

**BLACK LIVES MATTER:  
MOVING BEYOND D&I**

**THE COVID-19 SCAPEGOATING  
OF ASIAN AMERICANS**

**MENTAL HEALTH: TAKING  
CARE OF OUR TEAMS**

# INCLUSION

*Creating Globally  
Inclusive & Culturally  
Competent  
Workplaces*

WINTER 2021 + ISSUE 6

**Leading the  
Charge on  
Implementing  
Inclusive and  
Equitable  
Practices**

**MERCK'S**

**CELESTE  
WARREN**







# Celeste Warren

**Vice President,  
Global Diversity and  
Inclusion Center of  
Excellence,  
Merck**

**A**s the leader for Merck's Global Diversity and Inclusion Center of Excellence, Celeste Warren is responsible for working with Merck's global leaders to advance and embed diversity and inclusion as a strategic approach in order to maximize business performance and create a competitive advantage.

Warren joined Merck in 1997 and has held numerous positions of increasing responsibility within its human resources organization. Most recently, she was vice president, Human Resources for Merck's Global Legal, Compliance, Communications, Population Health, Patient Health, and Global Public Policy Organizations. Prior to that, she held the role as vice president, Human Resources for Merck's Manufacturing Division and Global Labor Relations and US Employee Relations Center of Excellence.

Prior to joining Merck in 1997, Warren worked for nine years in human resources at Kraft Foods Inc. and General Foods and held several positions of increasing responsibility, including such roles as training and development leader, diversity leader, labor relations director, and human resources leader for several organizations within Kraft and General Foods.

She has been honored with many awards, including *Black Enterprise's* Top Executives in Global Diversity and Inclusion, *Savoy* magazine's Most Influential Women in Corporate America, 21 Leaders for the 21st Century, and *DiversityGlobal's* Influential Women in Global Diversity.

Warren attended the University of Kentucky, where she earned her BS degree. She received her master's degree in Human Resources from Carnegie Mellon University.

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

**Celeste Warren:** Certainly, my early childhood experiences shaped much of my life's focus. I was born in a small steel-mill town in western Pennsylvania. My father was the first Black teacher, principal, and later superintendent in that part of the state. As a child, I watched him go through much adversity, which he met with steadfast dedication, commitment, and devotion to his belief that we were all created equal and deserved equity in our personal and professional lives. I also watched my mother, who was a stay-at-home mom, support him, counsel him, and get angry with him—and with such passionate strength. I guess you could say that my parents informed my fundamental belief system and instilled in me the determination to fight for equity.

My professional path included a number of positions of increasing responsibility in the human resources field, but my passion has always been on working to advance equity across all the dimensions of diversity. Today, my current role at Merck means I am focused on my life's work, and it has empowered me to make a greater impact on the organization and its initiatives and efforts.

**IN:** How has COVID-19 changed your perspective and your work?

**CW:** In many ways, the COVID-19 pandemic hasn't changed our work—rather, it has amplified our diversity and inclusion efforts across the company and the impact we have on the communities where we live and work, as well as on the patients we serve. And I can honestly say our commitment to diversity and inclusion never wavered during this time.

At Merck, known as MSD outside the United States and Canada, a key focus during this pandemic is not only to keep all our employees safe, but to ensure there are safe places for employees. That led to stepping up our efforts both on fostering a diverse workforce and on leading inclusively. Importantly, managers were directed to be even more purposeful about checking in on their employees to make sure they were adapting to a more intensified fusion of home and work and that they could meaningfully contribute and thrive as part of a team, even outside worksites.

In addition, we expanded our work and support to advance health equity. This pandemic and its spread, particularly among underrepresented communities, were spotlighting the problem of health disparities, which have existed for a long time. And while health disparities are a deeply entrenched societal issue, companies have an opportunity to play a meaningful role and help reverse those trends. I'm excited to see the impact of our recent commitment to increase funding to fight health disparities in communities of color across the nation.

These efforts are aligned to the company's D&I strategy for 2020 and beyond, which was developed last year before the pandemic hit. However, in light of COVID-19, we couldn't continue with business as usual. Instead, we are working to redouble our efforts. It may seem like a daunting task, but one thing this pandemic has taught us: if we don't help everyone, we will all feel the impact.



Celeste Warren moderates a panel of senior leaders during their annual Global Diversity and Inclusion Experience Month Kickoff event.

**IN:** As the reported instances of discrimination against Asian Americans have increased because of COVID-19, is this a concern that you and your organization are addressing? How?

**CW:** During health crises, underserved communities can be especially adversely impacted, and this is an even further challenge to the way we nurture diverse and inclusive workplaces. For example, during the Ebola outbreak, many individuals of African descent were blamed for Ebola. The LG-BTQ+ community continues to experience AIDS discrimination. Unfortunately, during the COVID-19 pandemic, blame has been directed toward our colleagues in the Asian community.

Within Merck, we quickly began working with our COVID-19 crisis team to ensure that the actions they were implementing included tools and resources that spread awareness and understanding, and allowed employees to better fight intolerance or any negative treatment of our Asian colleagues across the globe.

In addition, we joined with our partners at Ascend (the largest, nonprofit pan-Asian membership organization for business professionals and executives in North America) to affirm a five-point action agenda.

**Promote Inclusion:** Advocate for a diverse and inclusive workplace and society

**Raise Awareness:** Highlight the unique impacts of COVID-19 on vulnerable groups

**Denounce Bias:** Encourage individuals to report virus-linked discriminatory acts against Pan-Asians and other targeted groups and communities in the workplace and in public

**Support Communities:** Contribute time, knowledge, and/or other resources to aid frontline workers, COVID-19 victims, and families

**Give Donations:** Provide funds and/or other resources to support vulnerable populations of people and impacted businesses

**IN:** This summer, as a result of Black Lives Matter protests focused on police reform, there has been an increased focus on the need for racial justice and equity in the workplace and in society in general. What is your company doing to advance change in your company or the community, or both?

**CW:** Our company has been working on actions to support our community and close racial inequities long before the social unrest that we have seen since the horrific murder of George Floyd and other African Americans in the United States. We have amplified our efforts and are committed to doing more to impact sustainable change, not just within our company, but in the underserved communities that need resources and help.

We focus our efforts in four key areas—internal work environment, health equity, economic inclusion, and workforce development—to create change within and outside our company to deliver meaningful impact in the fight against systemic racism.

In our internal work environment, we work with leaders to drive accountability for building a diverse and inclusive work environment for our employees through specific talent management, talent acquisition, learning, and development efforts.

Within our company, we have a number of programs to address health disparities around the world, including Merck for Mothers. This \$500 million global initiative aims to help create a world where no woman has to die giving life—irrespective of where she lives or the color of her skin. We are also committed to improving health literacy around the world to help advance health equity, impact population health outcomes, and drive efficiencies in health-care systems.

Merck is a leader in advancing economic inclusion and supporting minority- and women-owned businesses. Because of the important role that business can play in supporting economic inclusion and supplier diversity, Merck created and sustained a 35-year-long effort to support small and minority-owned businesses. In 2017, we were inducted into the Billion Dollar RoundTable, an organization that recognizes corporations that achieve—and maintain—at least \$1 billion annually with minority- and women-owned suppliers headquartered in the United States.

“... one thing this pandemic has taught us: if we don’t help everyone, we will all feel the impact.”



Celeste Warren brings together all of the members of the Diversity Ambassador Teams to ensure alignment as they work together to drive impactful change.

Our efforts in workforce development have centered around partnerships with many organizations focused on closing the gap in students of color in STEM fields. We work with Year Up, which aims to close the opportunity gap by ensuring that young adults gain the skills, experiences, and support that will empower them to reach their potential through careers and higher education. We have a partnership with INROADS, an international nonprofit organization that prepares talented, diverse youth for corporate and community leadership. For more than a dozen years, we have partnered with Hispanics Inspiring Students’ Performance and Achievement to continue to deliver on its mission to inspire Latinx students to discover their potential and ignite their desire to embrace education and achieve success.

**IN:** What will be some of the biggest issues and challenges in 2021 for a corporate diversity and inclusion leader like yourself?

**CW:** We have come a long way within the walls of our respective companies in terms of internal workforce representation and inclusion. However, we know that as many as we have reached, we have many more to enlighten—and we will continue to work to close the gap between those who have benefited from our efforts and those who still need our support to drive D&I across the organization.

Perhaps the largest opportunity for businesses to play an important role in the future in diversity and inclusion is to reach outside our organizations to help mend the divide in our communities. Businesses can help advance unity through economic inclusion initiatives, which could be an important part of the solution to eliminate disparities in underrepresented communities all over the globe.

As D&I leaders, we need to help our companies support this shift by building additional capabilities, such as relevant global policies and knowledge of economic issues and the challenges impacting marginalized communities, in addition to workforce representation strategies. Only by understanding D&I in a much more holistic way—not only within our organizations but outside the organizations and how they operate as part of society—will we be able to help our organizations succeed in the future. It is through this transformation and journey that we will become the unapologetic ambassadors for change that our organizations and the world are calling for. **IN**