THOUGHT LEADERSHIP SERIES

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Diversity, Equity & Inclusion

DEI requires top-down commitment

In this week's Thought Leadership Roundtable, leaders at Black Onyx Management and the Metropolitan School District of Lawrence Township identify two precursors to DEI success at any organization: tangible support from leadership and making DEI a formal policy, not just a promise.

Q: What are the biggest obstacles to making DEI a central part of any organization?

Doneisha Posey: An obstacle that I've seen in many organizations is failing to address unconscious bias. It can be difficult for individuals to recognize their own biases, and these biases can manifest in hiring, promotions, and other business decisions.

DEI initiatives also falter without sufficient investment. Organizations must invest in training, coaching, and other resources to create lasting change. That investment must come from the top. Without the support and commitment of senior leaders, it can be challenging to create real change in an organization's culture and practices.

And finally, measuring the success of DEI initiatives can be challenging. Without clear metrics, it can be difficult to assess the effectiveness of DEI initiatives and make data-driven decisions.

Shawn Smith: Stakeholders must be willing and ready to do the work. The MSD of Lawrence Township is incredibly diverse. A commitment to equitable student outcomes is not something that stakeholders want for the district, it is something that they demand and expect when enrolling children, choosing a place of employment, or looking for a home.

Q: How can those obstacles be overcome?

Shawn Smith: Put your goals in writing. Make them policy. The MSD of Lawrence Township is guided by policy approved by our Board of Education. Per Policy 2110.02, the corporation is committed to eliminating racial and ethnic disparities in achievement, while raising achievement levels for all students, to ensure educational equity and excellence for all learners of all races and ethnicities. It is important for organizations to adopt common language and definitions. The definition of educational equity adopted by the MSD of Lawrence Township is, "A state in which dimensions of privilege, skin color, and economic status are not predictive of, or correlated with, educational outcomes in any significant way, and where all learners are able to participate fully in quality learning experiences."

Q: How can an intentional focus on equity shift hiring practices and professional development within an organization?

Doneisha Posey: When equity is in focus during the hiring process, we see diverse candidate pools and strategic, objective hiring strategies. Tools such as structured interviews and blind resume reviews can be used to reduce bias in the hiring process.

Inclusive professional development opportunities can lead to a more skilled workforce in which employees demonstrate increased innovation, effective problem-solving skills, and better decision-making skills. Examples of inclusive professional development opportunities include mentorship programs, employee resource groups, and training opportunities that specifically address the needs and experiences of under-represented groups.

I am also a huge proponent of data-driven decision-making with an equity focus. By collecting data on the demographics of job candidates, hires and promotions, organizations can identify areas for improvement and measure the impact of their equity initiatives. By creating a more equitable workplace, organizations can improve diversity, retain top talent, and create a more inclusive and successful business.

Shawn Smith: The MSD of Lawrence Township is keenly aware of the need for staff to be reflective of the students and families served. The Human Resources Department recruits year round, guided by a Board Goal centered around recruiting, retaining, and rewarding people. It is the intent of the MSD of Lawrence Township to focus on the recruitment and retention of bilingual staff and to increase racial and ethnic diversity by 3% over the course of the year. In addition, a district-based alternative licensure program in partnership with the Indiana University School of Education at IUPUI, is available. The program supports classified staff and community members in an on-site program to earn their teaching license.

Q: Discuss how employees can become empowered by a feeling of belonging and how that feeling can positively affect an organization's results.

Shawn Smith: Staff members must be part of the process when planning district programming intended to empower staff and affect organizational results. As an example, an external equity audit to review and update equity policies, practices, and cultural competence was conducted throughout the 2020-2021 school year, appraising district schools' policies, practices, and outcomes as they relate to racial equity. Immediately following, a committee of over 100 faculty, staff, parents, and students came together to review the report and to develop a set of recommendations for implementation. The committee report with recommendations was accepted and approved by the Board of Education in the spring of 2022. This plan is now being implemented by all divisions and schools.

Doneisha Posey: When employees feel a sense of belonging, they are more likely to be engaged, motivated, and committed to their work, and this can positively affect an organization's

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results in many ways. Employees who feel a sense of belonging are more likely to be productive and efficient in their work. They feel a stronger sense of connection to the organization, and this can lead to higher retention. This affects the bottom line in many ways, including lower turnover rates, reduced recruitment and training costs, and a more experienced workforce.

For organizations that have external customers, you would be surprised at how a sense of belonging within an organization positively affects external customer satisfaction. When an employee can bring their full self to the workplace, they are more likely to provide exceptional customer service. They feel a strong connection to the organization and its mission, which can translate into better customer interactions and excellence in customer satisfaction. By creating a culture of belonging, organizations can empower their employees, improve their results, and achieve greater success.

Q: There are well-documented gender- and race-based pay disparities. How does an organization work to address these disparities?

Doneisha Posey: I am very passionate about addressing gender- and race-based pay disparities. Addressing disparities, such as the significant pay gap between Black and Latina women and their white male counterparts, requires a multifaceted approach.

One of the first steps is to conduct a pay equity analysis to identify disparities based on gender or race. When inequities are discovered, pay can be adjusted to make sure all employees are being paid fairly.

Education and transparency are also critical to addressing pay disparities. The organization can provide training to managers and employees about the impact of unconscious bias on hiring, promotion, and pay decisions. And the organization

can communicate to employees how pay decisions are made and provide information on the pay rates for different positions within the organization.

It's also important to track progress toward erasing pay disparities by setting targets and monitoring pay rates over time.

Shawn Smith: In the MSD of Lawrence Township, all salary decisions are based on predetermined salary levels or pay scales. Salaries are finalized through the Human Resources Department to ensure equity and appropriate pay across all divisions. Pay scales are regularly evaluated in relation to other comparable school districts and competitors in the market.

Q: What's the key to organizations maintaining their DEI progress over time, even as companies grow and new challenges arise?

Shawn Smith: Organizations must hold themselves accountable. Lawrence Township uses a public-facing dashboard to provide real-time updates centered around the following 10 themes that emerged from the equity findings and that guide the action plan: Strong Principal Leadership; Hiring, Recruitment & Retention of Diverse Staff; ESL Learners & Shifting Demographics; Discipline; Access to Resources; Accountability; Social & Emotional Well Being; Racialized Language in Informal Settings; Gender Bias; and Parents & Community.

Q: Let's talk about some of the terminology surrounding DEI. Why is the term "opportunity gap" a better description than "achievement gap" when referring to racial disparity in outcomes?

Doneisha Posey: "Achievement gap" refers to differences in academic

achievement between different racial and ethnic groups. While it is important to measure this, the term fails to recognize that disparities are often the result of unequal access to resources and opportunities.

The term "opportunity gap" is a better description because it highlights the systemic barriers and inequities that affect marginalized communities. By using the term opportunity gap, we can shift the focus from individual achievement to the systems and structures that perpetuate these disparities.

Shawn Smith: Achievement is determined by opportunity. An organization must first ensure equitable access to high quality opportunities and experiences. Once those opportunities are institutionalized, then achievement can be measured.

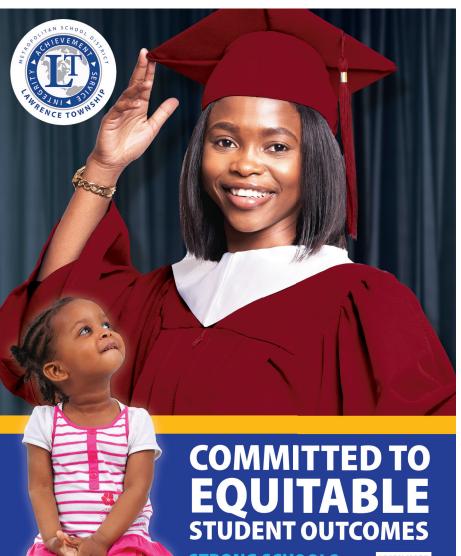### Q: What are the factors that have created the opportunity gap?

Shawn Smith: Some of the most significant factors stem from K-12 education, including the lack of universal access to high-quality preschool. Multiple studies examining the longer-term impacts of preschool have shown evidence of long term outcomes, including higher earnings, better health, better focus, and reduced likelihood of criminal activity.

Doneisha Posey: The term opportunity gap acknowledges that these disparities are not solely the result of individual effort or ability but rather a result of systemic barriers to resources such as quality education, health care, housing, and employment. By understanding the history of our country and how laws were created and enforced to maintain inequitable outcomes, we will be able to create more access for historically marginalized groups.

Q: What do the terms 'Allyship' and 'Accompliceship' mean and how does one progress from one to the other?

Doneisha Posey: Being an ally is good. Being an accomplice is better. To address systemic racism and make real, equitable changes in our city we need more accomplices. Allies make supportive statements, but accomplices take action. At Black Onyx Management, through research, best practices, and data analysis, we have identified key performance indicators that will hold us accountable to our goals and the community and become better accomplices. The overarching goal is to make our communities better places to live, work, and do business. It's time we progress from being allies to truly taking action and being accomplices!●

Doneisha Posey, vice president & general counsel of Black Onyx Management, is a Civil Rights attorney and Multicultural Millennial Leader who has become a highly-sought after DEI Thought Leader, sharing her experiences of increasing representation and creating opportunity and access for historically under-represented communities—especially Black and Latina women in the workplace.

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Dr. Shawn A. Smith has served as the Superintendent of Schools for the Metropolitan School District of Lawrence Township since 2014. The district serves more than 16,000 students and has over 2,300 employees. Dr. Smith has 32 years of experience in the field of education and is still a passionate educator whose first love is teaching Social Studies.

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