

CDOs Coming and CDOs Going: How Can Retail's Diversity Chiefs Ever Make Headway?

By [Samantha McDonald](#)

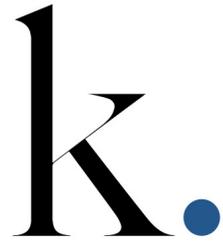
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Amid a nationwide social justice movement, and as has often been the case in the wake of public controversy related to equality, the role of the [chief diversity and inclusion officer](#) — viewed as one of the workplace's leading change agents — has seen higher hiring demand than usual.

Many companies have turned more of their attention toward the treatment as well as advancement of minority talent, whether by overhauling their D&I strategies, introducing new campaigns or appointing dedicated leaders of color, who are entrusted with the herculean task of addressing racial divisions and inequities within organizations.

But while the role has more recently taken center stage, perhaps not enough attention is being paid to the high turnover that has long plagued D&I execs. After only two years on the job, Nike's first-ever chief diversity and inclusion officer, [Kellie Leonard](#), stepped down in late July. (She was replaced by Felicia Mayo, who took on the position of chief talent, diversity and culture officer.) Separately, [Renée Tirado](#), global head of diversity, equity and inclusion at Gucci, resigned in August to set up her own consulting firm after just over a year in the post. Whether due to a lack of necessary tools and support from members of the C-suite or unrealistic targets and a wavering commitment to cultural change — or something entirely different — companies appear to let their diversity chiefs come and go. In fact, some recruiters suggest that the CDO's tenure averages at just about three years.

“Turnover is especially likely when the hiring of a CDIO is viewed as a silver-bullet solution to cure all that ails a company culture or customer perceptions,” explained Kyle Rudy, partner at retail executive search firm Kirk Palmer Associates. “Often times, these professionals are expected to accomplish too much too soon — without sufficient resources to create real organizational change.”



According to Rudy, many companies hire D&I leaders to publicly signal intent without fully understanding the functions of the post. Sans the proper structure and understanding of their organization's strategic needs or challenges, these companies are creating a tough environment for the newly hired CDO or CDIO executive, leaving him or her to "push a rock uphill" from day one.

"[Companies] need a cultural assessment. They need to see where their starting point is. That way, [the CDO] understands what's being expected of them, while [the company is] providing the infrastructure necessary for them to perform their jobs," said Brittany Hale, founder, CEO and chief culture architect at advisory firm BND Consulting Group. "You're not going to run the New York City Marathon if you've never even put on running shoes before... [Diversity] needs to be not only aspirational, but also operational."

Once that foundation is established, experts have suggested that the CDO or CIO be given a seat at the senior leadership table, either reporting directly to or working closely with the executive chief. With the CEO's backing, other members of the C-suite — and down the ladder from legal and HR to corporate communications and marketing — might be more open to systemic change within their own departments.

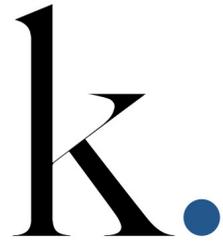
"These professionals are tasked with leading organizational change, and their level of credibility will be inferred by where the role falls in the organizational structure," Rudy said. "More traction will be made if they are viewed — and actually are — on the level of the CEO's direct reports."

But even with the support of the top ranks, the diversity chief will require resources, including a realistic budget, proper compensation, a dedicated team and an overall willingness from key stakeholders to follow through on strategic initiatives that go beyond creating [employee resource groups](#) or providing unconscious bias training to new workers.

"The CDIO can have a great strategy and implement it flawlessly, but if diversity and inclusion is not an authentic priority for the organization, it will not advance," Rudy said.

Hale put it this way: "Diversity and inclusion initiatives are a non-negotiable line item. There should never be a moment where you don't have enough time to put those in the budget if equity is truly part of your core values."

Indeed, authenticity has become the defining quality of an organization when it comes to both the effectiveness of its diversity and inclusion work as well as how it is viewed internally and externally. In short: Box-checking is out of fashion.



What's more, in the current national climate, clients, employees and customers are keeping a watchful eye on companies engaged in conversations surrounding social justice — and they're quicker than ever to “cancel” business with a brand or retailer with questionable track records on diversity and race.

“We're in a time of increased visibility and awareness, and your sincerity is going to be very visible and apparent,” Hale added. “Everybody has a business to make money, but the products they offer, the way they go about marketing their products and the way they interact with customers are so vast and varied. We see that these can often affect their bottom lines.”

Ultimately, hiring and retaining a diversity head won't remedy all of a company's, let alone the country's, challenges in the complex realm of diversity, equity and inclusion — but it can certainly help spur some meaningful change.

“Companies must understand that hiring a CDIO is the start of the journey — not the conclusion — and further commitment and investment will be required achieve long-term success,” said Rudy.