

UnMasked™: A generational shift in attitudes about racial inequity, diversity and the unique implications for businesses

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At various points since mid-March 2020, the COVID-19 global pandemic has forced many businesses to shutter their doors and rapidly reduce the number of employees in their facilities and offices. Some of the workforce moved remote, and by June, the collective consciousness of the country was focused on more than the pandemic, namely on the structural racism that has plagued this country for centuries.

Now, as the economy reopens, consumers re-enter the marketplace and employees return to their workplaces, Millennials and Generation Z (who we colloquially term the “Next Generations”) are focusing on the conditions of the institutions they patronize and in which they work.

Next Gen’s exposure to the collision of two pandemics, COVID-19 and structural racism, showed them the danger and trauma of being Black, particularly in America.

Their analysis is exposing a disconnect between our society’s proclamation of equality and the institutional inequities embedded in the fabric of our great union. It is prompting Next Generations to mobilize to upend institutional racism and amplify public awareness and intolerance to structural inequities.

In stark contrast to the adoption of facial coverings and masks to decrease the spread of the coronavirus, those positively impacted by this phenomenon have effectively become “unmasked” — released from previously socially imposed constructs.

The effect of this “unmasking” is that Next Gen consumers and employees are returning with a different professional mindset than they held a few months ago. They are less inclined to accede the status quo for the sake of professionalism.

They are also less motivated to accept inequalities for the chance of climbing the corporate ladder and less likely to allow institutionalized structures that perpetuate inequities in any

fashion to remain intact. This is an immediate shift that businesses and employers must not only accept, but embrace.

According to Statista,¹ Next Generations are the largest age group in the country, at over 129 million. Millennials and Generation Z are also more diverse than previous generations, with over 44 and 48 percent, respectively, belonging to a minority race or ethnic group.

Next Generations are unlike prior generations which are more likely to assimilate² into existing structures to avoid disruption and gain acceptance. Next Generations, with their diverse composition, accentuate authenticity, belongingness and distinctiveness. They are now more emboldened to be authentic and create constructive disruption.

Next Generations also have a wildly different concept of normality and possibility. Whereas members of prior generations may have doubted that a BIPOC (Black, Indigenous or Person of Color) individual would ever be elected president of the United States, the first president of which some Next Generations became consciously and practically aware was a Black man. There are some Next Generations who have never cast a vote for a white, male presidential candidate.

Black Next Generations — or Black American Millennials (BAMs) — not only expect equal treatment, but rather equitable treatment to that of non-Black peers. They are also generally more accepted by their peers than in previous generations, which leads to others observing them as authentic and completely unmasked. This reality is central to the “cancel” culture and present move to hold businesses and employers publicly accountable for their statements on diversity and racial equity.

Research shows Next Generations³ are also ambitious, results- and team-oriented, self-confident and lack fear to assume stretch projects, question established authority, or challenge the status quo. This mindset has been known to upset the apple cart and cause employers to rethink cookie-cutter programs that guide employees through the employment life cycle.



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On the same day in separate cities over a thousand miles apart, we witnessed a dishonest 9-1-1 call by a white woman (colloquial "Karen") reporting a threat on her life by a Black man in New York's Central Park and the murder of George Floyd by police officers sworn to serve and protect Mr. Floyd's general health and welfare (Minneapolis).

These incidents disrupted the Next Generations' sense of equity in a poignant way. Members of the Black community will tell you that such atrocities, however alarming, are frequent, if not daily — add Breonna Taylor, Eric Garner, Taylor Bracey and countless others to the list. So what made the events of May 25, 2020, different?

Now is the time for businesses and employers alike to lean into this disruption and embrace change as an opportunity for transformational growth, rather than to resist or fight against it.

One effect was that it made complicated topics of persistent racial inequality mainstream. Issues like the more significant adverse economic impact on Black communities of the pandemic due to the percentage of low-wage workers displaced by the shutdown were also exposed.

The bombardment of these and other undeniable, factual realities sparked global protests in support of the value of Black lives — expressed with a collective shout of affirmation: "Black Lives Matter" across a broad coalition.

Next Generations are highly motivated and their numerical presence, the probability of encountering them in the workplace — as clients, contacts, consumers, customers or employees — is extremely high. And given their diversity and generally inclusive disposition, businesses and employers are likely to see increased activity in race-related complaints of unlawful discrimination under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and other applicable laws.

The complaints may challenge perceptions of racism in various forms, including but not limited to:

- Overt actions (e.g., anti-Black social media posts);
- Discreet actions of individuals (e.g., microaggressions); and
- Discreet actions created by structures (e.g., failure to develop, retain and advance Black talent, etc.).

Notably, the handling of these complaints, whether of unlawful discrimination or otherwise, will often be in the hands of Next Generations. They will be present as employees in human resources, legal departments, public relations or government agencies reviewing complaints, or on juries asked to decide if certain actions, policies or practices are unlawfully discriminatory at trial. The Next Gen mindset will undoubtedly impact and determine the outcomes of these cases.

Businesses and employers must:

- Proactively assess their culture, structural composition and human capital;
- Next, evaluate, distribute and enforce anti-harassment and disrespectful behavior policies;
- Then, consider launching affinity groups or reinventing existing affinity groups as internal resources;
- Equip employees, particularly public-facing employees, with tools to increase cultural competence; and
- Create and facilitate an atmosphere of increased dialogue at each level of operation, including on any public-facing or social media platforms.

Global protests are compounding the business disruption already in full force from COVID-19. Now is the time for businesses and employers alike to lean into this disruption and embrace change as an opportunity for transformational growth, rather than to resist or fight against it.

Because the Next Gen mindset values results, collaboration among peers, and impactful community engagement, systemic inequity is rightfully under assault. Employers need to take notice and adapt accordingly.

The general absence of fear when tackling seemingly insurmountable projects, or challenging the status quo, indicates that Next Generations are unlikely to be pacified by esthetic changes to structures that perpetuate racial inequity. Employers need to deliver concrete, measurable actions. Next Generations want to see immediate evidence of substantive change.

Although structural racism cannot be cured instantaneously, a creative and comprehensive strategic plan should be identified, implemented and executed to facilitate transformative growth of our nation toward a more perfect union.

The time to uproot institutional racism and realize a more inclusive workplace is now, and the unmasked Next Generations are leading the way.

Notes

- ¹ <https://bit.ly/3aAPtH1>
- ² <https://bit.ly/2Nfa2QI>
- ³ <https://pewrsr.ch/2Zx4O57>

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