

I Was Told I Have Career Advantages ‘as a Black Woman.’ Here’s How I Replied.

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For senior company executives, appointments to public boards are one way to ease into retirement with purpose and prestige. But in a recent conversation I had with a 60-something white man, he lamented that the board opportunities he had expected and looked forward to are unlikely to materialize for him.

“There’s no chance now, for the next 20 years,” he said. “All they want are women. Edith, you must be in great demand — as a Black woman.”

The statement struck me as a perfect illustration of what holds women and people of color back. First, there’s the suggestion that my race and gender are the relevant credentials for me to get a board appointment — the kind of microaggression that I, like so many people of color, have had to deal with all through my career.

Even more galling was his implied complaint about the injustice of it all: How can a well-respected white man with solid experience lose out to women or people of color?

The truth is, having board members with different backgrounds is important, and that is now being recognized, not ignored. My board credentials, by the way, are also solid. I have worked for more than 35 years in financial services, and I was the first Black woman to be a partner at Goldman Sachs. I got that promotion in 2000 — 131 years after the company was founded. I headed the firm’s human resources department for a decade. I’ve run multimillion-dollar, client-facing businesses with large teams of people reporting to me. I’m now on the boards of Amazon and PepsiCo, and I’ve been on the boards of Slack and Etsy. The executives and boards of these companies prioritized diversity of experience as critical to their organizations’ success. My identity as a Black woman is part of that experience.

At this point in my career, I welcome it when people engage me on the topic of race in the workplace because I see it as an attempt to understand how I — a Black woman and senior leader — view and experience the world.

After the murder of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter protests, these conversations with white peers and colleagues have become more frequent. They are an opportunity to engage with and educate leaders who are looking for ways to create positive change. That said, I am also fully aware that there are deep-seated biases that make any change difficult. Company executives, the majority of whom are white, for the most part still struggle with how to address race at work.

“Listen to what you just said,” was my immediate reaction to the person who made the comment about his lost opportunities. You’ve had it your way for decades. It has taken years to

get to the point today where corporate leaders are seriously considering equality of opportunity for people of color, I explained.

And despite efforts to diversify the top ranks of companies, the statistics remain disheartening. The percentage of board members in Fortune 500 companies who were women was only 26.5 percent in 2020, according to the [Alliance for Board Diversity and the consultancy Deloitte](#). Women of color made up only 5.7 percent of these boards. (Remember, women [make up just about half](#) the American work force.)

The data on pay is equally dispiriting. It took women 40 years to jump from earning 62 percent of what men were paid in the United States [to 82 percent in 2019](#). But there has been little progress in the past decade. Around the world the picture is bleak: In March the [World Economic Forum calculated](#) it will take 136 years for women to close the gender gap, as measured in economic, educational, health and political empowerment terms.

Implicit in my professional acquaintance's observation is the assumption, which I have also heard articulated by younger white men, that giving women and people of color equal opportunities will mean lowering the bar — that we are not quite as qualified and the businesses that hire us will suffer. This is ostrich thinking that ignores the privilege that has allowed white men to dominate [the leadership ranks of almost every institution](#) in the United States for centuries, whether or not they were the strongest candidates. And it's just plain incorrect. There is an enormous [body of research](#) that shows teams made up of people from different backgrounds, ethnicities or genders perform better.

But making the business-case argument misses the point. We all need to pay attention not only to the statistics but also to our actions and our words: the coded racism in the water cooler banter; the casual passing over of the Black woman in favor of a white man who went to the same university as the boss.

My acquaintance was right about one thing: The world is changing as younger people enter the work force. My 31-year-old daughter, Jordan Taylor, with whom I run a company that brings people with diverse backgrounds together in group coaching sessions, is part of the generation that won't stand for bias. They get loud, and they take action. They are also proactively addressing the challenges, looking for opportunities, demanding the mentorship and sponsorship at work that will help them develop their careers. They expect this, as anyone should.

Having conversations like the one I had with my acquaintance, no matter how uncomfortable, is important. We continued to talk, and though I can't say to what degree I evolved his thinking, I came away knowing that he heard my perspective.

Covid-19 and the movement for racial justice have upended the normal ways of working. As we reconstruct the workplace, we have a unique chance to reorient corporate America, to make room for new leadership, to build strong foundations for a more equal world. It won't happen, however, unless we challenge the status quo.