

AI: CHALLENGE
OR OPPORTUNITY?

SUPPORTING TRANSGENDER
EMPLOYEES IN THE WORKPLACE

KEEPING DEI
FRONT AND CENTER

INCLUSION

*Creating Globally
Inclusive & Culturally
Competent Workplaces*

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Supporter of
IDEAS

Inclusion, Diversity, Equity,
Accessibility, and Social Justice

**Johnnetta
Betsch
Cole, PhD**

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



Johnnetta Betsch Cole, PhD

Staunch Supporter of **IDEAS**

**Inclusion, Diversity,
Equity, Accessibility,
and Social Justice**

Dr. Johnnetta Betsch Cole rose to national prominence as the first African American woman to be named president of Spelman College. She later became president of Bennett College, making her the only person to serve as president of both historically Black

colleges for women in the United States. She has held teaching and administrative positions in anthropology, women's studies, and African American studies at major academic institutions.

After retiring from academia, Dr. Cole served as director of the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art. During her tenure, the museum expanded its outreach to

African immigrant communities, opened its first exhibition on the African continent, and aimed to substantially boost the number of African women artists' works in its exhibitions and permanent collection.

Dr. Cole was also a principal consultant with Cook Ross (now Be Equitable) and a senior consulting fellow at the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, bringing her DEAI expertise to both positions. She has additionally served on the corporate boards of Coca-Cola Enterprises (the first woman to do so), Home Depot, Merck (the first Black woman to do so), and Nation's Bank South.

Dr. Cole was the first African American to serve as chair of the board of United Way of America and was president and chair of the board of the National Council of Negro Women. She currently serves on the board of the A.L. Lewis Museum and is a senior fellow at the Kettering Foundation.

Her published works include *Racism in American Public Life: A Call to Action*, *African Proverbs for All Ages*, and *Speechifying: The Words and Legacy of Johnnetta Betsch Cole*. Dr. Cole has received numerous awards and 70 honorary degrees. On March 21, 2023, she was awarded a National Humanities Medal by President Joseph R. Biden.

Inclusion: What brought you to do this work?

Johnnetta Betsch Cole: I have been engaged in the work that I now refer to with the acronym IDEAS—inclusion, diversity, equity, accessibility, and social justice—since I was a youngster, growing up in Jacksonville, Florida. Those were the days of legal racial discrimination that was based on the ideology of white supremacy and expressed through acts of systemic racism in every sector of the life of African American people.

While I grew up as a Black girl, I did not grow up poor; however, class did not trump race and gender then, and it does not do so now. In my hometown, I and all in my extended family were well-known because of my maternal great-grandfather, Abraham Lincoln Lewis. A.L. Lewis, as he preferred to be called, was born in 1865, the last of the children of Judy and Robert Lewis, who had been enslaved in Madison County, Florida. A.L. Lewis only had an elementary education, but he went on to become a businessman, a philanthropist, and a civil rights advocate. He was also Florida's first Black millionaire.

During my childhood, Black people could not try on clothes in stores that were owned by white people. However, because of who my family was, someone in the main department store in downtown Jacksonville would periodically call up my mother and say that she could bring my sister and me to try on clothes after the department store was closed. When

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I was 10 years old, and we were driving home after my mother had bought some dresses that my sister and I had just tried on that night, I said to my mother, "Mama, if I cannot try on clothes in the light of day, please don't ever take me again to try on clothes in the darkness of night." And I never did!

IN: Tell us about one of the greatest challenges you confronted.

JBC: In 1982, at the invitation of Dr. Donna Shalala, who was then the president of Hunter College, I assumed the position of Russell Sage Visiting Professor of Anthropology at that college and the director of the Latin American and Caribbean Studies Program at the City University of New York. I also taught women's studies at Hunter before I became the first African American woman to serve as the president of Spelman College. It was while I was at Hunter College that I met Audre Lorde, who was also a professor at Hunter.

Audre Lorde would often introduce herself by saying, "I am Audre Lorde, a Black woman, feminist, lesbian, mother, professor, poet, and warrior!" Speaking from her own multiple identities, Sister Audre forever changed how I do IDEAS work and laid the foundation for what I think is my greatest success. Namely, I not only understand and do IDEAS work that is informed and motivated by my own multiple identities, but my work respects, honors, and supports the multiple identities of people in other marginalized communities.

When Audre Lorde first confronted me about my homophobia and heterosexism, I was shocked. But I came to accept that she was right in pointing out that because I was a social justice activist on issues of race, ethnicity, class, gender, and religion did not mean that I was informed by scholarship about heterosexism and had done the inner work to confront and address my own views and practices that were centered in heterosexism.

IN: What do you think companies should be prioritizing in 2024 that has not been given enough attention in recent years?

JBC: In recent years, much of my work as an

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advocate for inclusion, diversity, equity, accessibility, and social justice “IDEAS” in companies is carried out with my colleague and brother-friend Howard Ross, who is well-known and highly respected for how he continues to teach and learn about IDEAS, implicit bias, and belonging.

In the work that we do together, Howard and I see that, across our nation, there is more and more “them vs. us” thought and action and less and less attention to ways to bring people together across their differences. Companies should prioritize ways for their employees to experience a sense of community in the face of these highly polarized times that we are in.

IN: What sort of impact do you expect the Supreme Court ruling on affirmative action to have?

JBC: While it remains to be seen what effects the Supreme Court’s ruling on affirmative action in higher education will have on businesses, it has already had a chilling effect on corporate efforts for greater inclusion, diversity, equity, and accessibility in their workplaces. We are going to have to be creative about how we continue to address the kind of disparities that are so real in workplaces, and we are going to have to do so even in the face of opposition to “diversity programs” in businesses—an opposition that is now firmly in place as a law in the state-supported colleges and universities of Florida, Texas, and Alabama, and as of September 2023 was being considered in nine other states.

Corporations also must face the challenge of keeping their employees physically and psychologically safe as they are confronted with racist, misogynistic, homophobic, and transphobic public policies. And it is vitally important that companies make sure their employees know that they stand beside them.



As IDEAS practitioners, we must be willing to do some soul-searching about our own work and seriously inquire as to whether the approaches and strategies we take are focused more on “being right” and less about which policies and practices can lead to the kind of change that is spoken about but is far from being practiced. Sometimes in our ardor for doing our IDEAS work, we have not been as conscious as we need to be about what can effectuate fundamental change, rather than what makes us feel good. Simply put, we need to give far more attention to presenting our work in a way that ensures organizations don’t reject it. There is wisdom in this saying: When you go fishing, you should bait the hook with what the fish likes to eat, not what you like to eat!

IN: You are often referred to as an exemplary mentor for people who are IDEAS professionals and those who aspire to do that work. What is your basic approach to mentoring?

JBC: I strongly believe that every relationship is more authentic, rich, effective, rewarding, and joyful when it is centered in reciprocity. Thus, while I understand and will carry out my responsibility to guide, teach, encourage, and support my mentees, I also expect to receive benefits from each of my mentees.

There is a widespread assumption that mentees, because they are usually younger than their mentors, have little to teach their mentors. That is not true. Indeed, I learn enormously from my mentees, who have experiences, ideas, and practices that are quite different from my own. When we work together across generations, each of us can serve as a teacher as well as a learner. There is an African proverb that captures the value of this kind of reciprocity: She who learns must teach, and she who teaches must learn. Dr. Sheila Robinson, with whom I regularly interact as one of her mentors, is an IDEAS professional who I continue to learn from and am inspired by. **DW**