

We're Still Far From an Equal Workplace for Marginalized Communities. Employers Need to Follow These Steps for a Path to a More Equitable Future.

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For Black, brown and other people from marginalized groups in the workplace, there continue to be stark inequalities that hinder our success. Take, for instance, Black women, who are estimated to lose over \$900,000 over a 40-year career because of the earnings gap. For Black founders, funding has continued to trend downwards over the past three years – dropping a staggering 71% in 2023 (far outpacing the 37% decline in total VC spend). Black women founders receive a mere 0.34% of total VC spend.

Just last month, the U.S. Court of Appeals blocked a Black-owned venture capitalist firm from awarding grants exclusively to Black women entrepreneurs – blatantly disregarding the historical context of systemic barriers that have long-excluded Black women. In the United States, 42% of Black women feel they lack opportunities for career advancement or promotion, compared to 35% of total U.S. adults.

We can't pretend that everything is equal when it isn't. For those of us from marginalized communities under your employment, it's important that we know that you care enough

about us to make equity a priority in your office.

Combatting the inequities that hinder minority people's – and, in particular, Black women's – career advancement, entrepreneurial success and personal finances won't be easy and will require consistent commitment. Employers have a significant role to play here. The first step will be to recognize the unique pressures that we face. From there, corporate leaders have the opportunity to implement informed policies to promote mental health and well-being.

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Do your research

About a month ago in a now-viral interview with Vice President Kamala Harris, Drew Barrymore asked Harris to be the country's "Mamala." This hit a nerve for many. While it may not have been Barrymore's intent, this comment – seen by many as an expectation for Black women to fulfill a nurturing, maternal role for all – echoes a deep-rooted stereotype for Black women to be a sort of Superwoman.

There's a cultural pressure we often feel to always appear strong, hide our emotions and put others first (often at the expense of our own well-being), which has contributed to a widespread mental health crisis among Black women in America known as the Superwoman Schema (SWS). This burden, combined with systemic inequalities, has led to many Black women being less likely to seek mental health support as compared to their white counterparts.

Creating spaces for marginalized communities to address their vulnerabilities both in the workplace and in their personal lives has to become a priority for employers and employees. Or, do one better: Establish a work culture where being vulnerable is seen as a strength, not a weakness. Do your

research. Take what you learn to inspire inclusion and break barriers. Take the opportunity to amplify a sense of belonging and empowerment for everyone under your employment to be acknowledged, seen, heard and supported.

Related: 5 Trailblazing Black Women Entrepreneurs Share How They're Breaking Barriers – And How You Can Too

Paving the path to workplace equity

The path to workplace equity is not something any one person can walk alone. It's a journey that requires all of us – employers, community leaders, and allies – to participate actively. A great starting place is to create spaces for vulnerable, open sharing with trusted communities at work. This could include creating employee resource groups (ERGs) for Black women and other minority groups, offering access to culturally competent mental health services and consistently providing a safe environment for employees to report concerns. This can also include honoring the histories commemorated by national holidays that celebrate BIPOC American leaders and histories – like Juneteenth, Indigenous People's Day and Martin Luther King Jr. Day – and marking those dates as company-wide holidays.

Being a part of a trusted community at work is crucial. Mentorship programs can also be incredibly powerful. Connecting your employees with mentors who understand their experiences and perspectives can offer much-needed support and guidance: Provide a space where trust and open conversations can be the norm. These relationships have the potential to affirm that it's okay to ask for help, be vulnerable and prioritize self-care.

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Professional networking has become crucial for boosting Black and other minority entrepreneurs, helping them forge connections, secure funding, and tap into industry insights that might otherwise be out of reach. Provide opportunities to nurture talent by bridging gaps and providing tailored programs that boost growth opportunities for BIPOC-led businesses.

Outside the workplace, it's just as important to have spaces where Black, brown and other people from marginalized groups can share their experiences and challenges openly. Community-based organizations, social networks like Akina Connect and support groups provide essential platforms for this type of sharing and personal growth – offering a safe place to talk about mental health, seek advice and share resources without fear of judgment or misunderstanding.

Creating an inclusive, productive, uplifting workplace requires a collective and committed effort. It starts with acknowledging the unique pressures we face and extends to creating environments – both professional and personal – where we can be seen, heard and supported. By lifting up the next generation through intentional community and inclusiveness, we will take a step closer to a more equitable future.

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