

## **HACE Brings Together Chief Diversity Officers From Globally Recognized Brands for Roundtable Discussion about DEI Issues in the Workplace**

By Patricia Mota

During The Hispanic Alliance for Career Enhancement's (HACE) recent and successful National Leadership Summit this April in Chicago, our organization had an opportunity to hold a candid and crucial dialogue among top leaders in the diversity, equity, and inclusion space to discuss and share the challenges, lessons learned, best practices, and opportunities on the horizon as they work to accelerate equity with action and accountability. HACE launched these special Chief Diversity Officer (CDO) roundtables seven years ago as a way for us to continue to add value back to our partners.

Three groups discussed some of today's top diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) best practices and challenges, including alignment with the environmental, social, and corporate governance (ESG) goals to accelerate change, navigating polarization and divisiveness in the workplace and how their roles as CDO's are evolving.

For this discussion, HACE was honored to have guest speakers and facilitators such as Alejandro Tobolski, head of DEI at Johnson & Johnson, Cecilia Nelson-Hurt, chief DEI officer at Heidrick & Struggles, and Jarvis Sam, founder and CEO at Rainbow Disruption, formerly chief diversity officer (CDO) at Nike. We also had representation and input from global recognized brands such as Unilever, ALDI, Allstate, AT&T, United Airlines, and NBCUniversal to JPMorgan Chase, McDonald's, Barilla, US Foods, Sodexo, and many others.

Roundtables like this one provide an open atmosphere with diverse sharing from participants who seek knowledge. What we learned recently brought much concern, and there is much work to be done.

### **Overcoming Polarization and Divisiveness**

One issue that dominated much of the conversation was how increased polarization and divisiveness have become a source of stress for many leaders. It has come fast on the heels of the pandemic that started in 2020 and what happened with the murder of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor.

The top concern we've heard from diversity offices is that the momentum for DEI has slowed down. Yet it has a lot to do with budget cuts, particularly in the financial services and tech industries where there have been a lot of layoffs. The need is still there, greater than ever before, with Asian hate and anti-immigration rhetoric as examples.

Participants have seen increased activities around LGBTQ+, backlash from some conservatives, and warmth from others within their community. Individually, some in their organizations are supportive. In contrast, others are opposed based on their personal value system. Yet, many

companies say there should be a place for the LGBTQ+ community and that supporting them is good for business and aligns with their corporate values.

Most participants agreed that the biggest stressor was to best manage this intense and quickly moving landscape. It was noted that not only are positions supported by statements made, but silence on a topic can also be seen as supportive. One very recent example that someone mentioned was the recent backlash of Anheuser Busch due to its use of trans advocate Dylan Mulvaney who promoted Bud Light via a TikTok video in April. The company released statements that some thought were not supported of the LGBTQ+ community.

### **How CDO Roles are Changing**

We also wanted to explore the roles and challenges of those who work as CDOs. This position, which came about in the mid-2010s, is intended to support a company, ensuring they build inclusive and equitable workspaces. Sometimes they're tied in with the HR department or may be part of the communications team. The structures vary, but they are predominantly focused on making sure that they're hiring diverse people from different backgrounds and across all levels. They are also advancing diverse talent within the organization at all levels, and diversity is not just race or gender.

If their company is asked to put out a statement on Black Lives Matter, abortion laws, or other sensitive issues, CDOs are the go-to people, which is why there's heightened stress for them. Because companies are so far behind, they have created a dedicated role, giving the CDO oversight, but it's not just their responsibility; it's every leader's responsibility within a company or organization.

With the recent events across the US, the CDO role became even more important in managing the message versus getting comfortable with the message after leaving the table. This role has become the lifeline for keeping social issues alive and holding the company accountable.

### **Taking Action and Finding Solutions**

Companies are taking productive and positive steps to promoting diversity in the workplace. Many participants provided one another with best practices and resources that have aided them.

For example, Johnson & Johnson presented a matrix approach to diversity, partnering with ESG to meet goals. The company uses an internal sponsorship program, pairing a senior leader with someone within the organization, prioritizing people who are not at the top. These leaders may be paired with women, black leaders, and others within the organization to ensure a talent pipeline is moving up. Different from mentorship, these senior leaders recognize the skills and talent of those they are sponsoring and advocating for their participation in a project.

Others talked about the importance of understanding history, evolution, and lessons learned. Companies reflect society, and they need to be intentional and genuine in their actions.

We also observed that global data does not always reflect how employees self-identify, and there should be a push to include Latino/Hispanic as an option under the race category. However, employees worry about a negative effect if they identify a certain way. Gaps remain within the



workforce since the pandemic, and there is particularly a divide between front-line and remote/hybrid workers.

One participant summarized that DEI must work with ESG as their goals are closely tied together with rewards based on achievement.

At the conclusion of the roundtable, we saw how companies are putting together positive and welcoming steps to review content, install new decision-making processes, and grasping business issues such as the upcoming Supreme Court decision on affirmative action. Some are focusing more on Hispanic retention, taking more intentional action, and are helping their leaders be more accountable toward equity.

In our part, we are helping to create more ways for groups who haven't been prominent at the table. Thanks to constructive feedback from companies, HACE is proud to announce that we are formative stages of building a LGBTQ+ Latino/a/x/e training cohort. This program, which will debut in the spring of 2024 and be open to LGBTQIA + individuals, provides a safe and motivating space for community-building, helps participants confidently and effectively lead themselves and others, and expand their networks and support systems.

HACE fully supports these steps and the continuous invitations to companies for our roundtables as we provide resource, tools, programs and other opportunities to ensure there is representation of all communities in leadership and influential roles.