

## **Don't Let Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Efforts Stall in 2021**

By Rachel Ramsey

We all do it. We have our list of priorities, a neverending to-do list, and then something “more important” comes along, and that list shuffles around like a deck of cards. This is what 2020 felt like for most of us. First there was COVID, followed by restaurant closures and the constant retooling of our businesses—all of which felt like a gut punch to our livelihoods and the industry.

But then in June, there was a social justice awakening unlike anything I've ever seen before. The injustices I have faced every day of my life were on display for the world to see, comment on, and post about.

I've always been a realist and a forward thinker who could push past the present and focus on next steps. It's what made me a good line cook, and it shapes my strategies now as a restaurant HR professional. As I watched black squares get posted on Instagram and retweets of #blacklivesmatter, I had to wonder: Would this sudden interest be sustained when the real work began? I remained optimistic, but cautiously so.

Diversity, equity, and inclusion aren't new ideas. Many companies have long understood that investing in people, celebrating diversity, and promoting equity positively impacts company culture while also increasing your bottom line.

But that school of thought had yet to permeate the restaurant industry—until COVID hit. This time was different. DEI had our full attention. For once we were still. We weren't furiously mixing cocktails, doing inventory, or prepping for brunch. We had time to reflect. And it wasn't pretty.

Our industry has a long history of racial discrimination, sexism, ageism, and a general white washing in leadership. So when companies began making statements expressing their ongoing commitment to be a force for change in restaurants, I got excited, but cautiously so.

Cautiously, because a statement is not doing the work. What is this work? It's a deeper look at your systems, policies, and programs that contribute to discrimination of any kind in the workplace, followed by an action plan to implement equitable policies. The work isn't just a one-time DEI training for employees; it's yearly DEI program funding.

Once the reality of fulfilling the promises of those company statements became apparent, lots of owners went back to their relentless to-do lists. DEI got pushed again, right below mincing a 50-pound bag of onions and right above cleaning the grease traps.

I know what you're thinking. I don't have any money, resources, or time. But I'm often amazed at what business owners can accomplish with the right tools and a committed mindset. Here's a tip: Start small. One step is far better than none. I once read that we start everything from a place of not knowing—walking, talking, breathing, literally everything. DEI isn't so different. My clients often start by assessing their leadership teams. Are they diverse? If not, I ask this

question: How do you get a promotion at your company? Or do you have a step-by-step process to move from prep cook to executive chef?

Clearly defining processes like promotions and assessing “culture fit” go a long way to change behaviors rooted in bias. In recruiting, I often heard, “They’re just not a culture fit.” But what does that mean? Is it simply the exclusion of candidates because they don’t look like you or speak like you? In poor work cultures even current employees can feel excluded. The goal is to not only celebrate similarities amongst your teams, but the differences as well. That is what an inclusive workplace looks like.

While working in HR at Sodexo, I partnered with community nonprofits to offer access to jobs, opening a pathway to employment for individuals living in the communities we served. Our team offered candidates feedback on their resumes & tips on building soft skills, like interview presence and flexibility for free, which helped establish a tangible pipeline of future employees.

Building equity in restaurants will require commitment and focus, but it’s too important to ignore. In other facets of the industry, we’ve done the work to innovate, trailblaze, and shape popular culture for generations to come. Yet in an industry where our primary goal is centered on the care of our guests, we neglect the responsibility of caring for our own. Those employees who identify as people of color and women, and who are most likely to be marginalized and disenfranchised, constitute the large majority of our workforce.

Our teams are watching. The same employees who were brave enough to speak out and challenge their leaders last summer will be evaluating our actions or lack thereof.

My hope is that leaders commit without reservation to taking a step in the direction of equity. There are so many resources available to you, if you want them. Granted, as business owners in 2021, we keep getting hit with curveballs, but without the support and commitment of true allies, DEI will get lost again as just another item on the to-do list. Something we know we should work on, we know we should support, but don’t.