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e often think of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) as being an effort exclusively implemented at the organizational level.

While such top-down initiatives are undeniably necessary for progress, another critical component is individual action and the recognition that even one person can effectuate change.

By now, most organizations have launched DEI initiatives and formed DEI committees charged with the important priority of promoting and establishing a welcoming, nurturing, and safe work environment at all levels. Although these committees are essential to advancing organizational objectives, we should also bear in mind the extraordinary importance of individual responsibility in promoting DEI goals.

Several years ago, I wrote a column on the bystander effect, a social psychological theory suggesting individuals are less likely to assist a person in need when there are other people around. Conversely, individuals are more likely to act if they are alone.

Psychologists theorize this happens for two reasons. First, in groups of people, moral responsibility tends to be diffused among the group, and individuals may not think they need to act because they assume someone else will take care of the problem. Second, if one individual in the group does not see other group members taking action, the individual may assume they do not need to do anything because inaction is socially acceptable.

In the context of DEI, this phenomenon can lead to individuals failing to address a problem when they see it and failing to take concrete action to promote inclusion because they think someone else (e.g., a committee) will take care of it. The antidote to the bystander effect is creating awareness of the phenomenon and encouraging individual responsibility for creating a more equitable environment followed by concrete action.

What would happen if we each held ourselves individually accountable — rather than relying solely on our committees and organizations — for promoting DEI in our workplaces?

History is replete with examples of individuals who brought about significant change. Rosa Parks. Susan B. Anthony. Malala Yousafzai. For the most part, these individuals had no previous fame, wealth, or significant resources, yet they



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DEI goals require individual responsibility

By CAMILLE KHODADAD

all brought about transformative social change. We tend to believe that we need power and influence in order to promote progress. We need to rethink that.

And, of course, there is the change brought about by individuals we will never hear about, or who will never get wide recognition. The type of change that may not have a profound international, national, or even local effect, but has an impact on organizations and individuals. It may be the individual who speaks up during a meeting on behalf of someone who belongs to an underrepresented group, or actively mentors or sponsors someone in that group. Small, incremental changes can make a difference to those around us.

There are ways that, as individuals, each of us can effectuate positive change within our organizations.

1) Recognize your power: In order to make progress, each of us needs to recognize that we are potentially powerful agents of positive social change. We don't need any special title or educational background to advance DEI. Again, if you doubt this, take a look at history.

2) Take personal responsibility: Commit to

promoting DEI. Think about how you personally can do this in your organization, your professional network, and beyond. For each of us, the process may be different.

3) Take concrete steps to promote DEI: This may consist of taking someone to lunch, checking in with someone periodically, mentoring and sponsoring individuals and serving as an ally to individuals in underrepresented groups, etc.

4) Learn from others: Look at what other individuals around you are doing to foster inclusion. Are they doing something that is working? If so, can you follow their example? If what they are doing is not working, what can you learn from it? Is there something different that you can do?

While DEI committees will always be an integral part of an organization's efforts, let's not forget the critical role each of us plays in the process and how each of us can make change happen. CL

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