Race is an issue for everyone in business today. Organizations that recognize diversity as an asset—and a real opportunity—will have a distinct advantage.

Fewer Black men and women occupy corporate leadership roles today than in 2002. What does this indicate about diversity in 2021? What does it mean to be a Black professional in corporate America today? How are racial dynamics in organizations changing? And how can leaders build more inclusive organizations?

To answer these questions—and to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the African American Student Union at Harvard Business School—Anthony J. Mayo, Thomas S. Murphy Senior Lecturer of Business Administration and C. Roland Christensen, Distinguished Management Educator at HBS; Laura Morgan Roberts, professor of practice at University of Virginia Darden School of Business; and David A. Thomas, president of Morehouse College, brought together scholars, academics, and practitioners to analyze the role of race in organizations today. These efforts led to the publishing of their book, *Race, Work, and Leadership: New Perspectives on the Black Experience*, a compilation of essays that examine how race matters in people’s experience of work and leadership.
By examining the individual and collective experiences of Black professionals, the essays dispel the myth that we are living in a post-racial society. “Challenges still persist,” says Mayo. “Throughout their careers, Black leaders face obstacles others don’t. They are less likely to be hired and less likely to be promoted, and their day-to-day experience is worse than that of their non-Black colleagues.” Organizations that understand this and actively champion policies, practices, and programs that advance Black professionals in work settings and in leadership roles are better able to retain Black talent—and prosper as a result of the diverse skills, experiences, and perspectives of their entire workforce.

While many large companies have launched inclusion and diversity initiatives, most leaders still shy away from frank discussions about how the experiences of their Black employees and executives—as well as their feelings of authenticity and potential for advancement—differ from those of their white peers. Many such initiatives instead end up focusing on other forms of diversity—gender and sexuality, religion, or ethnicity.

“Understanding the reality of race in today’s business world is an important first step. The next step is driving meaningful change by investing in the next generation of Black leaders and beyond.”

David A. Thomas
President of Morehouse College

To bring race back into the conversation and refocus their diversity initiatives, organizations should keep these key challenges and opportunities in mind:

- **Differentiate the Black work experience.** Black professionals report lower levels of engagement and greater intentions to leave. Losing these high-potential Black leaders has considerable costs for organizations.

- **Take charge.** Black leaders face many leadership challenges, including having their credibility questioned and being unfairly associated with disadvantage and risk.

- **Redefine leadership.** Black leaders face contested authority. However, when given the right opportunities, they can redefine leadership norms, champion diversity initiatives, and challenge inequality within their organizations.

- **Create a beloved community.** Organizations succeed when people learn across differences, and a community where people develop multifaceted alliances can help Black leaders overcome isolation and bring their true selves to work.

- **Encourage open conversations.** Popular diversity initiatives have fallen short in developing Black leaders, but organizations that promote psychological safety, acknowledge inequity, and focus on social justice can create inclusive environments that support the advancement of all.
TAKING ACTION AND LEADING CHANGE

Once the challenges of Black leaders are acknowledged and understood, organizations that want to provide a better environment for Black employees can take some concrete steps to implement programs and strategies that level the playing field:

- **Educate themselves** about the structural inequalities Black people and other marginalized groups have experienced in the past, and the extent to which race is embedded in the global economy. How our society is structured—including structural racism—shapes all workers’ experiences.

- **Provide a psychologically safe space** and train professionals and leaders to have conversations about race and inclusion. That means developing a culture of questioning and inquiry.

- **Take advantage of the opportunity to learn about employees’ experiences**—good and bad. Unfortunately, that often takes place in exit interviews, but whenever it occurs, the feedback can provide valuable insights into the organization’s challenges.

- **Ensure that all employees receive appropriate feedback.** It’s important to assess how engaged professionals are with their boss—do they receive feedback and coaching on a regular basis? Sometimes, Black professionals don’t receive the same kind of feedback and advice as other employees do. Managers with good intentions often withhold feedback when they really need to be having those conversations.

“Mentors are certainly important, but rising leaders also need sponsors and champions—people who move beyond giving advice and actively work to provide opportunities for workers to shine and to stretch themselves.”

Laura Morgan Roberts  
Professor of Practice at University of Virginia Darden School of Business
As organizations confront the persistent challenges facing Black professionals in advancing to leadership roles, one takeaway is that no one beats the odds alone. “Mentors are certainly important,” explains Roberts. “But rising leaders also need sponsors and champions—people who move beyond giving advice and actively work to provide opportunities for workers to shine and to stretch themselves.”

Race is an issue for everyone in business today. Organizations that recognize diversity as an asset—and a real opportunity—will have a distinct advantage. They will be able to make the most of their talent, create a stronger organization, and deliver more as a business. “Understanding the reality of race in today’s business world is an important first step,” says Thomas. “The next step is driving meaningful change by investing in the next generation of Black leaders and beyond.”

WHY ORGANIZATIONS LOSE BLACK TALENT

As your organization looks to increase its diversity, think about the factors that often prompt Black workers to seek better opportunities elsewhere. Findings from groundbreaking empirical investigations of racial differences show that Black professionals report lower levels of engagement than non-Black respondents, including:

- Lower assessments of their coworkers’ commitments
- Lower perceived importance of their roles
- Fewer opportunities to learn and grow
- Lower levels of overall satisfaction with their workplaces
- Decreased opportunities to express their values and bring their whole selves to work

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