

WORKPLACES AND
MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES

INTERSECTIONALITY:
WHY IT MATTERS

CORPORATIONS ARE TAKING
A STAND ON THE ISSUES

INCLUSION

WINTER 2019 + ISSUE 4

*Creating Globally
Inclusive & Culturally
Competent
Workplaces*

DIVERSITY STRATEGIST

LENORA
BILLINGS-
HARRIS

Leading the
Charge on
Implementing
Inclusive Practices





Lenora Billings-Harris

Diversity Strategist & Speaker

Lenora Billings-Harris is a diversity and inclusion thought leader who works with companies to leverage diversity and increase inclusion, reduce the impact of unconscious bias, and thereby increase each company's bottom line.

Billings-Harris has been named among the 100 Global Thought Leaders on Diversity and Inclusion by the Society for Human Resource Management and was named one of the 20 top influential diversity leaders in the United States by *Diversity Woman*. Billings-Harris recently delivered keynotes in Cape Town, South Africa, and Tel Aviv, Israel, to share best practices with leaders in business, government, education, and NGO communities.

"The workplace is the primary location where people experience some form of diversity every day."

She coauthored the book *Trailblazers: How Top Business Leaders are Accelerating Results through Inclusion and Diversity* and is the author of *The Diversity Advantage: A Guide to Making Diversity Work*. She also serves on the adjunct faculty of the business schools of Averett University and the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Her team at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro conducted award-winning research.

Billings-Harris has presented in 37 countries. She is a past president of the National Speakers Association (NSA) and was the 2014–2015 president of the Global Speakers Federation. In 2016, she received the NSA's Cavett Award, the highest honor bestowed upon professional speakers in the United States. In 2018, she was inducted into the NSA's Speaker Hall of Fame.

INCLUSION: What will be some of the biggest issues and challenges in 2019 for a corporate diversity and inclusion leader like yourself?

Lenora Billings-Harris: Clarifying what diversity and inclusion really is from a business perspective continues to be a never-ending challenge. Many people, at all levels of their organization, still think it is only about EEO compliance. Diversity focuses on who is on the team—do people look alike and think alike, or is there diversity in many ways? The first step in my work often includes helping executives reframe D&I so they see the goal is to attract the best talent, which leads to diversity of thought. Diversity of thought leads to innovation and better decision making and problem solving, which then leads to higher productivity and profits.

Once leaders reframe their understanding of workplace diversity, they can explore ways to attract a broader mix of talent. The next issue is to find ways to create an inclusive environment that enables talent to produce at their highest level. Executives committed to an inclusive environment understand that D&I is not "just an HR program"—it impacts every level and every department of the organization. Most importantly, they understand that creating inclusivity and equity is everyone's responsibility. Leaders focus on transformational strategies instead of easy tactics to achieve their aspirational vision of inclusion.



Billings-Harris speaking at the Citrix Synergy Conference (2017)

IN: In the last year, gender inequality in the workplace—including sexual harassment—has become large in the public eye. We all know that these challenges are not new. How does this new public awareness help close the gender gap?

LBH: Women and men who have been harassed or discriminated against due to gender have become empowered to speak their truth. Because they know there is worldwide support to stop sexual harassment and identity bashing, more people are willing to speak up. However, having the courage to speak up is still difficult. According to the EEOC, harassment of all types and retaliation charges continue to rise every year. Companies committed to advancing D&I are offering harassment prevention training. They are not assuming that nonharassing behavior is simply a matter of common sense.

In regard to the gender pay gap, some organizations have gone public in their efforts to create gender equality in the areas of hiring and pay. They are so committed that they are willing to have the public hold them accountable. This is a major shift in the way organizations address gender inequity regarding pay in the United States since, culturally, Americans do not discuss salaries openly. Some countries, such as Sweden and Norway, require corporations to share this information. Uncovering the systematic bias in hiring and pay practices helps companies make sustainable changes.

IN: There has been a much greater emphasis in recent years on unconscious and implicit bias training in companies. Why is this training so important? Does it work? How can it be done better?

LBH: You cannot change behaviors if you do not know that some behaviors are ineffective or produce a result different than what was intended. Unconscious bias training opens the door to discovering how unintentional actions impact productivity.

Exploring unconscious bias, especially through an interactive workshop experience, is a positive way to help people discover that bias is normal—all humans are biased, and all biases are not negative. When unconscious bias sessions are designed and facilitated well, the participants develop an understanding of how our brains capture information and apply it to our

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beliefs and attitudes about others. They discover that our biases determine our behavior, and unconscious bias is more pervasive than expected. Leaders learn how names, accents, schools, and even height impact hiring decisions.

Learning and development programs

can be effective only if they are followed with goals and metrics to implement new behaviors and address systematic bias. Herein lies the problem. Organizations often do not commit the time and resources needed to do this type of follow-up.

When businesses make a concerted effort not only to offer unconscious bias training but also to commit to uncovering intentional and unintentional biases in their hiring and employment practices, they discover the changes needed are not difficult to implement. For example, several companies use blind-screening practices such as omitting names, schools, and year of graduation from résumés. They focus on job requirements, company goals, and clearly stated tangible and intangible talents needed for the specific unit or team.

IN: What are some of the recent thought leader topics in the world of inclusion that organizations are learning about and implementing?

LBH: Unconscious bias is the hottest topic, and executives are leading the charge to introduce it within their organizations. They learn a little about bias at a conference and then decide to do something in their organization. The concept of belonging is on the rise as the next hot topic because it is so closely related to bias.

Next is generational diversity. There are four and in some companies five generations working together. The accusations and insensitive comments that people make about others not in their generational group can be brutal! One



National Speaker Association Hall of Fame induction

of my clients decided to hire engineers directly after they graduated from college to introduce fresh thinking into his aging company. Because nothing had been done to prepare the baby boomers and others for these new, energetic young hires, the environment became toxic. After unconscious bias and generation sessions, the ground was laid for employees to understand each other and interact with each other more effectively.

IN: Given the change of emphasis in our current federal administration, in coming years, will it be more incumbent on corporations to be at the vanguard leading the push for inclusion? And are companies well situated for that challenge?

LBH: The workplace is the primary location where people experience some form of diversity every day. It is incumbent upon executives to lead efforts for inclusion and diversity, not only because it may be the right thing to do, but because it makes good business sense. Corporations have a responsibility to set an example in their communities by supporting inclusion efforts internally and externally. What people learn at work carries over to their behaviors at home and in the community, thus impacting everyone on a large scale.

Regardless of how laws may change and elected officials behave, companies set the bar regarding expected behavior. Civility has been on a sliding slope. Business leaders can, and some have demonstrated by example and by holding people accountable, that disrespecting

others through words or actions is not tolerated. Inaction is a decision, and it does not go unnoticed. The best talent is retained by organizations that value diversity of thought and create safe and inclusive spaces regardless of what is happening in the world of politics.

IN: For a number of years, practitioners of diversity and inclusion have been making the business case for D&I. Do you think this message is sinking in? If one of your clients does not fully buy in that a culture of diversity and inclusion is a competitive advantage, how do you convince them?

LBH: I do not assume my clients know the advantages of having a diverse and inclusive workplace. I focus on D&I 24/7, and I recognize that others focus on their area of expertise similarly. Even though there is so much research-based evidence proving diverse and inclusive organizations perform better than their competition, there are still companies—large and small—that have been performing well with little or no attention given to D&I. When I am faced with this dilemma, I help them discover how they can become great, instead of just good, by embracing inclusion.

Some people will never change. I am fortunate that most of my clients want to change but just do not know how or where to start. Once the organization articulates and implements its vision of an inclusive and diverse culture, those who do not want to ride that train eventually leave one way or the other.

IN: What brought you to do this work? Is there a personal motivation or a story from your childhood or past that inspired you in this direction?

LBH: It was March 1994 when a single moment in South Africa became the pivotal event that propelled my life's work. I was facilitating a workshop there one month before Nelson Mandela was to be elected president. The tension in the country was palpable. Everyone feared there would be escalated violence. After the workshop, when everyone had left, a woman who had been sitting in the back of the room came up to me with tears dripping from her face and gave me a bear hug. She said, "I'm an Afrikaner. When I saw you, a black woman from America, and realized you were the speaker, I couldn't think of a reason to stay in this room, but I could not leave because my boss was here. My husband, brothers, and sons are gathering guns to kill every black person they see. Now I know my real reason for being here today. It was to experience your presence. I must go home and convince my family to put down their guns and work for peace."

As we embraced again and cried together, I realized diversity and inclusion was not only about words—it was about showing up, being authentic, and creating safe spaces for people to explore differences and discover productive ways to live together.

From that time forward, my efforts have been focused on helping others understand the power of diversity and inclusion through the significance of the Zulu proverb "Ubuntu." The translation is "I am because we are. We are because I am." **IN**