



Why We Can't Lose Diversity & Inclusion to the Coronavirus

By Sheena Butler-Young

April 17, 2020

It's been a rough few weeks.

As our country teeters on the cusp of economic recession, and the [coronavirus](#) baffles medical experts and thought leaders alike, the angst many of us are feeling is only compounded by mounting uncertainty on all fronts.

Retailers are furloughing and laying off workers in droves. And [diversity and inclusion](#) — the sector of corporate culture and strategy that has experienced a robust surge in recent years — has slipped through the cracks for many firms.

Rather than maintaining its newly earned position as a critical business need, D&I has been relegated to a “nice-to-have.”

Chief diversity officers — and related roles and departments — are among the scores of retail's workforce being furloughed, laid off and, in effect, deemed “nonessential” at some companies.

And according to diversity and inclusion experts and fashion insiders alike, it's a crucial and costly mistake.

“Diversity and inclusion is critical now more than ever,” explained Darla DeGrace, a diversity and inclusion strategist and founder of Boston-based DeGrace Group. “Unfortunately, you see a lot of companies abandoning their D&I efforts at this time. That's how you know who the true champions are: The people who aren't doubling down right now, they're not serious about their initiatives and they never were. If you could facilitate a meeting online, you could do D&I online. You could figure out a way to continue the work.”

People de-prioritizing their *wants* in times of crisis in order to address life-and-death needs is certainly a historical concept, one that American psychologist Abraham Maslow codified in



his renowned 1943 paper, “A Theory of Human Motivation,” as a “hierarchy of needs.” In short, humans have at least five basic categories of needs — physical, security, social, ego and self-actualization, according to Maslow — and higher needs only become important after lower, more basic ones are met.

If we’re using the hierarchy of needs as an analogy, D&I is inextricably linked to people’s physical well-being, as well as their mental and emotional health.

It is a basic need.

Amid the coronavirus crisis, scores of [minority women](#) and men are in precarious circumstances. They’re either being forced to potentially jeopardize their health by attending their “essential” jobs at grocery stores and fast-food restaurants, or they’re being swept up in mass layoffs and furloughs as other low-paying jobs in retail and office administration are sacrificed to cost-saving measures. (Macy’s, [Nordstrom](#), Neiman Marcus and DSW are among the retailers that have [furloughed workers](#) in recent weeks.)

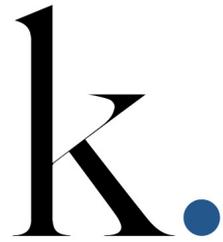
What’s more, in addition to amplifying existing health and socioeconomic disparities, the pandemic is, in swift fashion, creating new disparities.

As Kyle Rudy, SVP at executive placement firm Kirk Palmer Associates, put it: COVID-19 is birthing “a new kind of haves and have nots.”

“For example, if you’re a company that’s pivoted to remote work, you’ll likely have employees who are parents and employees who are not parents. Then, within the parental group, you’ll have people with children who have six hours of aggressive homeschooling each day and others who might just need to set their kids up in front of a screen for a three-hour tutorial,” he explained. “There’s a huge complexity of need.”

In the short term, added Rudy, companies should seek to understand the breadth of experiences employees — minorities, in particular — might be facing in the time of coronavirus.

“Asian communities are experiencing increased racism. Latino and African-American communities are experiencing higher rates of hospitalization and fatalities,” said Rudy. “COVID-19 has been both unifying and fragmenting, and companies need to lean into these unique experiences to understand how their employee groups have been impacted and how they can best support them. And in how and when we return to work, short-term thinking can lead to long-term harm.”



DeGrace said companies that are still operating and garnering revenues amid the pandemic should be finding avenues to support their minority employees and customers.

“Companies need to have a robust corporate social responsibility initiative — whether that’s partnering with more local nonprofits or donating time to [these communities],” she explained. “Internally, you have to find a way to build a [diversity-focused] culture online. You should be able to conduct focus groups and lead a discussion about race. I wish more companies would focus on race, because this is a perfect time to be talking about it.”

Indeed, early data on the novel coronavirus indicates COVID-19 is killing African Americans at greater rates than any other group. In Louisiana, for example, African Americans account for 70% of the deaths but just 33% of the population.

“You hear doctors talking about people of color dying at more alarming rates because of underlying health conditions,” noted DeGrace. “But the reality is you need to take a step back: It didn’t just start with underlying issues. Why do we have underlying issues in this community in the first place? [It’s likely because of] institutional racism and everything that comes along with that.”

And, where companies are concerned, the ones that take advantage of an unprecedented opportunity to uplift and engage diverse communities — internally and externally — are likely to lead the next wave of business growth across sectors, Rudy suggests.

“A healthy post-pandemic company culture can be different and even stronger than before: Leaner, more creative, more digital — focused beyond just customer engagement and loyalty, but also employee engagement and loyalty,” he added. “Companies that reintegrate the workforce correctly post-COVID-19 have a chance to surpass where they were prior.”