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OPINION

Guest Essay

What Should I Do With My White Privilege at Work?



By Jenée Desmond-Harris

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I am a white woman who was recently promoted to a high-level administrative position in my school district. At the same time, highly experienced and qualified Black women were displaced from their leadership positions. While the school district is requiring all employees to address issues of race and equity, our hiring practices do not reflect these values. I am challenged by my decision to continue to hold my leadership role and my position in the midst of these conflicting messages, actions and values. What can I do to address these inconsistencies and this discrimination?

I'm sure you're feeling guilty about how you may have unfairly benefited from your employer's actions. But the district (including all the kids who go to school there) is better off with you in a leadership role than it would be with someone who didn't care

about discrimination. And your leaving, obviously, won't make the district hire or promote more Black women. So I don't want you to quit this job.

That's if you plan to actually do something to improve the situation, of course. Spoiler: You have to. Because if you don't, all of the power that comes with a senior role and being white will go to waste.

But before I get into what "doing something" might look like, I want to remind you that you are definitely not the only person looking around after last year's big summer of "racial reckoning" and asking whether anything has actually changed, aside from a training or public statement here and there. Enrica Ruggs, the director of the University of Memphis's Center for Workplace Diversity and Inclusion, told me this is quite common. "We're seeing a lot of virtue signaling, which is not in and of itself a bad thing," she said. "But you can't just say, 'We fixed this one thing one time and now we're antiracist.' You have to make sure you're intentionally trying to reduce discrimination and increase inclusion." Many institutions, she said, have not.

You're right to be upset. Dr. Ruggs reminded me that while discrimination is obviously most harmful to its targets, it takes a toll on overall morale and productivity in a workplace and hurts bystanders who observe it, too. That means you. (In one article, she compared the effects of witnessing racial bias to exposure to secondhand smoke.)

So don't approach this as raising a fuss or filing a complaint on behalf of the Black women who were displaced. Instead, remind yourself that it's part of your job as a high-level administrator to make the school district better and stronger — which means making sure that experienced and qualified people are rewarded for their work. This is your fight, too.

First order of business: You need to get the facts. You say that these Black women were "displaced." It's not clear whether you mean they were fired, demoted or reassigned to less attractive senior positions. But in any case, you should try to find out why. It sounds like you suspect that discrimination, unintentional or otherwise, was a factor in the way management treated these women. Though you will probably never know for sure, you should get as much information as you can.

After you've done that, set up a virtual coffee with the most senior person you can reach to call attention to the tension you see between what the district is saying about racism and what it's doing. Your script for starting that conversation is, "So, I've noticed that we care about racial justice and equity but we fired all the Black women." (OK, not literally that, but you should confront them with the facts you've uncovered, head-on.) This will most likely be followed by a silence so long and awkward that it makes you wonder if your colleague hit mute by mistake. But just let it sink in. Dr. Ruggs said, "Sometimes these organizations are not even comparing their words to actions and seeing misalignment." Although you're likely to hear, "We can't discuss the details of personnel matters," you should feel free to diplomatically ask for an explanation.

But Dr. Ruggs suggests that you be forward-looking. Don't just speak up about things that have already gone awry, also push to change hiring practices so that any discrimination that's built into the system is minimized. Ask: "When we're going into hiring decisions, how can we use practices that we know help to reduce discrimination? What are the systems that we're going to use to reduce the chance of

even getting to a point where we see these inconsistencies between our proclaimed values and our actions?”

These are a few concrete changes that you can propose:

When it comes to interviewing, ask all candidates the same questions in the same order. (“That way you’re not giving some people more opportunities to shine,” Dr. Ruggs said.)

Use structured metrics when you’re evaluating candidates — decide what you’ll be looking for and how much various qualities will be weighed and scored before you do any interviews. (“Too often we look at how a person makes us feel and whether they ‘fit,’ and we know that thinking of fit leads to bias,” Dr. Ruggs said.)

Make interviews as “blind” as possible, concealing names and other information that might suggest a candidate’s race or gender. (“The research shows that people have negative-biases names that sound ethnic. They see ‘Enrica’ and that sounds Black. People would evaluate that lower than ‘Emily,’” Dr. Ruggs said.)

Organize others who feel secure in their roles (probably white people, given the district’s track record) to help advocate these changes and also to hold the district accountable if, after some time, you’re not seeing results. I realize that small process tweaks seem very dry and underwhelming, especially compared with the emotion and drama of the big antiracism statements that so many institutions have made, and the pain of discrimination — to say nothing of the pain of the people who’ve already been affected.

But talking about reducing racism doesn’t mean anything without concrete actions. Use the security that you feel comes with your seniority and whiteness to make people uncomfortable with the way things are and suggest some fixes. Push your district to be the kind of place where you’re proud to work and where Black people can get and keep the jobs they deserve.