

## Setting the Tone

## LEADING THE CHARGE FOR DIVERSITY AND EQUITY IN THE WORKPLACE

BY MICHELLE LEACH



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**In an ideal world, our differences would be celebrated and we would all have an equal playing field to rise to our fullest potential. Midlands organizations are intentionally and strategically moving the dial on this front, taking direct aim at the large and growing body of research that further underlines and quantifies the inequities that so many experience on a day-to-day basis.**

These groups are helping and partnering with others to lift their respective businesses, organizations and communities. Such heavy lifting requires strong leadership.

When asked about both challenges and progress related to diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) efforts, Cammy Watkins, executive director of Inclusive Communities, pointed to the latest “Women in the Workplace” report by McKinsey and [leanin.org](https://leanin.org). The report surveyed more than 40,000 employees at upwards of 300 organizations.

“[The McKinsey report] talks about women in the workplace and what they are looking for, and why so many are leaving for smaller businesses or to start their own businesses due to the lack of flexibility in ‘traditional’ office spaces,” Watkins said.

The report characterizes this shift as the “Great Breakup,” noting that women are “demanding more from work and are leaving companies in unprecedented numbers to get it.” In fact, reportedly, women leaders are switching jobs at never-before-seen rates – and at higher rates than men in leadership, which the report surmises “could have serious implications for companies.”

Watkins referenced its LeadDIVERSITY and Transformational Leadership programming, the latter of which she said is designed for leaders who are just starting to explore opportunities to improve DEI competencies as a means of enhancing business effectiveness and prosperity.

“That program is a shorter time commitment and is specifically directed at building individual skills, as opposed to the collective impact focus of LeadDIVERSITY,” she said. “We host two classes of that program a year, one that started in August and the other that starts in January.”

The organization is also a member of the Council Bluffs Area Chamber of Commerce, whose Workforce Development Director Alicia Frieze suggested as among those local resources for readers seeking DEI and unconscious bias training.

She said that such training is beneficial for individuals, organizations and teams before someone advances into a leadership position.

“[They should have] a solid understanding of DEI and be aware of their own unconscious biases,” Frieze added. “So, they don’t negatively impact their leadership or the culture of the organization.”

Frieze noted findings by Forbes that stated that companies with a focus on DEI increased employee productivity and morale by 77% and 67%, respectively, while turnover was reduced by a reported 58%.

“Knowing these statistics, it is important for the CB Chamber to provide training opportunities for teams and resources for our businesses as a vehicle to get to see these positive results locally,” she explained. “Helping businesses understand what DEI is, how to have a diverse workforce, an inclusive hiring process and equitable policies and culture, will help with recruitment and retention.”

Accordingly, Frieze said the chamber has updated its policies and procedures to ensure they are more inclusive and allow leadership to treat everyone equitably.

“We have included a diversity and inclusion statement on our website, as well,” she said. “We have developed a dedicated page to DEI that includes resources and members that work in the realm of DEI as an extended resource for members to receive or provide DEI training to their team.”

Frieze said other DEI offerings include Women Inspiring Women, Executive Women Partnership, and Impact CB (for young professionals), CB Tech Career Acceleration (focused on providing Latino residents free access to IT training from AIM Institute and career placement assistance), and L.I.F.T. (Leveraging Individual Female Talent, a six-month mentorship program for females who have been out of the workforce for more than a year).

CONTINUED

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- KARINE SOKPOH, PRESIDENT, MIDLANDS AFRICAN CHAMBER

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## Building Strong Communities

Promoting diversity and the economy is central to the Midlands African Chamber's (MAC) mission.

"Investing in diversity at the executive level helps create a more inclusive business environment," said President Karine Sokpoh. "It reflects a commitment to providing equal opportunities for all, irrespective of their backgrounds, which can lead to a richer and more diverse talent pool."

Additionally, Sokpoh attributed MAC's investments in training opportunities through its Power Hour and MAC Xcelerator programming to better decision-making and innovation driven by diverse teams within today's global business landscape.

"By nurturing diversity in executive roles, [MAC] positions itself and its members for a competitive advantage in the market," she stated.

Rounding out motivations for such resources and support, Sokpoh referred to community engagement and talent attraction.

"When businesses in the Midlands African Chamber support diversity and leadership initiatives, they enhance their relationships with the local community, fostering goodwill and collaboration," she said. "Companies that invest in leadership and inclusion programs are more likely to attract top talent and retain employees. Individuals from diverse backgrounds are more likely to stay with organizations that value and support their growth."

Overall, Sokpoh concluded that such resources and offerings reflect a proactive approach to enhancing skills and fostering diversity that informs positive outcomes for businesses and communities.

When putting the numbers to such themes, she cited statistics courtesy of talent firm Insight Global; for instance, how companies that are "diverse" earn 2.5 times higher cash flow per employee than less diverse teams, with inclusive organizations also driving more than 35% better productivity and better decision-making 87% of the time.

"From the Midlands African Chamber's perspective, the interrelationship between diversity, equity, and inclusion and career advancement within the organization should be a deeply intertwined and mutually reinforcing one," Sokpoh summed up.

She referred to efforts to ensure career advancement is accessible

to all members, regardless of background.

"This means that diversity and inclusion should be at the core of talent development and succession planning," she explained.

Sokpoh also emphasized initiatives to cultivate a diverse talent pool at all levels, for instance, recruitment from diverse sources. In addition, she underscored striving for leadership teams that elect the diversity of both team members and the broader community.

"This representation can inspire and serve as role models for others, reinforcing the belief that advancement is achievable for all," she added.

Sokpoh encouraged leaders to educate themselves on:

- Equitable skill development to address historical disparities
- Mentorship and sponsorship — formal programs to support, guide and advocate for employees' advancement
- Transparency and fairness in promotion processes
- Feedback and continuous improvement facilitated by open feedback channels
- Accountability in achieving diversity/inclusion goals

## Leading Transformative Change

Inclusive Communities' programming leadership provided additional insights into the challenges and solutions that their teams grapple with and provide.

"One recent insight discussed in our workshops that has resonated with me, pertains to a recent CDC report," said Director of Programs Dominic Green. "It highlights that one in four people live with a disability; however, when examining reported HR statistics, only 3% to 5% of individuals openly disclose their disability to their employer or team."

This discrepancy, according to Green, suggests a significant portion of the population refrains from sharing this information due to concerns about how they may be treated or what the response might entail.

"Even if we account for individuals who are retired or not currently in the workforce, there remains a substantial number of people who do not openly acknowledge their disability, exceeding the reported figures," he said.

No one should ever feel marginalized or excluded due to a lack of understanding or because their identity or way of being doesn't align with societal norms.

DOMINIC GREEN, DIRECTOR OF PROGRAMS, INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES

The array of opportunities to develop leadership skills is driving diverse workspaces and experiences at all levels, according to Veronica Smith (her name has been changed for safety purposes).

"The approach to our programming is truly dialogue-based and all-inclusive, allowing leadership to take place at every level of an organization," she stated. "We often say, 'Lead from the seat you are in.' Leadership ability and capacity are not tied to a title ... cultivating the skills to have courageous and inclusive conversations around equity throughout an organization is extremely valuable."

To that end, she referenced both free, community-based dialogue on topics of equity and social justice on a monthly virtual/in-person hybrid experience, as well as workshops and services to develop specific skills.

"We work with organizations ranging from, but not limited to, universities, community organizations, corporations, school districts, and health care institutions," she said. "We also have a speakers bureau for organizations looking to bring a subject matter expert in to address a particular topic with their audience."

Green reinforced how investing in its programs and offerings, at its core, promotes a "profound sense of humanity."

"It is our fundamental belief that no one should experience discomfort or fear in the presence of their neighbors or colleagues simply because they may appear or behave differently," he said. "No one should ever feel marginalized or excluded due to a lack of understanding or because their identity or way of being doesn't align with societal norms."

There exists the universal desire, he continued, to be treated with the same dignity and respect that is extended to one's neighbors, friends and family.

"The essence of this work lies in building and nurturing relationships," Green added. "When individuals begin to recognize this and open themselves to it, we witness the potential for meaningful change to take root and flourish."

And their efforts are bearing fruit.

"We have seen a shift towards more equity and inclusion in our region," Smith said. "We believe that this is in no small part due to the coalitions of leaders we support committed to a vision of a society strengthened by diversity, inclusion, respect, equity and justice for all people."

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