

Breaking the Barriers to

Workplace

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

Linda Basch and Anne Weisberg, two leading experts in diversity and inclusion at NYU Stern School of Business, discuss the barriers to leading diverse organizations and how to break them down.

Despite steady progress, fostering workplace diversity and inclusion remains a persistent challenge for most businesses.



The Middle Management Roadblock

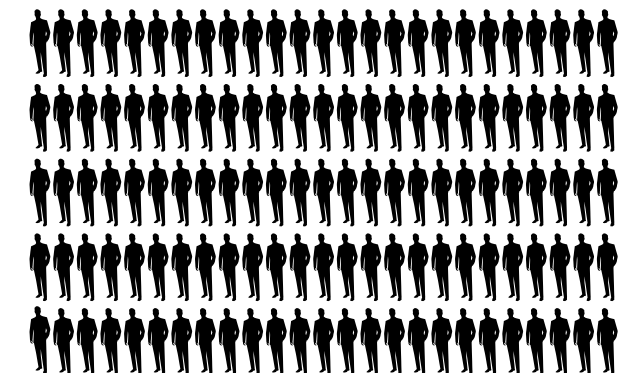
At a time where public demonstrations against racial injustice have brought issues of diversity squarely to the fore of life in the US and around the world, many organizations have recognized this moment as a crucial opportunity to address the barriers to diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) across all dimensions that exist in their workplaces.

For example, the [2019 McKinsey report on Women in the Workplace](#) highlights that, while the proportion of women in senior roles is improving, the real block remains much closer to ground level, in what they term ‘the broken rung.’ The report finds that for every 100 men, only 72 women are hired or promoted to first line manager roles—and within this group, the numbers for Black and Latino women are significantly lower than for white women.

Anne Weisberg has been researching and writing on diversity and inclusion issues ever since she failed to get hired as a young mother fresh out of Harvard Law School in the mid-1980s.

Since then, Weisberg has become a champion of greater inclusion, having run programs at Deloitte and Blackrock and now as Director of the Women’s Initiative at the leading international law firm Paul, Weiss.

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Weisberg believes that today, the greatest potential for DEI change lies with the mid-management of organizations. She explains that a diversity problem on the lower rungs of the corporate leadership ladder “just compounds, resulting in the pool of diverse talent being increasingly limited at the more senior leadership levels.”

Weisberg works with Linda Basch—an anthropologist whose career has spanned academia, senior roles at the United Nations, the presidency of the National Council for Research on Women (NCRW) and corporate consultancies—to create training programs that help business professionals develop the skills needed to become more inclusive leaders and combat DEI roadblocks at the middle management level.

After all, Weisberg and Basch note, it is precisely these middle managers who can make the most difference.



According to recent research from the Center for Talent Innovation, two-thirds of senior male leaders believe in the business case for DEI, but less than half of middle managers do



Reframing the Business Case

Basch and Weisberg emphasize that DEI is not only a matter of fairness to individuals. The business case is clear: companies that foster a true sense of belonging for all—where people are empowered to speak out against bias, and where opportunities are equal—will benefit from high levels of employee engagement, performance and ultimately competitiveness.

Additionally, “companies [that] unlock the power of inclusion and diversity as an enabler of business performance and organizational health” are more likely to innovate and thrive during bad times as well as good, says McKinsey.

Basch has been researching these themes across her career, and has seen the business case underscored on countless occasions, with investment managers, banks, and law firms all showing performance improvement when they embrace greater diversity and inclusion policies. Weisberg observes that “the business case for greater diversity and inclusive action is better understood today. Many senior leaders ‘get it’ now.”

However, while senior leadership emphasis is frequently at the enterprise level, Weisberg and Basch believe that DEI practices can have an even greater impact on the day-to-day lives of mid-level managers and their teams. “What middle managers care about is: ‘Is it going to make our lives easier? Is it going to make our performance better?’” Weisberg says that this is the key to creating impactful DEI initiatives: “how it will improve performance and make lives easier, and what [middle managers] can do about it.”

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Putting Inclusive Leadership into Action

One of the keys to inclusive leadership is understanding differences—an aspect which Basch notes is gaining prominence particularly as Millennials and Gen Z begin to enter leadership roles.

“It is about creating environments where you can bring many more perspectives and experiences to the table,” says Basch. “People don’t really understand ways to work across differences very well.” Basch explains that this is partly due to the fact that we all have unconscious biases. It is a part of being human, so rather than pretending we don’t have biases, the essential question she asks is, “How can we unpack and understand those biases better?” In their inclusive leadership courses at NYU Stern, Basch and Weisberg challenge participants to become aware of their unconscious biases through hands-on exercises, and then use this awareness to develop new leadership mindsets.

Basch and Weisberg then guide participants through creating a concrete inclusive leadership action plan. Basch says, “A key element of our approach is putting in place the basic building blocks to enable change to happen, and integral to this is helping managers develop a written leadership plan, and pair them with ‘accountability partners’ to ensure that plan is acted upon.”

The crucial first step to developing this plan involves challenging participants to closely examine their companies’ existing structures and practices. “If managers don’t understand the context of their own organization—where the power points lie, what the underlying culture is—they are not going to be able to manage successfully,” Basch explains. “We ask them to look into their organizations and identify where they will get support, where the limiting assumptions are, who the role models are internally and externally they look to—and what particular challenges these steps pose for them. From this they can start to develop their own leadership plan.”

At the heart of their inclusive leadership training is Weisberg’s and Basch’s belief that all of their students can make a difference within their organizations and teams, both through their behavior as individuals and as leaders. They strive to inspire a sense of agency among managers. “We tell [participants] at the outset that we expect them to be change agents,” says Basch, “and we will give them the tools to be able to move forward as change agents.”

Essentials of Inclusive Leadership

For those who strive to become more inclusive leaders, Basch and Weisberg have identified crucial building blocks of workplace DEI. “What we do is structured,” they explain. “We break it down into three components” which form the crux of their leadership training methodology.



Understand Difference Creating awareness of the implicit assumptions we make about individuals and their identities. If you don’t understand your unconscious biases you are unable to address them.



Make the Business Case Review current research, business cases and examples to understand how DEI initiatives lead to better business outcomes and improve day-to-day performance.



Develop Inclusive Mindsets and Practices Learn about issues of social identity and in-group preference, and understand how these impact hiring, development and assessment. As with unconscious bias training, identifying these issues helps you build checks and balances into your organizational processes to build a more diverse, equitable and inclusive workplace.

About the Experts



Linda Basch is an Adjunct Professor of Management and Organizations at NYU Stern School of Business. She is also an Athena Leadership Fellow at Barnard College and a Consultant with the University of North Carolina's Center for Faculty Excellence. She currently consults and coaches on issues of leadership advancement, career transitions and organizational change.



Anne Weisberg is Director of the Women's Initiative at Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton & Garrison, LLP, where she is responsible for designing and implementing a gender strategy that fosters a high performing, inclusive work environment for all. She is also an Adjunct Professor of Management and Organizations at the NYU Stern School of Business.

Linda Basch and Anne Weisberg teach Inclusive Leadership courses at NYU Stern as an elective part of the MBA program. Inclusive Leadership is also available as an open enrollment Executive Certificate Program through NYU Stern Executive Education. **Learn more at execed.stern.nyu.edu/inclusive**

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