

How Inclusive Leaders Can Understand and Harness the Power in Juneteenth

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If you aspire to be an inclusive leader, there are opportunities in Juneteenth. As a White American who has been learning from and working alongside Black colleagues, friends, clients and family members for over 50 years, I offer four ideas about the power of Juneteenth for inclusive leaders.

Juneteenth is an opportunity to amplify the voices and experiences of Black people as all your colleagues learn to honor the day in 1865 when enslaved people in Galveston, TX, first heard that they had been legally freed by the 1862 Emancipation Proclamation issued by President Lincoln.

1. Center the voices of colleagues who identify as Black

During this time of remembrance, we can ensure that we listen to, learn from and follow the agency of those among us who identify as Black or African American. Find the right way to engage with your Black colleagues. Make them visible, give them the mic and open the door to their stories and to systemic change that will help them. Make sure that the way your company recognizes Juneteenth reflects the amazing mix of their voices and their experiences. If you are Black, expect and ask allies to show up this way.

My truth: I have not always known how to truly hear my Black

colleagues. I have failed at times to prioritize their voices. Mistakes are available for making, like the impulse to monetize Juneteenth. Instead, we can bring a solemn sense of respect and open-heartedness to this day.

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2. If you're White, get Juneteenth right

If you identify as White or your racial identity is other than Black, Juneteenth also invites you to own your story. My ancestors were enslavers of African people and settlers on native lands, as I've detailed here.

Juneteenth encourages me to recommit to racial justice. This day of remembrance calls me to move beyond the shame I feel about what 'my people' did and keep doing as White supremacists and authentically serve as an accountable ally to Black people still navigating the impacts of slavery and discrimination. Juneteenth is a day for White people to learn history lessons and stand behind our Black colleagues, friends and customers by hearing their voices and following their lead.

3. Juneteenth gives us a chance to explore the meaning of freedom

In 1865, June 19th was a day people learned about freedom. In our time, the promise of freedom is still an essential American commitment, even though we fall short of this aspiration for all people in the USA. I grew up in a civil rights era that celebrated freedom riders, where the cry on the streets was "Let freedom ring." It was a time that challenged the oppressive limitations imposed on Black

Americans and many others.

Freedom is a human value that opens the door to each individual's voice and enables choices for each human to make and enjoy. We must not take our freedoms for granted nor assume that everyone is free. Do you have a point of view in your business about how freedom fuels inclusion and builds belonging on your team?

To develop your point of view around freedom as an inclusive leader, I encourage you to explore Angela Davis' book, *The Meaning of Freedom*. In the book's Foreword, she is described as "one of the foremost philosophers of freedom in our time." Ms. Davis' life experience and her incisive mind equip her to draw many conclusions that were a disruptive revelation to me. Juneteenth should invite all of us to face up to her analysis as a thoughtful socialist.

Related: [We Need Inclusive Leaders Right Now More Than Ever](#)

4. Learn the lessons of transparency and truth-telling

There was a thirty-month gap between the time the Emancipation Proclamation freed enslaved people from living as property and them hearing about their changed status as "free" humans. Even now, it is telling and troubling that society was set up so that it took a powerful White man to declare them in possession of such a fundamental human right.

Yet there's a wider application here regarding organizational life and how information is shared. We sometimes restrict truth and transparency around DEI, struggling to go beyond representational data in annual reports. We may fail to address real data points of suffering: for example, the frequent reality that Black employees receive lower performance ratings. Why does such a pervasive and impactful

inequity exist, how will we solve it and how will we tell the truth about our learning as we do so?

I understand there are legal issues to be considered as we explore why people who identify as Black are consistently rated lower. But Juneteenth should welcome a courageous competence to become more transparent about the complex interactions between human performance and systemic racism.

There are also truths to tell about the stories of our societies. Teaching history is not an ideological act, nor a political position. A modern way to honor Juneteenth: we fight any attempt to stifle education about slavery, racism, anti-Semitism, misogyny, genocide, discrimination and other forms of hatred, past or present. How are you responding to any local attempts to suppress the truth and power that Juneteenth represents?

However we identify racially, Juneteenth can activate our learning as inclusive leaders. No one should have to wait thirty months for truths that can be heard, told, and acted upon today.

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