



# IS YOUR SOLIDARITY SOLID?

A Guide for Improving  
Corporate Diversity  
and Inclusion When  
the World is Watching





# WALKING THE TALK

Did your organization post a solidarity statement in the wake of George Floyd's death and in response to Black Lives Matters protests? If so, what have you done since then to prove that your stance was authentic?

Your answer matters, because African American consumers are paying attention via social media movements such as the non-profit Pull up for change, which has taken Instagram by storm. Organizers there are asking corporations to “pull up or shut up” by sharing the diversity and inclusion statistics within their own ranks—especially in leadership and C-suite roles.<sup>1</sup> They want to encourage companies to match their hiring practices to the realities of American demographics, which means they should be able to show at least 13% of African Americans in their ranks—and not just in low-level or managerial roles or as leaders of “Diversity and Inclusion.”

## **If you think this is a fly-by-night movement, think again.**

Balancing hiring with the realities of American demographics is not a trend, but a cultural imperative. It's also a smart move. Black men and women bring value beyond raising diversity numbers. Their viewpoints and insights reflect the viewpoints and insights of 13.4% of our country's consumers<sup>2</sup> who currently claim \$1.4 Trillion in buying power.<sup>3</sup> Companies who ignore this growing and influential demographic do so at their own risk.





# THE 150-POINT INSPECTION

Brands that claim to value diversity should be on alert: Black consumers want to know what's under their hoods and will be performing a 150-point inspection to find out, because we have become intolerant of the intolerance within corporate America. No longer will brands be able to get away with hiring for the optics, because African Americans are now checking everything from the brake fluid to the power steering to make sure we're not getting a lemon.

Think of it as an MRI of your internal culture that's capable of detecting corporate-sanctioned micro-aggression, micro-invalidations, invisible hurdles to advancement, and alternate pathways created to deter African Americans from having a seat at the table. If you have doubts about your organization's ability to pass this inspection, it's time to take a closer look at how you're going to resolve that. Telling employees to value diversity when the decision-makers in your company all look and sound the same is a losing game. You'll need to lean into the discomfort of truly analyzing why things are the way they are from the inside out and commit to doing things differently.





# DO YOUR STATS LINE UP WITH YOUR STANCE?

From legacy corporations to Silicon Valley startups, a large majority of American companies—and the advertising agencies that represent them—still staff their halls and fill corporate seats with one type of person: Caucasian American men. Historically, this has resulted in a “white echo-chamber” of voices that are often out of touch with the demographics of America. Non-Hispanic whites make up 73% of the American population, and more than half of those are women, which means white men represent just 35% of the U.S. population.<sup>4</sup> Companies that believe 35% of the population should speak for the other 65% are lacking in innovation. The other 65% of people are consumers who make choices about where to buy and from whom, so it’s time to get real about who is at the helm of a corporation.



Words are simply not enough anymore, and while symbolic actions like giving employees a day off on Juneteenth were a step in the right direction, that also doesn't go far enough. Companies must bring diversity to the corporate table in real and measurable ways. If your company is not there yet, it's time to get real. First, by being transparent with yourself about where you are in terms of diversity and then creating a timeframe for change to ensure your efforts are recognized and that any missteps that happen are seen within the context of your overall willingness to do the hard work. No company is perfect, and mistakes will happen, but companies that are willing to try will be seen as innovative leaders who will be applauded for their efforts, even when they are not perfect.



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# CHALLENGING THE ILLUSION OF INCLUSION

There is a major disconnect for Black men and women in corporate America who experience racism and micro-aggressions in the workplace every day, even as they are told that “everyone” is on board to combat these corporate conflicts. Many times, when Blacks point out race-related problems, they are punished in ways large and small by white group-think that seems to say, “We knew you would cause problems. We’re letting you be here. Isn’t that enough?”

All companies must be aware of the segregation that happens in corporate America. Such terms as “urban” have been used for decades to keep African-American workers in particular segments of a company and away from the mainstream work and opportunities. John P. might be made the V.P. of urban sales rather than a V.P. of sales simply because of his race. This is not a compliment—it is another river to cross, a subjugation and career suppression in its most subtle form. According to the Harvard business review article *A Dream Deferred* “The psychological contract made by corporations is unfulfilled for black high achievers. We’re dealing with a breach of contract.”<sup>10</sup>



In an independent, nonpartisan national survey asking 1,000 respondents about race, discrimination and systemic racism, 64% of whites said everyone receives equal treatment in the workplace versus 21% of Blacks. 73% of African Americans said Blacks are treated less fairly, compared to just 26% of whites. Asked if they were ever treated differently at work because of their race, 24% of whites said yes compared to 60% of Black respondents. 52% of Black respondents said they have been treated poorly on the job because of their race, compared to 15% of whites.<sup>11</sup>

“To me the biggest take-away from this survey is that our data show that whites do not connect the disadvantages faced by Blacks to their own advantage. Whites have yet to understand the full extent of the privileges structural racism bestows upon them,” said Mona Kleinberg, assistant professor of political science who helped design and analyze the poll. “Making the connection that when one group receives less another group gets more is what whites need to see more clearly if we want to end white dominance in the U.S.”

Leaders need to understand the depth of this problem and make real changes, including hiring and promoting more young, Black professionals—even those who do not have a college degree. That’s because it’s simply harder for African Americans to graduate high school and afford college, and it is also harder for them to complete college and earn a degree as they are more likely than other ethnicities to work part or fulltime while pursuing their education. To truly develop a more diverse pool of talent companies could be going to junior colleges and 8th and 9th-grade career days and helping students with potential find their way into their industries.



The biggest take-away  
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# EVERY INVOICE SHOULD INCLUDE A BLACK VOICE

Non-Black leaders in corporate America have a duty to start understanding how oppression happens inside corporate walls and make an active plan to battle it. Posting a feel-good ad about standing with the Black Lives Matter movement is not enough. Neither is having one or two “token” employees in your midst. This is about more than hiring a few Black executives. It’s about repairing the broken culture of companies that didn’t value real diversity in the first place. You can never fix a problem inside the company by going outside. It’s time to look at hiring culture and ensure that African Americans are included in the decision-making process in measurable ways—such as insisting that every invoice includes a Black voice.




If your company is not there yet, it's time to get started. Being transparent about where you are in terms of diversity and then creating a timeframe for change will help ensure that your efforts are recognized and that any missteps that happen are seen within the context of your overall willingness to do the hard work. Mistakes will happen, but it is those companies that are willing to lean into the discomfort that will see the greatest gains. There has never been a better time to start.

**Need help creating a roadmap to greater diversity and inclusion?**

Wil Shelton is the owner of a successful marketing agency and a D&I consultant who helps large companies improve their multi-cultural representation and communications while avoiding cultural landmines that can damage their brands.

Contact Wil for a consultation.

A portrait of Wil Shelton, a Black man with a beard and mustache, smiling. He is wearing a dark suit jacket over a light-colored shirt and a dark tie. The background is a solid orange color. The text is overlaid on the right side of the image.

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# About **Wil Shelton**

Before he was the President & CEO of Wil Power Integrated Marketing, Wil was a salon owner and hairstylist who saw an untapped opportunity in a space where word-of-mouth is a daily occurrence and consumers are both captive and receptive to input. Over the past 20-plus years, Wil has grown his company into a global marketing agency that taps into the unique culture of salons and barbershops to build a bridge between today's brands and hard-to-reach, multicultural customers.

Today, Wil boasts a vast network of over 100,000 African American salons and barbershops nationwide, giving his clients the ability to reach over 100 million consumers annually. Since its inception, WPIM has proven to over-deliver on value and responsiveness. As more and more brands set up multicultural departments, Wil is able to provide them with a proven roadmap for success.





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