Combating Religiously Influenced Racism in Organizations
Abstract

In this case, the author examines how religious attitudes can be linked to discrimination and provides recommendations on how to combat racism in organizations. The text reveals how religious attitudes related to racism can impact organizational attitudes and corporate practices. A case study from AT&T illustrates the actions leaders can take to foster diversity and inclusiveness in organizations. AT&T’s strategies incorporate education, planning, dialogue, communication, and evaluation. This case includes ideas for implementing the steps and building employee engagement.

Case

Learning Outcomes

After reading this case, students should be able to:

- Debate the religious dimensions that correlate to racism and its influence over organizations.
- Evaluate the impact of religious narratives about race on diversity and inclusion (DI) practices in organizations.
- Develop approaches for creating organizational policies and practices that emphasize DI.
- Outline measures of performance organizations can use to determine the effectiveness of their DI programs.

Religion’s Impact on Organizational Practices

Most companies have formal policies that promote inclusion and diversity, but these plans do not always translate into corporate practice. People engage in racism, sexism, and other forms of in-group favoritism subconsciously (Nkomo & Ariss, 2014). This subconscious bias can make it difficult to effect real change in organizations.

Nine out of ten people who identify themselves as evangelical are White. In Lindsay’s (2008) model of elite agency, collaboration among leaders with similar beliefs leads to powerful networks and synergy. Evangelical corporate executives, industry leaders, and politicians continue to produce structural barriers that prevent the less fortunate from attaining positions of power (Lindsay, 2008).

Christianity, Racism, and the Antebellum Economy

In the early days of America, Christianity endorsed slavery (Fletcher, 2016). In the colonies, a view of Christian preeminence gave support to the enslavement of non-White peoples occupying the American continent. Economically, slavery was a boon for the South (Stewart, 2016). Slaves provided cheap labor for Southern cotton growers, giving the growers competitive advantages over Europe and the North. Southern aristocratic Christians interpreted their economic success as an endorsement from God of their methods.

Southern Christian beliefs played a prominent role in promoting the South’s secession from the Union and maintaining the institution of slavery. In churches across the South, preachers claimed that God had ordained the enslavement of Africans as punishment for their heathen ways (Stout, 2008). Confederates portrayed the
North as a Godless society bent on destroying the Southern way of life and banishing its sacred institutions. While soldiers fought in the field, families sat in pews listening to inflammatory rhetoric that condemned the North and proclaimed the righteous cause of the South.

After the Civil War, a “separate but equal” principle of justice led to the enactment of Jim Crow laws, but Blacks were anything but equal under this system (Freedom Riders, 2017). Blacks were expected to live in underdeveloped parts of town, use inferior bathrooms and water fountains, enter stores through discrete doors, and ride in different rail cars than Whites.

Jobs in the growing factories and mills of the south became the sole preserve of poor whites, and racial discrimination among white workers, unions, and employers combined with legal separation of the races through Jim Crow legislation effectively eliminated blacks from skilled and semi-skilled occupations, confining them to the most menial jobs in organizations. (Nkomo & Ariss, 2014, p. 393)

Modern Evangelical Attitudes and Racism

In 2008, Lindsay interviewed over 300 evangelicals who belonged to the upper stratosphere of government, business, sports, arts and entertainment, and higher education. Participants included Chief Executive Officers, former cabinet members of five different White House administrations, professional athletes, Ivy League professors, pastors of mega churches, leaders of some of the largest nonprofits in the world, and stars of Hollywood. From interviews and analysis, Lindsay (2008) developed his model of elite agency. In this paradigm, people with money and influence control institutions, establish rules, and use philanthropy to support causes most dear to them. This power base, coupled with institutional control, legislative and governmental influence, and philanthropy, generates cultural narratives and programs designed to move the evangelical agenda forward.

Because of limited views on how to reduce racism, White evangelicals, also known as Christian conservatives, unknowingly continue to perpetuate racial inequalities. Emerson and Smith (2000) conducted a study, titled “Divided by Faith”, of this religious group in America. Based on the General Social Survey, conducted by the National Opinion Research Center in Chicago, most evangelicals diagnosed Blacks’ lack of success as a motivational issue: that is, evangelicals believe minorities simply lack the interest in attaining prosperity for themselves. Nearly one-third of respondents said that inadequate education was the problem.

Unlike in the antebellum period, religious conservatives no longer believe in God-ordained inequality. Instead, their belief structure is that God gives everyone free will and holds them equally accountable for their actions (Emerson & Smith, 2000). Respondents to the Emerson and Smith study made the following statements:

“They [blacks] have all the opportunities we [whites] have,” said one woman (p. 97).

Another woman said, “If they want to achieve the same level as a white person, they can.” (Emerson & Smith, 2000, p. 97)

An economically successful male graduate of an evangelical school stated, “If [African Americans] have a chance to catch a vision it would help people stay focused enough to get them there [to economic success].” (Emerson & Smith, 2000, p. 100)

Another man expressed his beliefs on what God expects: “I think they [Blacks] choose to live like that [economically poor] because it is an easier way out. I am a firm believer in this: God said he would provide for our needs, and he does. But if you want out of a gutter, you’re going to have to work to get out of a gutter.” (Emerson & Smith, 2000, pp. 101–102)
One antebellum narrative, however, persists in the modern era. In this narrative, getting a good job and working hard are Godly values, and this is where Blacks are failing. White evangelicals view all programs designed to help minorities as welfare. Welfare is sinful because it interferes with free will and individualism, which are the ultimate American conservative values (Emerson & Smith, 2000).

In his book *Reconciliation Blues: A Black Evangelical’s Inside View of White Christianity*, Gilbreath (2006) expanded on the conversation created by Emerson and Smith. Gilbreath, a Black evangelical, noted that while the White evangelical church excels at evangelism and missionary work, it is less willing to address the issue of racial reconciliation. Evangelical universities are dominated by Whites and the few Blacks who attend these schools feel like outsiders (Gilbreath, 2006). Racial issues are rarely discussed in these schools and there seems to be a lack of sensitivity by White evangelicals around the causes of racism in the United States (Gilbreath, 2006). The author went on to note that Republican conservative politics and White evangelicalism are inexorably linked such that Gilbreath (2006) was made to feel like a traitor by his White brothers and sisters for suggesting that he might not vote for a Republican president. Through extensive interviews, Gilbreath (2006) showed that other racial minorities also experienced ignorance and insensitivity from White evangelicals.

**Evangelical Approaches for Addressing Racism**

After their preliminary work, Emerson and Smith (2000) interviewed White evangelicals who stated that addressing racism was a top priority. Conservatives offered few tools for narrowing the racial gap in the economy. Over 50% of the group agreed on three solutions to the racial problem: developing relationships with people of other races; combating racism in the job market and through the courts; and racially integrating churches. Over 80% of White religious conservatives endorsed the first two actions, while just over half of respondents said that integrating congregations was an answer.

None of the proposed solutions tackled structural racism, or the inequalities that result from a hidden system that prevents Blacks and other minorities from rising above low levels of economic success. As noted previously, over 60% of White conservatives believed that Blacks failed to rise above their current financial state because they lacked the motivation to try (Emerson & Smith, 2000). This group also felt that racial equality has already been legislated and companies that do not follow the rules should be pursued in court (Emerson & Smith, 2000). As long as firms maintain legal policies and procedures, they are not responsible for racial inequality.

Sinitiere (2013) offered a brief history of evangelical scholarship on the issue of race. In the thirteen years since “Divided by Faith” had been published, evangelicals continued to struggle with the race issue. Sinitiere reviewed books published in the last ten years that extended the work of Emerson and Smith, including: *Free to Be Bound: Church Beyond the Color Line* (Wilson-Hartgrove, 2008); *The Next Evangelicalism: Freeing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity* (Rah, 2009); and *Blacks and White in Christian America* (Emerson & Shelton, 2012). These books point to the continued problems associated with White evangelicalism’s focus on individualism and its unwillingness to tackle the problem of structural racism. Emerson and Smith’s seminal work is still relevant (Sinitiere, 2013).

**Structural Tools for Change**

The evangelical approach places the responsibility for racial inequality squarely on the shoulders of individuals. Good Christians should reach out to people from other races (Emerson & Smith, 2000), but White conservatives largely believe that Blacks lack education and economic success because they are not adequately motivated to make the tough choices needed to prosper (Emerson & Smith, 2000). Based on extensive research, literature, and theory, Flynn, Holmberg, Warren, and Wong (2017) proposed structural solutions to
the barriers caused by race.

Flynn et al. (2017) recommend three strategies that pertain to business policies and practice. The first pillar of structural change is targeted investment in poor communities. Resources should be spent on improving infrastructure, access to broadband technology, education at all levels, and public transportation. Next, companies should actively encourage greater labor union participation. Labor unions give minorities the power to challenge unfair practices and managerial personal preferences that lead to the continuance of the status quo. Third, every person needs affordable access to quality healthcare. Corporations can help by offering reasonably priced medical plans to workers and investing in community healthcare centers in impoverished areas. Before enacting any of these recommendations, however, Flynn and colleagues state that a racial impact assessment (RIA) should be conducted to gauge whether the plan will result in real benefits for minorities. Conducting an RIA involves identifying the racial groups that may be most affected by a proposal, engaging those stakeholders, documenting inequalities and identifying causes, and clarifying the purpose of the strategy. The next steps of an RIA are to think about unintended consequences of a policy or proposal, determine possible benefits, investigate alternatives, and identify success metrics (Race Forward: The Center for Racial Justice Innovation, n.d.). Rather than risking money on a good idea, an RIA provides a framework for thinking about and investigating how a DI strategy might produce tangible benefits for those it seeks to serve.

Creating Genuine Diversity in Organizations: The AT&T Model

The AT&T model takes a structural approach to combating racism, using tools similar to the strategies identified by Flynn and colleagues (2017): through employee engagement programs, labor unions, councils, supplier diversity programs, and philanthropy.

AT&T’s supplier diversity statement reads: "We are committed to promoting, increasing and improving the overall participation of minority-, women-, service-disabled veteran- and LGBT-owned business enterprises by purchasing their materials and services" (AT&T, 2018).

AT&T’s actions have created tangible results, where over 40% of U.S. workers and 37% of managers are people of color (AT&T, 2018). 80% of racial minorities stay with the company.

The AT&T Diversity and Inclusion Model

Diversity and inclusion are related terms with different meanings. Diversity refers to the representation of various ethnicities, genders, cultures, and perspectives in an organization. “Inclusion is defined as the degree to which employees feel part of essential organizational processes including influence over the decision-making process, involvement in critical work groups, and access to information and resources” (Downey, van der Werff, Thomas, & Plaut, 2015, p. 37).

The AT&T model is based on its Code of Business Conduct (COBC) statement, which covers diversity, ethics and compliance, human rights, and citizenship (AT&T, 2018). In 2016, 98% of employees completed annual COBC training (AT&T, 2018). The firm’s suppliers are expected to comply with AT&T’s Human Rights Policy, which states that all human beings should be treated with dignity and respect.

AT&T employee engagement programs and incentives aim to increase employee skills, hire the best talent, and help workers achieve their goals. AT&T employee resource groups include The NETwork BICP (Black Integrated Communications Professionals), The Hispanic/Latino Employee Association of AT&T, Asian Pacific Islanders for Professional & Community Advancement, and nine other minority-oriented groups (AT&T, 2016). Over 1 million workers receive health benefits (AT&T, 2018). In 2016, the company spent over $30 million in tuition assistance; more than half of the tuition assistance money was invested in the education of non-
Whites.

The company uses councils to help promote diversity and inclusion. The Chairman's Diversity Council, consisting of the chairman's direct subordinates, meets every quarter to evaluate DI metrics and strategies (AT&T, 2018). The Chief Diversity Officer chairs the Senior Executive Diversity Council that oversees DI related to marketing and suppliers. The Business Unit Diversity Councils implement business unit DI initiatives. There are a dozen employee resource groups with over 130,000 members, and the president of each group meets monthly in the Joint Diversity Council to address corporate needs.

Nearly half of AT&T’s employees belong to a labor union (AT&T, 2018). This is the largest union representation of any company in America. With dozens of contracts and agreements in place, over 60,000 employees are covered by unions.

Through AT&T’s Inspire program, workers mentor “underserved students” in nearly 40 cities (AT&T, 2018). Over 250,000 students participated in the program. More than 50% of participants in the Summer Internship program are people of color (AT&T, 2018).

Supplier diversity is a major part of AT&T’s DI strategy. In 2016, the firm spent over $14 billion with minority-owned businesses (AT&T, 2018). This amount represents nearly 20% of AT&T’s business-to-business expenditures. Supplier diversity is a four-part strategy: collaboration and mentorship to grow the supplier base; educational workshops; mentoring prime subcontractors to help them increase their subcontractor diversity; and helping suppliers increase their opportunities with AT&T’s internal business units. As of 2016, over 400 suppliers have signed up for the program that connects contracts and subcontractors for diversification.

Through education initiatives, councils that include representatives from all levels of the company, employee engagement groups, supplier diversity programs, labor unions, philanthropy to the disadvantaged, and other efforts, AT&T invests heavily in the future of minority groups. These strategies distribute power rather than consolidate it.

Discussion Questions

1. How did Southern Christians justify their support of slavery in the South? Immediately following the Civil War, how did Whites in the South maintain their economic advantage over Blacks?
2. How do evangelical attitudes about economic success influence evangelical leaders’ approaches to combating racism in their communities and organizations? What critical changes can these leaders make?
3. What are AT&T’s strategies for increasing minority opportunities and economic standing? What results has the company seen based on these strategies?
4. What are the risks and benefits for AT&T investing in communities and educational initiatives outside of its corporation?

Further Resources


References


Emerson, M. O., & Smith, C. (2000). Divided by faith: Evangelical religion and the problem of race in America [Kindle version]. Retrieved from Amazon.com


http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781526462121