

Forbes

LEADERSHIP

Future of Gender Equity Relies on Workplace Culture

TINA TCHEM, CIVIC NATION

Sexual harassment and gender inequity in the workplace are issues garnering attention not just in the entertainment industry, but across business, government, and academia. The most pressing question is why so little has changed in the decades since the Supreme Court made clear that sexual harassment violates federal law. Why do we still have a gender pay gap 54 years after the enactment of the Equal Pay Act, and why are women so underrepresented in the leadership ranks of so many companies, even as women make up nearly 50% of the US labor force?

For too long, we have viewed issues of gender and race discrimination, sexual harassment, and diversity and inclusion as solely human resource topics, affecting only personnel decision-making and employment law exposure. This narrow approach has led to slow progress in achieving full integration of women and minorities into the corporate workforce and leadership in many industries, and now we see it is also putting companies at risk for deeper regulatory, compliance, litigation and governance problems. A corporate culture that fails to respect and support its employees may foment a toxic corporate culture overall: if a company management tolerates, or worse engages in, unlawful acts of sexual harassment or worse, then why would employees expect management to respect other laws and do business honestly or protect the company's consumers?

It is time for organizations to begin ad-

ressing these problems in a holistic manner. Creating a culture of compliance in all facets of the business is key to avoiding potentially titanic ramifications. Before recent events, a culture of compliance meant oversight, testing, audit and reporting. Now, it must also include ethics and workplace equity. Compliance officers, as well as human resources professionals, legal counsel and operational management, all need to own responsibility for fully in-



Tina Tchem heads the law firm of Buckley Sandler's Chicago office. Ms. Tchem served as Assistant to the President and Chief of Staff to the First Lady Michelle Obama from 2011 to 2017. In the Obama administration, she also served as the Executive Director for the Council on Women and Girls. Ms. Tchem serves as a strategic advisor for Civic Nation.

tegrating issues of diversity and inclusion. This should be a topic for board review and oversight on a regular basis, not just when a problem arises. And this means approaching these issues with the same rigor and vigilance that businesses apply to other areas implicating sound compliance management, like adherence to securities, anti-corruption, and consumer protection laws.

A culture of compliance also means creating a work environment for the 21st century that values and cultivates the talent of employees and invests in their long-term success, including addressing the structural barriers to full diversity and inclusion that keep women and minorities from advancing in their careers within a company. Bias training, affinity groups

and mentoring or sponsorship will not fully create an inclusive culture when a lack of paid family leave and unequal pay or inflexible work schedules mean that employees must make difficult decisions between work and family, frequently during the years when they are the most likely to make the career advancements that will lead to future leadership in business.

From my experience at a corporate law firm, I have seen how tone at the top of management can flow through a company to bring all elements of the business into line, especially when the entire enterprise is at risk. From my experience in eight years as the Executive Director of the White House Council on Women and Girls, Assistant to President Obama

and Chief of Staff to First Lady Michelle Obama, I have seen the costs to company competitiveness, and our country's global competitiveness, from continuing to organize work places in calcified ways that fail to recognize the demands employees face today, and fail to take advantage of the modern tools at hand to get work done efficiently and effectively. And as a lawyer I see the urgency of integrating both of these approaches to address the persistent, toxic culture before it rears its head in a moment of crisis.

Recent headlines put all companies on notice to assess their own culture of compliance and take a hard look at whether they are fully diverse and inclusive. Those who fail to address this do so at their own peril.