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The Black Executive's Truth and What We Can Do About It

BY MICHAEL C. HYTER

Even though everyone faces obstacles to their professional development and advancement, it is no secret that executives of color face unique challenges in the workplace. So far, despite numerous studies of the issues and interventions to solve this challenge, there continues to be a scarcity of Blacks in executive ranks. Today, there are only 5 Black CEOs leading Fortune 500 companies with a small pool of Black executives being positioned and developed to take on CEO roles in the future. In fact, the Black CEO pipeline hasn't changed much in the last two decades. Executives of color, particularly Black executives, continue to be overlooked for these highly coveted positions although our society has become more progressive on this topic.

As a business leader who has worked in corporate America for over 30 years and who now supports the development of C-Suite executives, I have witnessed an unexplained divide between my white and black colleagues. I watched many talented Black leaders get stuck in the corporate hamster wheel running harder and faster than their white colleagues with the hope of being recognized and rewarded for their efforts. And in more instances than not, those congratulatory moments don't come or are slower than expected. The reasons given are numerous, but they all translate into one thing – a unique set of barriers or “headwinds” that stand in the way of Black executives from achieving their full potential.

For years, these headwinds have been explained away as the result of poor educational attainment, lack of experience and preparation, and bad culture fit. When in reality, they have to do in large part with conscious and unconscious biases against people of color. Today's high potential and succession pool identification is based on criteria and legacies steeped in the preferences and traditions of the majority culture. These preferences, whether intentionally or unintentionally, filter out talent from backgrounds and experiences unfamiliar to corporate elites.

This is not to suggest that Blacks should throw their hands up and accept defeat because it is undeniable that there are more opportunities for Blacks in the business world today than ever before. Our efforts should be on repositioning the discussion to bring greater awareness to the biases and obstacles that Blacks face so that companies and Black professionals together can be intentional about developmental opportunities. This is the only way that we will rise above the immediate and obvious detrimental effects that prevent Blacks from getting ahead in the business world.

In today's VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous)



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world, companies can't afford to overlook and underutilize their talent. In fact, as the business world experiences market disruption, technological transformations, consumer preferences/trends shifting overnight, and fast-changing geopolitics, companies are looking for new opportunities to address the headwinds that exist within their organizations so that all employees can thrive and help to drive top and bottom-line revenue.

This creates real momentum for Black executives and their advocates to address these biases head on. There is a space emerging for business leaders and experts to come together to discuss how to address systemic racial bias within organization as well as how to devise plans to support Blacks in overcoming these biases and maximizing their contribution to their respective organizations.

Creating a strong pipeline of Black executive talent, specifically Black CEOs, hinges on having the right data to inform decisions, coupled with seasoned insight into human potential and development. Companies that recognize the untapped potential in their Black talent can make a series of investments that will significantly enhance the career trajectory of these leaders. In addition to challenging conscious/unconscious bias towards Blacks, companies should be intentional about providing their Black talent with visible, important and complex (VIC) assignments, encouragement even in the face of low confidence, and constructive, yet honest feedback on how to increase impact.

If companies commit to providing this level of support for their Black talent, the business world will not only see an increase in racial/ethnic representation in their C-Suite, they will likely experience a positive impact on their bottom-line. It is important to remember that creating equity in the C-Suite is not just a moral imperative in a just society, it is also a wise business strategy that will assist companies in achieving their strategic business objectives, broadening their customer bases, and experiencing greater innovation and employee engagement. **S**