



**BUILDING DIVERSE
TALENT PIPELINES
IS A TEAM EFFORT**

Mita Mallick

“I’m all for diverse talent,” this leader who oversaw one of our biggest clients explained. “As long as they are good.”

Taking a deep breath and hoping to coax him into some self-reflection, I asked, “Can you share more about what you mean by ‘as long as they are good’?”

“Listen, I am all for meeting talent,” he continued, ignoring my question. “Happy to meet the internal candidate who is interested in the role. He is colored, right?”

My heart dropped. My throat went dry. I looked past him to see one of his team members standing behind him. She heard what he said and stared at me, her mouth hanging wide open.

“We don’t use that term, colored, to describe anyone, today,” I tried to calmly explain, worried my voice was shaking. “We say people of color, and in this case...”

“Why not? Why can’t I say that?” he interrupted me.

“Well,” I said, pausing. “It’s an offensive, hurtful term dating back to the Jim Crow era, and racial segregation in the United States. We don’t use it because...”

“How should I refer to him?”

“We should always ask people how they identify before making assumptions and never...”

“Okay, okay, okay I won’t use that term,” he said interrupting me again. “You know I’m Canadian, so I had no idea,” he laughed, shrugged his shoulders, and walked away.

Several years ago, I was coaching a white leader as roles opened up on his team, consisting of all white leaders. Those openings were an opportunity to start to change the composition of his team. (And also to help him understand that the language he uses matters. He couldn’t keep using “But I am Canadian” to absolve him of whatever he said.)

What this leader said aloud is the tension many leaders wrestle with quietly: they aspire to have a diverse workforce. Many accept that diverse teams perform better. They will proclaim they are focused on diversifying their teams. They are committed to diversity. But they don’t want to sacrifice the quality of talent. They don’t want to drop their standards, accept quotas, and hire someone just because they are “Black, Hispanic or Latino, or Asian.”

And so this is the myth we must debunk in order to begin to transform our workplaces: hiring and developing diverse talent, as long as they are good.

**We need to focus on the role we can play
in creating inclusive processes ...**

DO YOU BELIEVE THERE IS A LIMITED POOL OF BLACK TALENT TO RECRUIT FROM?

In 2020, Charlie Scharf joined a list of executives who revealed that they have more work to do on their DEI journey. The Wells Fargo CEO shared his views on the lack of representation at the bank, citing that there was “a very limited pool of Black talent to recruit from.” Scharf later issued an apology after swift media backlash, stating that it was “an insensitive comment reflecting my own unconscious bias.”

In my time coaching leaders, I have heard a number of these phrases and more:

- There just aren’t enough qualified Black candidates out there.
- It’s not our issue, it’s a pipeline issue.
- Of course, I want more people of color on my team. Recruiting can’t find any candidates.

No matter what the wording is, it boils down to this: the underlying assumption that we lower the bar for “diverse talent.” Because we don’t believe or know or have seen “enough talented people of color” in the marketplace.

When I was once working with a South Asian leader, he said to me, “You know we brought in interns from Historically Black Colleges, we had a program,” providing evidence that he cared about diversity. “But they just weren’t as good as the other interns. We had to stop going there for interns.”

“How many interns did you hire?” I had asked.

“Three.”

You might find these examples uncomfortable or not believable. And if we are honest, others have heard these stories in our workplaces before, and even believed or continue to believe these myths ourselves.

So let’s self-reflect and answer the following:

- Have you ever thought that focusing on “nondiverse talent” or white talent is lowering the bar for your team?
- Would you ever stop a partnership with a college because a handful of white interns from that college weren’t very good?
- Do you believe there is a pipeline problem when it comes to white talent?
- As you think about your career, how many white individuals have you hired or referred for roles?
- Can you recall a time you worked with a white colleague who wasn’t a fit or wasn’t qualified to do the role? Has that made you more hesitant to hire white people over time?

Now let's self-reflect and answer the following:

- Have you ever thought that focusing on “diverse talent” is lowering the bar for your team?
- Would you ever stop a partnership with a Historical Black College or University because a handful of Black interns from that college weren't very good?
- As you think about your career, how many people of color have you hired or referred for roles?
- Do you believe there is a pipeline problem when it comes to people of color? Do you believe there is a pipeline problem for Black talent? Hispanic or Latino talent? Asian talent?
- Can you recall a time you worked with a Black colleague who wasn't a fit or wasn't qualified to do the role? Has that made you more hesitant to hire Black people over time? (You can also re-ask the question naming a specific community of color.)

So if you believe the myth that you can't hire “diverse talent” without lowering the bar, you won't make much progress on diversifying your workforce. Because very few people will fit whatever standards you have set in your head. If you hire a person of color and treat them like you did them a favor or they were a quota, they won't stay. If you don't show up as an inclusive leader, you won't be able to retain them.

IT'S TIME TO BUST THE PIPELINE MYTH

An underlying assumption in the myth, “I’m all for diverse talent as long as they are good,” is that there isn’t “qualified” talent who identify as people of color. The pipeline just isn’t there.

When I once worked with a leader in Vermont, they wanted to hire a head of market research. It was an opportunity to change the composition of a mostly white team. And yet they wanted to provide no relocation support, offering an average compensation package versus the market, including that the role had to be in state. And Vermont remains the second whitest state in the United States, 89.8 percent white.

“It’s a pipeline problem,” proclaimed the leader. “We aren’t getting any diverse slates from recruiting, there’s nothing I can do about it.”

In this case, the leader failed to recognize what many of us do: we are responsible for “the pipeline problem” myth.

We can create barriers that don’t allow fair and equitable access to our roles. We can perpetuate the pipeline problem by setting up internal hurdles and criteria. We can use credentialing and degrees as a way to gatekeep who is worthy of consideration. Mirrortocracies, a term recently coined in place of meritocracies, are organizations where leaders hire individuals who remind them of themselves, versus hiring the best talent for the role.

So in the Vermont example, attracting people of color candidates for this role was unrealistic. In the end, they hired a white candidate.

Finally, when we think of the “availability of talent,” dynamics in the marketplace continue to shift. With the continued rise of remote work, you have access to talent across the globe and no longer need to hire with a specific location in mind.

Prior to Elon Musk acquiring Twitter, the company’s “work from anywhere” policy was an example of broadening access to talent and their commitment to diversifying their workforce. And their policy was having an impact; Twitter reported 9.4 percent Black representation in 2021 (vs. 6.9 percent the prior year) and 8 percent Hispanic/Latinx representation (Twitter uses the term Latinx instead of Latino) in 2021 (vs. 5.5 percent in 2020).

“In an all-virtual environment there are very few limitations to where we can show up to meet talent as a company,” James Loduca, then Twitter’s vice president of inclusion, diversity, equity, and accessibility, told Bloomberg News. “We were able to hire folks in markets that we know have high populations of Black talent, markets that we know have high populations of Latinx talent.”

When we focus on myths like “diverse talent just isn’t as good” or “there’s a pipeline problem,” it distracts us from the work we need to do.

LANGUAGE MATTERS WHEN IT COMES TO ATTRACTING TALENT

In my time coaching leaders, I often see inappropriate or hurtful language used when referring to how an organization attracts talent. Here are three commonly used phrases I recommend we stop using and offer language to use instead:

Instead of “Diverse Hire, Diversity Hire, or Diverse Talent,” Use “Building Diverse Pipelines, Diverse Slates, Diverse Succession Plans”

Using the words diverse hire (diversity hire, or diverse talent) can have a damaging impact on your DEI efforts. Diverse hire implies that the only reason an individual was hired is because of a specific dimension of diversity. That they were hired because they were diverse, not because they were qualified.

Instead, focus your language around building diverse pipelines, and ensure you have diverse slates for roles. As a woman of color, I don’t want to be labeled as a diverse hire. I want to be known for my experience, my talent, my expertise I bring to the organization.

Instead of “Underrepresented Minorities,” Use “Historically Marginalized Communities”

Using the term underrepresented minorities (URM) has become increasingly popular as companies look to diversify their workforce. URM references the low participation rates of ethnic and racial communities in fields and industries relative to their representation in the U.S. population.⁹ Unfortunately, when we use this term, we don’t acknowledge that these communities have been systemically and historically excluded. By using only this one umbrella term, we also erase the differences of individuals in this group.

Instead of using URM, consider using the phrase historically marginalized communities. By using this language, you are acknowledging that there are communities who have systematically been denied access to economic, political, and cultural participation. I also use people of color more broadly and interchangeably with historically marginalized communities when speaking with leaders who might not yet understand the term historically marginalized communities and aren't ready to use it.

You can also be specific about what communities you are referencing and wanting to serve, for example, Black/African-American, Hispanic or Latino, or Native American/American Indian/Indigenous American. Often, it's important to be specific to ensure you are honoring a community's history and their voices.

Instead of "Diversity of Thought," Use "Diversity of Representation"

Increasingly, diversity of thought has become a popular phrase to express what we believe to be the intent of our DEI efforts.

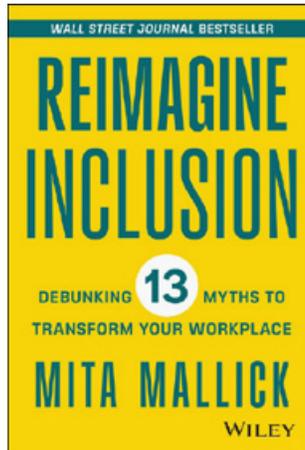
By only embracing diversity of thought, we aren't having uncomfortable conversations when it comes to gender and racial inequities in our organizations. We aren't specifically talking about whose voice is missing from the table and why.

Instead of using just diversity of thought, use the language that "diversity of thought doesn't happen without diversity of representation." You can also use the phrase, "focusing on diversity of representation" when referring to what you hope to achieve through your DEI efforts, particularly in recruiting.

When we focus on myths like “diverse talent just isn’t as good” or “there’s a pipeline problem,” it distracts us from the work we need to do. We need to focus on the role we can play in creating inclusive processes and hold ourselves accountable to finding the best talent for the role. While your recruiting organization has expertise and experience in this space, we must accept the responsibility that we as leaders have in hiring talent.

In my time working with leaders, many are quick to put the responsibility on recruiting for diversifying their teams. **Remember that this work belongs to all of us.** 🙏

Info



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Mita Mallick is a corporate change-maker with a track record of transforming businesses. She's a Chief Diversity Officer and highly sought-after speaker who has advised Fortune 100 companies and startups alike. She is a LinkedIn Top Voice, a contributor to *Harvard Business Review*, *Adweek*, *Fast Company* and *Entrepreneur*.

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