to make sure the team makes money for your manager, for your boss, and for your company, and **then** you will be listened to. Your credibility is through performance. All of the other issues you may want to move forward are enhanced by you being great at what you did as a young entrepreneur or employee. Remember: *be too good to ignore.*

3 Be Confident In What You Do

Self-confidence is key to anything you do. If you're not confident, hang around with people who have an attitude that you want to catch or a mindset that you want to learn and develop. Stay around people that have a confidence that you don't possess and learn from them. Confident people talk about the future and what they're going to do next; they talk about dreams and goals.

"People tend to become what they think about themselves." – William James (Goalcast)

Stay away from weak people. Weak people whine. Let them save their talk for the watercooler. Begin spending time with people that have an edge for success. You'll find that they're always going to talk about what's next, what they're learning, what they want to do, and who they want to be. *And it will rub off on you.* Even if you're

not a naturally confident person, it's hard to have bad habits around people that are insanely positive.

Another thing you can do to build confidence is to read about people who have overcome adversity. What you'll find is that there are plenty of people that had it worse than you, that were shyer than you are, that were less educated than you may be - and they made a big success of their life.

Read those stories and let them inspire you. You will then realize that the only things holding you back are *self-imposed limitations*. Don't accept that. You wouldn't accept if somebody knocked on your door and threw garbage in your living room. So then why do you accept the negative things that people say about you? And more importantly, why do you accept the negative things you say about yourself?

I've never talked like a failure, like somebody that wasn't going to make it. No matter what I was doing, whether I was a manager at Dollar General or behind the counter at The Pantry. I've had friends literally laugh in my face. But I kept going because I knew that place was not my destiny. It was just part of my story.

Make sure, at the end of the day, what keeps you driving forward is the people that doubt you. If you work hard enough and if you are intelligent enough, you can silence your critics. You blew through every barrier that they made for you and they can either respect you or shut up. Either way works for me.

These topics are so important to your success. Remember:

- Be confident in your choices, because if you're not, no one is going to do it for you.
- Take the extra time to earn your credibility. It will *never* be handed to you and you need to go ahead and accept that now.
- Go in early and stay late.
- Ask for extra opportunities after your duties are handled.
- Surround yourself with greatness and it'll rub off on you. Maybe not in a couple of days or weeks but you'll see a difference over time.

You have the opportunity to stand out in your field. **So, do it.**

Take Personal Responsibility

Let's look at our macro environment for a minute. Right now, if you just focus on what's in the media, there are a lot of folks trying to pit people against each other. Whether it's true or untrue, you might feel like somebody's coming at you at all times. Somebody's always trying to attack you.

There is a notion out there that more people are against you than are for you. That mindset can seep into everyday life and it's really just not true. When you view the world through the lens of "somebody's always keeping me down" or "somebody's holding me back," it's natural to want to give up control of your own personal future and lose personal responsibility.

So, yes, there are people that are trying to bend the rules in their favor. There are certainly the "haves" and the "have nots." But I do think it's important to remember, especially for those of us that are fortunate enough to grow up in America, that we have so many freedoms, opportunities, and advantages, and it usually comes back to personal responsibility.

Don't play the victim based on how you think other people perceive you. And by any means, avoid throwing intellectual tantrums.

Avoid Intellectual Tantrums.

It's a weird phrase, right? Lots of people do it. You've probably had one or two, even if you are early in your career. It's not often addressed by many, so I'll explain what I mean. Intellectual tantrums are not really tantrums in the typical meaning of the word and are not really about offending anyone. It's more about "thinking" all of your ideas are the best, which is intellectual arrogance. I actually think it's pretty comical.

Let's say that there is a conceivable way that *all* your ideas are the right ideas. You would have no need for a team because you can do it all yourself. And if all of your ideas are the right ideas, then the problems you're trying to solve can't possibly be

big enough to matter. In that case, you *should* do it by yourself. Don't waste anyone else's time on things that don't actually matter.

If you're solving big problems and doing big things, it will naturally create a team effort requirement. There is no possible way that you can do it on your own. And that's a good thing. Think about it this way - a single person can't cure cancer. You also can't change your community alone. However, a team will be able to change entire community dynamics.

Let's say you have a big goal like taking a company from 2 people to 2000. You're going to need other people that are aligned with your goal, like-minded people with vision and dreams. Intellectual arrogance may be able to get the train started but it certainly won't keep the train moving to the end destination successfully.

At the root, intellectual tantrums stem from a lack of maturity, which seems weird when you're working in an environment with adults. But you'd be surprised.

Most people luckily grow out of this and those that don't try to emulate all the wrong people. They try to emulate what they *think* Steve Jobs has done, forgetting the fact that Jobs had a partner in Steve Wozniak. Bill Gates had Jason Palmer as his partner. The Google guys were partners in school. There were two, maybe three-person teams that started these global brands with very few individuals accomplishing anything nearly as significant. I avoid playing on a team with people who are prone to have intellectual tantrums, and if one falls through the cracks, I choose to move them out of my company.

Dealing with Immaturity

If you're in a meeting and your boss or a manager says something inappropriate, think about it first in a rational, mature way. Make sure you are taking the words, tone, and previous actions into account.

If somebody that typically has pure intentions, has treated you fairly, and has been collaborative in the past says something ridiculous in the meeting, try not to treat it as a high octane issue. Catch up with them outside of that meeting and bring it to their attention. 90% of the time, that person will be thankful that you talked to them because they usually didn't mean something in the context it was perceived.

They simply didn't think about it. It was an off-the-cuff thing and they're going to want to be more cautious in the future.

By talking to them outside of the spotlight of the meeting, you've given them the opportunity to think through their mistake and avoid making it in the future. There is no need to embarrass them and make them feel like they needed to be defensive. You gave them an opportunity to be better next time. An immature person, would have had an intellectual tantrum during the meeting and played the victim, which would likely make everyone in the room feel uncomfortable and would not really solve any problem.

Here's a personal example:

I was in a meeting and I was talking about treating waitresses properly when you're in a restaurant. My assistant took the opportunity to bring to my attention that I was being gender specific - I should refer to them as a "server." I took the critique in stride and kept it moving. But then what happened was the next couple of times that I used that example, I was more conscious saying the word "server."

I wasn't offended that she corrected me, nor was she making it a huge deal that I didn't articulate it properly. But what she did do was give me another chance to get it right. I'm talking about business all the time and things like this are important to understand.

If someone says something that is off-the-cuff or offensive and they have a track record of saying that kind of thing, I still start with an individual conversation personally. Don't start by blowing up a meeting over it because ultimately, it's about getting the work of the company done so anything that may be personally offensive should be handled offline.

If it's a continued thing and you have a strong enough personality or if you're willing to put yourself out there in the name of righting a wrong: address them personally when it happens during the meeting. You can say,

Hey Joe, that struck me a little bit wrong. Did you mean to say that? It's the third or fourth time in the meeting I've heard you say that.

Then be quiet.

Joe now has a choice:

- A. Does he make an issue of where he was clearly wrong and make it a thing?
- B. Does he apologize and admit fault?

If it's a repetitive thing, put them on the spot but don't take everything you hear or see as a personal attack. It will distract you from being great at your job.

Remember your main goal is to be the best at what you do and if you feel that people saying off-the-cuff things is hindering that, then address it. It's also important to keep in mind that addressing these problems in a measured, professional way is key to getting a positive response, which is probably what you're aiming for. By solving a problem correctly, you avoid "playing the victim."

Action Steps To Take More Personal Responsibility



- 1 Don't play the victim.
- 2 Have a winning mindset.
- 3 Be accountable for driving change.

1 Playing the Victim

Let's talk about this a bit more. Why do you think people take this route when they feel like someone is being offensive? I personally don't want to get in the frame of mind of playing the victim myself, but I think our macro-environment is encouraging it as a 'knee jerk reaction' when someone feels uncomfortable.

Let's look at politics. The media pits people against one another, meaning that you feel, whether it's true or untrue, that somebody's attacking you. That somebody is trying to hurt you. First, I think we perpetuate the notion that more people are against us instead of for us. And this thinking seeps into everyday life. The second thing is when you view the world through the lens of someone keeping you down or holding you back, it is a natural extension to give up control of your own personal future and lose personal responsibility. And when you've exhausted everything that you can personally do on your own, two things will happen:

Number One: You won't have energy to blame someone else.

Number Two: You will be successful and will be helping someone else.

I think that's the critical mental difference. It doesn't mean the negative in the world is not there. It just means you can change fast enough to not let it affect your life.

2 Keep A Winning Mindset

You have to have a personal mindset that you're going to win where you are with the tools that you have right now. I think that changes your method for moving forward because you're looking outside of what others are doing **to you** and looking internally to what **you can do for yourself**. I'm big on personal responsibility, but I'm not naive enough to think that the world is shaped for equal success.

If victimhood is holding you back, you need to change your thinking and be more responsible for your own success.

Who do you know that's wildly successful by playing the victim all the time? I'll wait.

The answer is NO ONE.

If you're in the blame game consistently for your lack of success and throwing intellectual tantrums every chance you get, you're automatically putting yourself in the bottom third of successful people of all time. This mindset was enough of a realization to get me to focus on what I could do to be successful with the tools that I had.

3 Be Accountable For Driving Change.

Most companies have good, relatable, open minded people at some level in the business that can be observant to change. When you're with colleagues at work, notice who are the most open-minded to change. Who are the best managers to work for?

You want to try and be on their team, but even if you're not, an important practice is to ask for input and/or guidance. You could try posing a question like, "I'm a junior person, but I think I've got good ideas in the areas of diversity and team building. What's the best way for me to share ideas that may be a little bit risky for me to say on my own?"

They'll either answer your question or point you in the direction of someone who can. And to be honest – it's often more beneficial if they point you in the right

direction because you can use that to your advantage when speaking to others. For example, third-party validation boosts your credibility if you make a statement like, “The Senior marketing manager recommended I talked to you about this.”

Lastly, learn how to sell your ideas in any organization. It's *always* going to help you to understand what your idea can do in a positive way for the business. People will listen to your ideas to the degree that you show that you care about the same things that they do. That means, if you're going to bring up an issue on diversity or that you would like to have more lunch and learns at your company or that you'd like to take on a bigger project: no one really cares unless there is something in it for them. It's your job to sell them on why you love your idea and the positive outcome it will bring them.

We're all going to come across situations that will likely provoke an emotional outburst or cause potential discomfort. But by handling these situations maturely instead of pointing the finger and pulling the victim card, you're building that winning mindset more and more. When you focus on the bigger picture and what really matters, it's easy to work past a potential intellectual tantrum. **But you can't do it alone.**

Mentors Find Excellent People

If you take anything away from this book, take away the importance of mentorship. Having a mentor or a coach is one of the best investments you can make, and frankly the only way you can get smarter faster and start winning sooner.

Consider a CEO who is paying hundreds of dollars an hour to consultants for their input and advice. That's a no brainer and most executives do this routinely.

Professional athletes have coaches. Why? Because they are always striving to get better and win more.

Parents invest lots of money in their kids to help round them out as individuals - tutoring, coaching in sports, and other things.

I spend thousands of dollars a year to be a part of an organization where I am able to gain knowledge by talking to successful company presidents. Why? So, I can stay up-to-date on business trends, make valuable connections, and get tips on creating explosive growth.

But what about people just coming out of school, in their second or third year of work - who's coaching them?

If you are just starting out in your career and are on the rise to leadership, you are doing yourself a disservice if you don't understand the importance of mentorship and coaching. It can save you time, effort, and energy, ultimately helping you achieve your goals faster.



It doesn't mean you can't be successful without mentorship and coaching. By all means, there are plenty of successful people using the *try, fail, adjust* strategy. But by having a mentor that can look at challenges that you're facing, it allows you to make decisions better and faster. I've grown accustomed to getting critical feedback on my performance every step of the way.

To be honest, I only want to work for and work with people that will coach me and give critical feedback. I've never worked long for somebody that was not willing to give me tough feedback. Those were not people I wanted in my professional life. I don't respect you as much if you're not a straight shooter and provide performance evaluation and tips that help me grow in my career.

I want to get paid. I want to grow my career. I know I can only do that if I have the best information available about what is going on. I'm very focused on winning and not everybody is like that. Trying to grow your career without a mentor or a coach is silly to me. You won't get as far as fast.

Mentees are promoted five times more often than those not in a mentoring program. (Gartner)

So, if you are convinced that you need a mentor or coach, let's discuss ways to do that.

How do you find a mentor?

The answer is simple. Don't look for one. Average people look for mentors, but excellent people are found by mentors.

Focus first on being great at what you do and finding ways to help other people be great. By doing this, the right mentor will actually find you.

You should be attending networking events, reading books as much as possible and finding things to do on your own to keep progressing and learning.

Most people in leadership positions notice the person that is working and trying hard. I know I do. I'll make it a priority to have a cup of coffee with them and I may not be the mentor they're looking for, but I will certainly have some recommendations.

Nonetheless, take the time to become the best employee that you can be, striving for excellence in everything you do, and great people will seek you out to coach and mentor you to success.

Action Steps To Being a Good Mentee



- 1 Know What You Want.
- 2 Seek knowledge.
- 3 Be a good networker.

1 Know What You Want

The most important thing is deciding what you're looking to get out of having a mentor. What do you want from them?

Do you want somebody that is a truth teller who will look at your goals and help you game plan how to get them? Or do you want a cheerleader? Most successful people are not interested in just being your cheerleader. They're interested in sharing knowledge that they've learned and gained with people that are going to take things to another level.

There's a difference between a mentor and a friend. **Know this difference.** If you don't have enough friends and you need people to hang out with - that's friend zone. People that I mentor, I'm not hanging out with or going to the bar with them. I'm working with them on how they can meet their professional goals. Sure, we talk about personal things, but my goal is to help them get better professionally.

2 Seek knowledge

You probably have people in your office or your environment that you would like as a mentor. **Don't ask them to mentor you.** Instead, find out how they achieved success. For example, ask them what they're reading and how it impacts them. Ask them what organizations you should be a part of if you want to grow your career in whatever lane you want to play in. Don't be afraid to ask people that are experts in that lane where you should spend time. You need to associate yourself with the right people to be able to grow in your specific endeavors.

If you ask these questions, two things will happen. First, you'll read more. Second, you'll network more. Reading and networking are part of the foundation of being a good mentee.

3 Be a good networker.

You can help people that are above your level because everybody needs new clients. Everybody needs new ideas and all leaders need new opportunities.

Even though you might be young in your career, if you're an excellent networker, you have a huge advantage. You may not make \$300 an hour but if you have a huge network and know someone who can help any of your mentor's business grow, you should make that available to them. That's a powerful thing.

Asking how you can help someone else is currency. Your mentor will understand seed time and harvest time. That means sowing into you to help you become excellent.

You have to be of value to the person that you want as a mentor. You might not have anything you can do for them right now but as you grow your career with their help, you might be in a position five years from now to do them a favor. If you're not a top flight performer, don't ask people in your company to mentor you. Instead, just focus on doing your job.

If you only talk about doing the work but don't actually work hard, you are just a philosopher. If you ask a higher-up about being a mentor solely because you think that's the right thing to say, that's just crazy. Instead, be memorable.

Final Thoughts

FOR THE NEXT GENERATION OF LEADERS

It's critical to understand how diversity & inclusion affect you. If you are a young employee, student, or a young entrepreneur you must have the right mindset and surround yourself with the right people that can help you win in a diverse marketplace.

If you are from a diverse sector of the community, you have to make it a priority to learn how to navigate corporate America in a manner that you can win and make it more diverse.

LAST WORDS

Let's be honest. Diversity is a thing. As an experienced leader you can choose not to embrace it, but it's a topic that isn't going away. As a young leader, you need to know how to navigate a very diverse work culture.

As people of color start to become the majority and as more women begin rising into significant leadership positions, I think there will be some challenges. People in power in the U.S. are usually white males and typically, people in power don't like to cede that power.

Gen Z is about to graduate from college over the next two years, and they're even more diverse than millennials. A recent study shows 81% of Gen Z's have one or more friends of a different race. (Business Insider)

Until we educate the younger generation on the impact, power and goodness of diversity, there's going to be more tension in our country. This is why, as business leaders, we need to make sure that our hiring practices, daily habits, and the way that we deal with people showcase an example for the younger leaders that are coming along next.

By creating an environment where everybody can play in the sandbox, it doesn't make you less than, it makes you stronger.

BONUS TRACKS

A | D | S

Don't be ridiculous on purpose.



ADS: A Preventable Disease

Our experiences and exposures to people from different walks of life can achieve positive results. For many of us, having our eyes opened by direct contact with people from other religions, races, sexual orientations, and genders means that our minds will never close again. These experiences and exposures can break down the walls and bring us all together.

But we have to be careful. There's a condition out there that can affect even the most well-intentioned among us regarding diversity and inclusion. I have identified this illness that's so easy to catch, even at the highest levels of corporate life. It's easy to catch because it's self-inflicted.

It's called ADS - Avoidable Dumb Shit.

Hopefully your laughing at this, but it's really not a laughing matter. Episodes of ADS, as you'll see in the following stories, can have the opposite effect of enlightening us, manipulating our interactions with diverse groups in negative ways.

How does this affect us in corporate life? When we create cultures that lack appropriate controls, feedback platforms, or simply don't value the opinions of employees and business partners, bad things like ADS can happen. When none of these elements are present, you have empowered negativity, and it will rear its head when you least suspect it.

So, what's the cure for ADS?

Let's start with this - don't be ridiculous on purpose.

Building the right culture and feedback frameworks is similar to eating right and exercising to be healthier. As business leaders, we have to build strong enough cultures so that anyone can check us when something is off-putting, whether it's about a new marketing campaign or diversity initiative. We must create modes of feedback where people can fearlessly check us, whether it's protecting us from a terrible ad concept that could drive away huge customer groups and ruin an otherwise well-intentioned and well-earned reputation for inclusiveness, or just

keeping us from making bad business decisions. Really, you want a culture where people aren't afraid to stop you from looking stupid.

In addition to building a culture of free expression and accountability, we also need to create an environment of forgiveness. There are more ways to enforce accountability than to fire people. We can't be so overly sensitive so that people can't get anything done, and much worse, feel like they can't make mistakes. Our mistakes are often our greatest teaching moments, and they pave the way to greater performance in the future. Folks can't be branded as racists or misogynists or homophobes based on one mistake in the nuanced world of diversity and inclusion. The areas of diversity and inclusion are easy for us to make mistakes in our dealings, but fortunately, these are areas where we can learn quickly and put those lessons to work in positive ways for ourselves as individuals and in the service of our companies.

Let's take a look at a few examples of how ADS affects even the most esteemed companies in the world when they lack proper controls, feedback, and accountability, both internally and externally.

ADS Case #1: Target's Baby Daddy Card

Every year many families celebrate Father's Day, a holiday largely popularized by the greeting card industry. In 2018, Target, thanks in part to one of its business partners, American Greetings, contracted a bad case of ADS.

As I've mentioned in previous passages, our experiences and exposure to diverse groups of people can cut in both directions, influencing us both positively and negatively. Some have experienced the intensely strong nuclear family unit in the black community, as I did, while others may have had fathers leave their mothers at a young age or fail to be a presence at all. As a result of the latter dynamic, black folks have had a proverbial target on their backs with regard to having children out of wedlock. The stereotypes of "baby mamas" and "baby daddies" are pervasive in American culture - politicians have long tried to paint black women as having multiple babies by different men, while the opposite portrait - that black men tend to have babies with multiple women, is equally strong in our culture.

So, on this Father's Day, American Greetings and Target had a massive backlash from the black community with regard to greeting cards. As both companies had made decent efforts in recent years to include more cards aimed at underserved ethnic markets, Target only offered one card for wives and children of African-American men to honor their commitment to fatherhood.

The outside of said card depicted a black couple kissing and embracing, with the words "Baby Daddy" superimposed over them. Inside the copy was more playful, but still borderline at best: "You're a wonderful husband and father - and I'm so grateful to have you as my partner, my friend, and my baby daddy! Happy Father's Day."

While Target and American Greetings were quick to apologize after the social media backlash ensued, this is a great example of how having comprehensive reviews, a speak-up culture, and everyone thinking not only about the words on the paper, but especially CONTEXT, could have saved these companies a lot of trouble.

There's no doubt that both companies lost customers this Father's Day, which is a shame. Is Target, and for that matter, American Greetings, a racist company? Well,

not in my experience as an African-American male. The food's fine, I'm treated well, and they have a good to great selection of the products I want and need to buy. But this process of generating one card aimed at fathers like me—and I'm not absentee—shows a real tone deafness amplified by lack of review. If someone had asked a couple of questions and taken appropriate action, this case of ADS could have been easily prevented.

First, you need to have diverse folks in your feedback loop, empowered to speak their minds. You need people of all genders, races, sexualities, and beliefs helping you make decisions in a world that's only going to become more increasingly diverse. I have a feeling that if American Greetings or Target had deployed someone from an underrepresented group—especially an African-American—to review this card, it would have ended up on the cutting room floor of ideas at American Greetings.

In addition to having a person zero in on the appropriateness of the card itself, they should have also had a more strategic thinker doing a step-back, placing the card within the context of all of its other efforts to serve the African-American community. If they had done this, a few things may have happened. First, when that person saw that this would be the only offering for black fathers, they may have decided that no card was better than this one card. They could have also ordered up several more cards, which may have given this one better context and struck women with black partners a little differently (which was the playful edge that the American Greetings product team was shooting for with the card).

There's no doubt that the Baby Daddy card for Father's Day was a big lesson for Target, a company known for its sharpness in advertising and marketing to all ethnic and racial groups. It shows that feedback mechanisms and focused thinking, as well as strategic thinking, are elemental to avoiding mistakes in a diversity and inclusion context.

ADS Case #2: Dove “Misses the Mark” ...Twice!

The Dove family of soaps has long been not only one of America’s iconic beauty brands, but its campaigns also represent of a handful of companies who set the bar of what beauty is in the country in the ways they depict women of different body shapes and races, as well as ethnic backgrounds.

In recent years, however, Dove has self-inflicted a couple of bad cases of ADS, not only with women of different races, but also those with different body types. There are two cases in point, and they both employ the classic advertising motif of “before and after,” shots. But instead of showing the same women both before and after using Dove products, they chose to be too clever, depicting one woman as the “before” and another woman as “after.” Can you guess which race and body types were presented as before, and which ones were presented as after?

In the first ad, from 2011, the brand used different women as the before and after. This time, three women stood in front of two panels, one saying “before” and the other reading “after.” Having three women in front of the panels gave the feeling of a continuum, which featured from left-to-right, a plus-sized African-American model, a smaller brunette white model, and a smaller blonde white model. One could only be left to assume that blackness and being plus-sized is unacceptable, while the other representations of beauty were good.

In the second ad, from 2017, a black model of Nigerian descent represents “before” using Dove. She then lifts off her top to reveal her new, post-Dove use self, a white woman with red hair. The message, whether intended or not, is obvious: black represents dirty, while white represents clean. In this case of ADS, the backlash from all corners of the now-dominant internet was swift and real, with more than 3,000 negative comments immediately flooding the brand’s social media channels.

This again is a classic case of lack of diversity in the product marketing room, and no doubt a “yes” culture rather than one of open expression. But to the chagrin of famed African-American director Ava Duvernay, the company also apologized with the same “missed the mark” verbiage used by American Greetings in its Target “Baby Daddy” Father’s Day debacle. Describing Dove’s apology as flip and diminishing, Duvernay spoke what millions were thinking: this brand doesn’t really

care about me. And many were advocating an outright boycott of the product as a result.

Another model pointed out that brands fall into the trap of seeing diversity simply as an opportunity or trend to sell to new markets. But the thing is, you're not entitled to sell to people with whom you are tone deaf and fail to empathize. Make them part of your process, so that your campaigns are inclusive and diverse - with authenticity.

Both of these cases of ADS, as with all cases, were avoidable. It's amazing to think that huge brands like Dove, which typically deploy multiple agencies, can't recognize and adhere to the opinions of arbiters in the process who can protect their desire to appeal to all women--white, black, and all other races, as well as every body type. Everyone needs soap, right?

But the moral of this story is that there's no such thing as too big to fail when it comes to diversity and inclusion.

ADS Case #3: Let's (Not) Play Dress-Up

In my local area of Raleigh, North Carolina, we proved that missteps in diversity and inclusion aren't just a problem for corporate America or global companies. In the Raleigh case of localized ADS, we saw a local dental group, led by three women, see a little fun with their advertising backfire in a big way.

For many years, people have enjoyed costume parties (also called "fancy dress"), where they can act out fantasies, try on an alter ego, or just have a little fun. But there have been times when celebrities have been called out in the media for taking their fun past points of good taste and into offensive territory, such as Prince Harry donning a Nazi uniform or countless folks wearing blackface.

The three female dentists of Renaissance Dental have a penchant for playing dress-up in their ads, as a way to have fun. One ad featured the three of them masquerading as males, replete with fake mustaches. The particular ad in question, however, shows how wrongly we can take a concept that on the surface probably had great intentions.

In this case, the ad showed the three women—all white, all blonde—dressed respectively as Japanese (with kimono), Native American (with full headgear), and Scottish (a plaid jumper), under the tagline, "Everyone smiles in the same language." Whoever came up with the tagline did a great job—then dentists, in their apology, even said they were trying to appeal to a concept that brings people together across whatever other differences they may have. But the imagery, of three female icons of white, blonde beauty dressing up as Japanese and Native American, felt like mockery.

So, even with a good written message, imagery that's not spot-on with appreciation of diversity can be easily offensive. Since Renaissance is a successful, multiple-location practice in a very diverse area, they could have simply hired a group of diverse folks—men, women, boys, and girls of multiple races and ethnicities—to stand smiling under the tagline. That would have been the kind of marketing that shows universal appeal and appreciation for diversity, in an authentic way.

I'd be willing to bet that, like most small to mid-market businesses, there was more than a little DIY going on here with this marketing piece, and that they paid a photographer and printer to help them execute on the concept. With such a limited participant pool—and we know the three principals are white and from the same experiential backgrounds—they could have been saved by having even one diverse opinion in the room. Just one person could have said, “No, it's not okay for you to dress up as other ethnicities. No one wants to be replaced.”

Matters of diversity and inclusion are complicated and nuanced sometimes, and we can't all always know the history. But the more good people we surround ourselves with, the better the odds are that we can save us from ourselves and put our true hearts forward. Always get another opinion.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Donald's foray into entrepreneurship began in middle school selling Jolly Ranchers candy from his locker. After leaving college early to pursue his dreams, his big break came in a sales job with the technology company I-Cubed, where he learned the business through the founder's mentorship, his unrelenting work ethic, and a voracious reading habit.

After becoming CEO of I-Cubed, Donald grew the organization exponentially until it was acquired by a global technology enterprise in 2014. Donald is currently CEO of Walk West, a digital marketing firm recently recognized by Inc. as the fastest growing agency in North Carolina for 2018.

With two decades of experience growing and leading firms, Donald serves on boards for several organizations in the fields of technology, marketing, sports, and entertainment. Donald received a gubernatorial appointment to the NC Board of Science, Technology and Innovation, is an emeritus member of the strategic advisory board for North Carolina State University's Computer Science Department, and serves as a mentor for Google for Entrepreneurs Exchange.

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