

# Cosmetic, Conversation, or Commitment:

*A Study of EDI Corporate Messages, Motives,  
and Metrics After George Floyd's Murder*

By: Marcia Alesan Dawkins, Ph.D. and Ramya Balakrishnan, M.S.



Center for  
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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“We know that systemic racism is real. It has been persistent. And it can’t be wished away.”

“Our identity, our very existence is rooted in empowering everyone on the planet.”

“We commit \$10 million to aid organizations dedicated to equality and social justice.”

Each of these statements is a response to one event: the collective citizen witnessing George Floyd’s murder in 2020. Each statement tells a different story, complete with heroes, villains, plot twists, and resolutions. As such, this study explored the stories told and commitments made by corporations in their responses to systemic racism after George Floyd’s murder. We sought to uncover relationships between statement content, leader motive, and proposed organizational culture change.

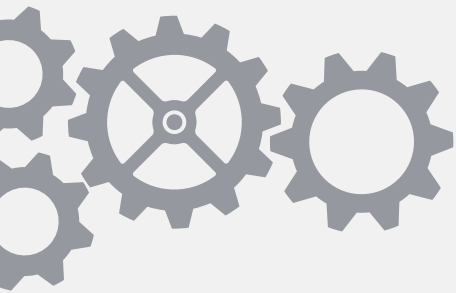


Blending computational and communication research methods, we found and identified three thematic elements and seven equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) strategies. Findings suggest organizations used statements to explain what witnessing Floyd's murder means, share leaders' motivations for doing EDI work, and propose socially responsible actions.

More specifically, the results of this study offer the following insights.

**Three themes** emerged.

1. Oppression is everywhere, all the time.
2. Leaders are invitational.
3. Messages and metrics should match.



**ACTIONS SPEAK  
LOUDER**





**Three motives** were found to underlie EDI strategies, ranging from surface level compliance to in-depth change. These are using EDI as a:



**COSMETIC  
TOOL**



**CONVERSATION  
STARTER**



**COMMITMENT  
DRIVER**

Cosmetic motives are overrepresented, as **95.98% of statement content lacks key details accounting for long-term culture change.**

While corporate statements were spurred by a here-and-now situation, the issue of systemic racism is ongoing. Therefore, these insights suggest the need for continued evaluation of statements in the context of quantitative and qualitative indicators, paying particular attention to employee reviews, diversity metrics, and social responsibility.

The current paper provides an overview of statement content as it relates to equity, diversity, and inclusion and includes advice on what leaders can do as they embrace transparency and promote accountability.


# INTRODUCTION

In May of 2020 virtually anyone with access to a screen encountered *The Age of Black Death* (Golding, 2020). As we watched Black lives like George Floyd's and Breonna Taylor's ending tragically, our own well-being suffered and many of us found it increasingly difficult to go on, particularly in our professions.

This duality, of life ending and life continuing, is painful and traumatic and represents a tipping point for organizational change and public accountability.

As in the [corporate statement shown here](#), inspired by a Black woman's account of being inundated by images of Black death and no longer being willing to deny or couch her feelings in appropriateness, employees began to ask how they could work through this (Harts, 2021).

## Maintaining Professionalism In The Age of Black Death Is....A Lot

 Shenequa Golding · 13 hr ago · 3 min read ★

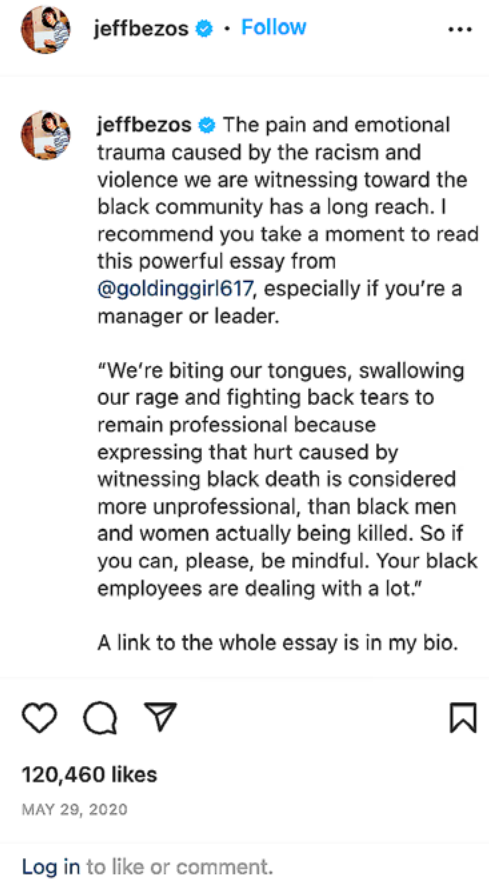
I just witnessed the lynching of a black man, but don't worry Ted, I'll have those deliverables to you end of day.



Figure 1: Amazon's Statement

Black employees, in particular, remembered they had a right to be comfortable and safe at work and recognized it was time to hold organizations accountable. They also voiced concerns that other systemically

excluded people were likely having similar experiences. In response, leaders took note and began to respond with corporate statements that featured equity, diversity, and inclusion prominently (Bezos, 2020).



jeffbezos · Follow

jeffbezos · The pain and emotional trauma caused by the racism and violence we are witnessing toward the black community has a long reach. I recommend you take a moment to read this powerful essay from @goldinggirl617, especially if you're a manager or leader.

"We're biting our tongues, swallowing our rage and fighting back tears to remain professional because expressing that hurt caused by witnessing black death is considered more unprofessional, than black men and women actually being killed. So if you can, please, be mindful. Your black employees are dealing with a lot."

A link to the whole essay is in my bio.

120,460 likes  
MAY 29, 2020

Log in to like or comment.

Our team of research and data scientists set out to understand how the question “How can we work through *The Age of Black Death?*” has been asked and answered by leaders at all levels in some of the world’s largest organizations.

Some information is already available and suggests there are diverging, if not competing, approaches being considered. Emerging leaders are asking chief human resources officers how the social and economic purposes of their organizations will impact existing inequities (Executive Networks, 2020).

Further, the 2022 *Edelman Trust Barometer* shows 60% of respondents expect CEOs to speak publicly about controversial social and political issues they care about (Edelman, 2022).

A survey of more than 6,000 professionals by Momentive found that, at every job level, over 70% of individual contributors consider EDI “an important factor in a company’s ability to drive success” while only 48% of owners and C-level executives felt similarly (Thompson, 2021). And, a study of 2020 corporate statements by Candid revealed challenges inherent in holding organizations accountable for the \$7.8 billion pledged to the social sector (Colar & Koob, 2021). These results suggest a deep divide between employees, executives, and the general public.

Such divisions prompted us to reconsider organizational change as a process of distributed imagining and communicating across leader levels (Weick, 2005; Peng, 2018). We wanted to understand the organizational change process and the role corporate statements play in driving EDI progress and solutions (Amis, Mair & Munir, 2020).

60% of respondents expect CEOs to speak publicly about controversial social and political issues

2022 Edelman Trust Barometer

48%  
Owners &  
C-Level

Replied yes to:

“Is EDI an important factor in a company’s ability to drive success?”

vs 70%  
Individual Contributor

Thompson, 2021

# What's the real meaning of corporate statements in *The Age of Black Death*?

## EDI MOTIVATION CONTINUUM



Figure 2: EDI Motivation Continuum



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## RESEARCH METHODS

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## Research Methods

To understand this distinction of perspectives, and potentially of motives, we built on existing research examining statement content issued via public venues by high-visibility organizations (Fiol, 1995; Hooghiemstra, 2008; Kiss & Barr 2015). Our team built a web scraping application to scrape corporate statements from Fortune 100 companies in response to systemic racism in 2020.

The application scraped the statements from the official website of the Fortune 100 companies, which included one or more keywords (“George Floyd,” “Black Lives Matter,” “Systemic Racism,” “racial equality,” etc.) related to racial injustice in 2020.

To enhance relevance, we only considered official statements from the organization or senior leaders after May 2020.

To avoid selection bias based on revenue, we also scraped statements from the [CEO Action Network for Diversity and Inclusion](#) (Henderson & Page, 2007).

We confirmed and analyzed 202 available statements from 228 organizations. Our sample count is visualized in the image below.

To account for the 26 organizations that did not issue statements, we also consider silence a statement.

## RESEARCH SAMPLE: CORPORATE STATEMENTS SINCE MAY 2020



Figure 3: EDI Statement Sample Count

CEO Action for Diversity & Inclusion™ is the largest CEO-driven business commitment to advance diversity and inclusion in the workplace. CEO Action was founded on a shared belief that diversity, equity and inclusion is a societal issue, not a competitive one, and that collaboration and bold action from the business community - especially CEOs - is vital to driving change at scale.

## Analysis

We used an AI-based algorithm to scan the statements, detect word and phrase patterns, and automatically cluster word groups and similar expressions. The algorithm uses an unsupervised probabilistic model that generates underlying topics from a collection of documents, where each topic reflects words from the statements' with certain probabilities.

Each statement is considered a single document made up of various topics. Each topic has various words belonging to it. In other words, a document response from Organization A, for example, will contain several different topics. If a word *w* has a high probability of being in a topic 't', all the documents having the word 'w' will be more strongly associated with topic 't' as well.

## AI-BASED SCAN: TOPIC MODELING

Chairman and CEO Jim Umpleby shared the following message with employees:

I do not usually **communicate** with you about non-**business** issues, but I cannot remain silent in the wake of recent events. I am struggling with outrage, sadness and frustration at the tragic death of George Floyd, which followed so closely on the deaths of Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor. We grieve for Mr. Floyd and his family and friends as well as for the larger community of which he was a part.

People of color in the United States are too often denied basic human rights that **many** of us take for granted. **Everyone** deserves to be treated with dignity and **respect** and have access to equal justice.

Racism has no place in a civilized society.

I know many of you are also dealing with your own range of emotions in response to these recent events, and others might be struggling to fully understand the anger and frustration we are witnessing in communities across the country. These tragedies **present** us with an opportunity to listen and work to understand the experiences and perspectives of those who have suffered the destructive effects of racism.

As Caterpillar employees, Our Values in Action require each of us to **respect** all people and their opinions, experiences and backgrounds. I ask you to reflect on your individual thoughts and actions and ensure they are consistent with Our Values.

In addition to our individual actions, Caterpillar will support the fight against racism and injustice. In honor of the lives taken and with a **mission** to help build a better **world**, the Caterpillar Foundation will make a donation to an appropriate **organization** that will be announced in the near future. I also encourage you to take advantage of our Caterpillar Foundation Matching Gift Program to support those organizations most important to you, your family and your communities in the fight against racism and injustice.

Thank you for living our Caterpillar Values every day.

Jim Umpleby, Caterpillar Chairman & CEO

### Topic Proportions & Assignments



### Topics

Business	0.03
Organization	0.02
World	0.01
.....	.....
Respect	0.04
Everyone	0.02
.....	.....
Communicate	0.03
Present	0.01
.....	.....

Figure 4: An Illustration of Topic Modeling

## FURTHER ANALYSIS: SYMBOLIC CONVERGENCE THEORY



Once the topics were identified we employed **Symbolic Convergence Theory (SCT)** to provide a more nuanced perspective on the data, identifying key themes and strategies which were ultimately closer to the realities presented in the statements.

SCT is based on the premise that words create organizational cultures and realities with the goal of activating diversity (Olufowte, 2006). Consequently, cohesive organizational cultures take shape when members use and exchange symbols to share and interpret the world around them (Bormann, 1983a, 1983b, 1985). These symbols are the building blocks of *fantasy themes*, which contain the meanings and values of a message or story.

WORD & SYMBOL  
EXCHANGES



FANTASY  
THEMES

The label *fantasy* is not used colloquially here, as in imaginary, non-existent worlds of science fiction. Defined by SCT, *fantasy* is a collective writing of a story about a current event that contains “emotion, events from a group member’s past, or an event that will happen in the future” (Park, Lee, & Hong, 2016, p. 710). A *fantasy theme* is a story that is shared, believed, and internalized by a variety of stakeholders to coordinate action.

Identifying *fantasy themes* helps explain why leaders and stakeholders think the way they do, how they think, and what has constructed their present understanding of the current situation. As they pertain to organizational cultures and communication, *fantasy themes* are tactics identified by an organization’s departmental and informal networks.

**Fantasy themes comprise three elements.**


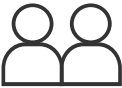

FANTASY THEME ELEMENT		DEFINITION
Setting Themes		Where and why the action takes place (i.e., places, agents that make setting possible)
Character Themes		Who brings life to the action (i.e., personas)
Action Themes		What happens as a result of the action (i.e., outcomes)

Table 1: Fantasy Theme Elements

When setting, character, and action themes “chain out” (or align) they create *rhetorical visions*. Rhetorical visions are strategies identified and performed by an organization’s leadership. In other words, rhetorical visions are “composite dramas” filled with heroes, villains, conflict, and a plot that ultimately gathers and unites people in a shared reality (Cragan & Shields, 1992).

**RHETORICAL  
VISION ELEMENT      DEFINITION**

Dramatis Personae	Actors, characters who embody and express the vision
Plot Line	Action of the vision
Scene	Location of the vision
Sanctioning Agent	People, events which make the vision possible
Analogues	Deeper structures and values contained in the vision

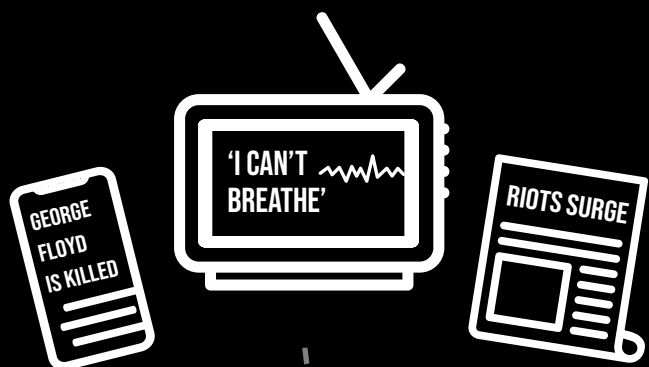
*Table 2: Rhetorical Vision Elements*

**Rhetorical visions are strategies identified by an organization’s leadership that reflect deeper structures and values to justify action. These structures and values tell stakeholders what is moral, socially relevant, responsible, and/or efficient (Cragan & Shields, 1992).**



When stakeholders share fantasy themes and a rhetorical vision, *symbolic convergence* occurs. Once symbolic convergence occurs stakeholders become members of a *rhetorical community*. They share a mindset allowing them to (re)shape organizational cultures by introducing new norms, roles, methods for decision-making, and metrics for success (Parker, 2018).

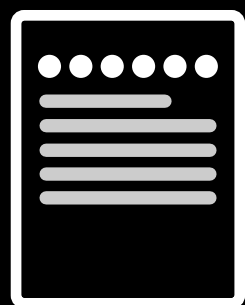
**Symbolic convergence and rhetorical communities are evidence of a collective understanding of experiences and critical indicators of culture change within organizations.**



**Collective Citizen  
Witnessing of George  
Floyd's Death**



**Companies Released  
Corporate Statements in  
*The Age of Black Death***



**Topic Modeling to  
Uncover Themes**

# SYMBOLIC CONVERGENCE

## Analyze Fantasy Themes

Setting



Where?



Media,  
Organizational  
Culture

Character



Who?

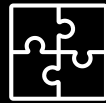


Heroes and  
Villains

Action

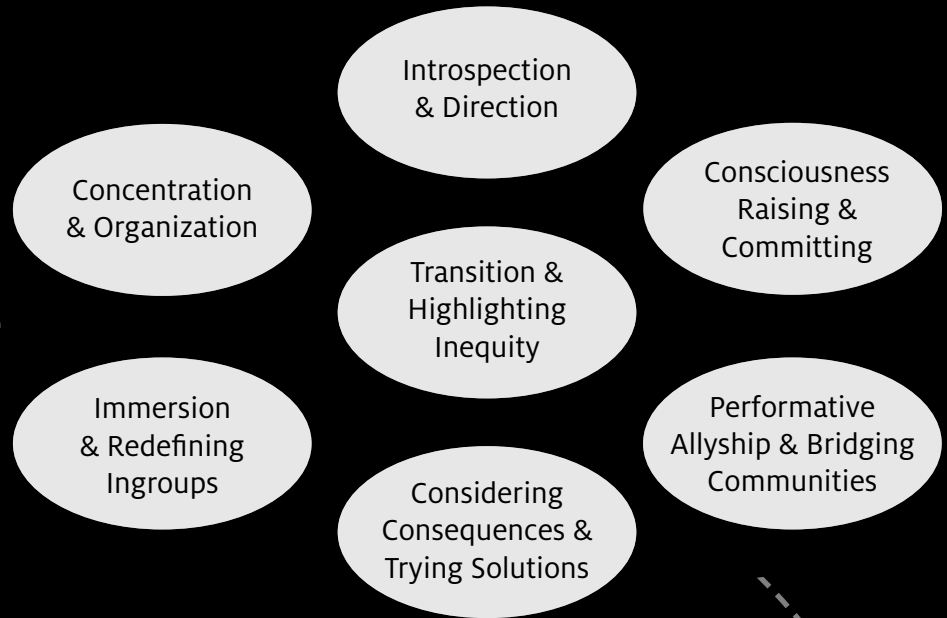


What?



Internal,  
External and  
Public Actions

## Distill Into 7 Rhetorical Visions



## Results: Potential Motives for EDI Leaders and Groups



COSMETIC



CONVERSATION



COMMITMENT

## Research Questions

In the current study, we unite the computational and communication research techniques discussed above within an organizational change context paying particular attention to EDI-oriented motives and outcomes. Specifically, we examine organizational statements for fantasy themes and rhetorical visions. We determine whether symbolic convergence on EDI has taken place based on the degree to which statements provide details regarding cosmetics (i.e., compliance issues), conversations (i.e., new norms and roles), and/or commitments (i.e., ethical decision-making methods and success metrics).

### We Pose The Following Questions:

What are some major fantasy themes about *The Age of Black Death* in the statements of Fortune 100 and CEO Action Network for Diversity and Inclusion organizations' 2020 statements?

What are some major rhetorical visions about *The Age of Black Death* in the statements of Fortune 100 and CEO Action Network for Diversity and Inclusion organizations' 2020 statements?

Are the rhetorical visions indicative of motive? (i.e., public relations/compliance; psychologically safe communication; concrete and sustainable commitments to creating more equitable, diverse, and inclusive organizational cultures)?

These questions provide a more comprehensive, holistic view of how organizational leaders enact and embody EDI in response to calls for accountability using communication, what impact the communication might have on organizational cultures and stakeholders, and what kinds of communication are more (or less) indicative of generating organizational cultures committed to concrete, sustainable EDI work.



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## HYPOTHESES

1. A variety of setting, character, and action fantasy themes exist within statements.
2. Setting, character, and action fantasy themes align to create rhetorical visions, which represent EDI strategies.
3. At least three motives for the statements exist:
  - Cosmetic (public relations and compliance)
  - Conversation (sharing stories, experiences with psychological safety)
  - Commitment (concrete, sustainable actions and outcomes)

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## KEY FINDING 1



Three fantasy themes about *The Age of Black Death* emerged from the topics:

1. Oppression is everywhere, all the time.
2. Leaders are invitational.
3. Messages and metrics should match.



## Oppression is everywhere, all the time.

As public attention to racial justice in the U.S. increased in 2020, organizations sensed a new level of urgency in addressing EDI in the workplace. Public advocates emphasized the idea of **intersectionality**, which describes both the intersecting aspects of any individual person's identity and the intersecting forces of privilege and oppression at work in a society (Crenshaw, 1991).

In response, many leaders issued statements that acknowledged oppression, the systematic mistreatment of certain groups by other groups. And some leaders used statements to begin to establish settings within which employees and stakeholders could safely share experiences and, in some cases, make complaints about the system (Ahmed, 2021).



For some leaders, the setting is internal to the organization. For others, the setting is internal and external with an emphasis on social responsibility. Still, others set the stage internally and externally while emphasizing economic responsibility.

Taken together, the statements recognize that oppression exists within organizations and organizational networks.

They acknowledge that racial representation within organizations is generally out of step with current demographics. In doing so, they suggest organizations are not level playing fields where all employees and stakeholders share equal opportunities to participate and succeed. They also suggest that increasing diversity results in better, more impactful, and more innovative work and is essential to building novel solutions to challenges faced by systemically excluded and included stakeholders and communities alike.

## INTERNAL SETTING

For now, I can only do my part by focusing attention on [our organization] and our employees.

*Emphasis: Governance and Employee Experience*



## INTERNAL & EXTERNAL SETTING



[We]... care for each other and our communities.

*Emphasis: Social Responsibility*

The company's focus [is] on sourcing products from Black-owned and other diverse businesses.

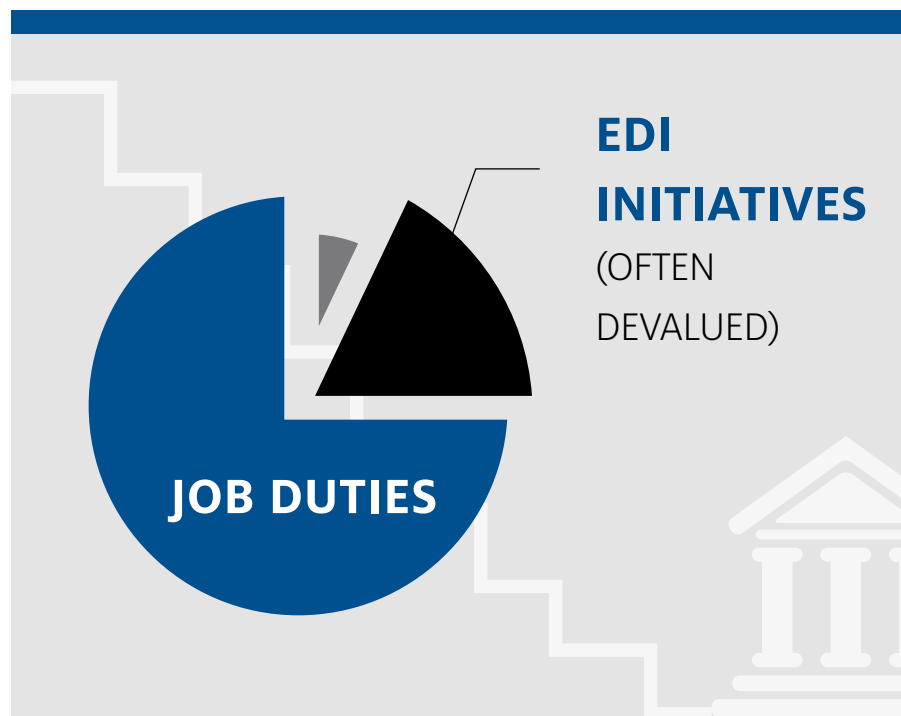
*Emphasis: Economic Responsibility*



Some leaders take a broader approach to the setting, asserting that it is “critical... [to] fight injustice wherever it exists.” In this case “wherever” is the public sphere generally, and mass and social media specifically.

## Navigating this setting emphasizes social responsibility and requires organizations to educate themselves and their stakeholders about how to fight racism.

Education could include information on how many organizational cultures fail Black people and people of color, who receive fewer promotions due to systemic bias. Or, that Black people and people of color are more likely to invest substantial time and effort in activities that promote EDI, which may also be devalued in the professional development process.



Accordingly, investigative reporting reveals that several organization’s statements were written by employee resource groups who were unpaid for their subject matter expertise and labor (Tiku, 2020). Further, “fighting injustice wherever it exists” could include education around how members of employee resource groups can be disadvantaged through cultural taxation of unequal service and mentoring demands.



Given these power dynamics, we suggest that those who are most empowered to make change (organizational leaders) must take the first steps on the journey toward equity to make this a shared reality.



## Leaders are invitational.

The character theme portrays CEOs and organizational leaders as heroes. However, we must remember that heroes must succeed in making the fantasy a reality to fulfill the role. Making the fantasy a reality involves making invitations to collective development.



For instance, an invitational CEO is one who commits to closing the pay gap and achieving it, versus one who commits to closing the pay gap and takes no concrete steps toward doing so. In becoming heroes, and to ensure symbolic convergence, leaders express and embody the following character traits: ability to listen and respect others' perspectives; provide opportunities for stakeholders to develop and choose options based on their own lived experiences; owning responsibility for economic and social organizational successes and failures; fostering psychological safety; calling oneself out for needing to change; and a sincere conviction that Black people and all people of color have value.

Good examples can be found of the “leaders are invitational” fantasy theme in the following statements. One CEO shared:

**“We are only at the beginning of this journey and to be clear, we have more work ahead of us. But I strongly believe... we...will open... dialogue on diversity and inclusion and help us deliver on our greater social purpose.”**

Similarly, another shared:

**“We aspire to build better lives for all of us. We strive to have a diverse employee population and recognize that only by interacting with, and listening to, people of all races... sexual orientations and abilities can we hope to truly understand and appreciate one another.”**

Here, senior leadership is cast as open-minded, empathetic, and aware of the need for an EDI strategy even though none has yet been developed.

Invitational leaders are also required to name and disinvite perceived villains from the equitable environments they are trying to co-create. In these statements, villains are not people but forces that steal opportunities for equitable, diverse, and inclusive organizational cultures. Villains named in the statements are systemic oppression, historical events, everyday racism, lack of psychological safety, talent pipeline problems, inaction, and silence.

Take the following excerpts as examples:

**“We know that systemic racism is real. It has been persistent. And it can’t be wished away.”**

**“We cannot lose sight of the fact that racism is tearing our communities apart. One lesson we should all learn is that silent carriers help spread racism.”**

In these examples villains are equated with the status quo of the past and present. In addition to naming and disinviting villains, leaders must overcome villains to bring about the more equitable futures they espouse. To overcome villains, leaders must set the stage for changes in how and when they are publicly accountable as well as how and when they acquire and share new knowledge appropriately. For instance, recognizing how social issues like human rights, climate change, and income inequality align with structural racism as critical to corporate outlook.



## VILLAINS OF EQUITABLE ENVIRONMENTS

Systemic Oppression

Historical Events

Everyday Racism

Lack of Psychological Safety

Talent Pipeline Problems

Inaction

Silence

Status Quo of Past & Present

In terms of corporate outlook and public accountability, leaders must be able to define systemic racism, discuss EDI as a strategic business asset and social value, and model voluntary-based learning. To do so they must avoid the impulse to equate aggressive acts of racism with the existence of racial categories (Fields & Fields, 2012; Hamilton, 2020).

To avoid false equivalencies and embrace their invitational roles, leaders use words such as “me,” “we,” and “all of us” to assign responsibility to individuals at all leader levels in the organization. In doing so, they normalize the rhetorical vision that casts people of color and white people with shared responsibility for and interest in dismantling systemic racism. Such language shapes the emerging rhetorical visions and sets the stage for appropriate solutions to address how multiple forms of systemic oppression compound.

However, there are unnamed villains in the statements.

Heroes often refrain from using words such as “murder,” “lynching,” or “trauma,” opting to use “death,” “officer-involved shooting,” or “difficult moment(s)” instead. They also avoid words like “racists” in favor of words like “silent” or “inactive.”

Such word choices obscure the central role that whiteness and racism play in the injustices and indignities Black people and all people of color endure. These word choices also communicate cultural norms by articulating what is right or wrong, sayable or unsayable. Further, word choices make power relations (in)visible, by modeling appropriate responses to evidence of exclusion and discrimination.





## Messages and metrics should match.

A critical action theme emerges alongside the dynamic setting and character themes contained in the statements: Messages and metrics should match. To address this theme, leaders embody their heroic character traits and begin to list desired general outcomes for organizational action that align with the setting themes introduced.

Desired outcomes are presented as short- to medium-term positive improvements resulting from long-term EDI-oriented culture change.

## THE OUTCOMES SHOW UP IN 3 CATEGORIES:



# EDI ORIENTED INTERVENTIONS

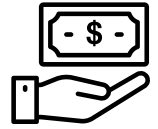
## Internal Operations

- Creating EDI core values
- Proactive recruiting and hiring practices
- Addressing high-achieving Black, Indigenous, and people of color whose professional development amounts to “window dressing”
- Increasing representation of systemically excluded groups
- Creating self-identification systems to encourage preferred pronoun use
- Investing in internal training and development (especially anti-bias training)
- Hiring EDI experts
- Conducting pay equity audits
- Ensuring greater diversity in products and marketing
- Diversifying vendors
- Forging networks that include BIPOC decision-makers in board eligible roles
- Recognizing and reducing bias and everyday racism
- Evolving with customer and client demographics
- Creating equitable policies for hybrid and remote work
- Providing human and financial support to ERGs and employee networks



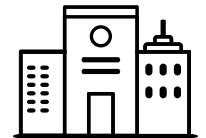
## External Philanthropy

- Non-profit grant funding
- Matching employee gifts
- Volunteerism
- Supporting Black-owned businesses
- Funding mission-driven banks and Black and Hispanic-led minority depository institutions
- Providing in-kind support
- Scholarships and endowments



## Public Equity

- Increasing racial equity in society
- Advancing racial justice
- Providing equitable access to tools
- Improving outcomes for BIPOC people in terms of housing and banking
- Participating in thought leadership (including inviting thought leaders into organizational cultures)
- Building empathy and hope
- Validating openness in communication
- Reforming public policy
- Improving supplier and supply chain diversity



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## KEY FINDING 2



Seven rhetorical visions about *The Age of Black Death* emerged and contain motives for EDI work, ranging from surface level compliance to in-depth change.

**Analysis confirms that as fantasy themes chain out within organizations and in the mediated public sphere, rhetorical visions emerge. Rhetorical visions represent distinct EDI strategies framed to positively impact the lived experiences of employees and public images of organizations. Following are the emergent strategies and their descriptions.**

# RHETORICAL VISIONS AS EDI STRATEGIES

## EDI STRATEGIES

## DESCRIPTIONS

Concentration & Organization		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Elevating equity as a core issue</li> <li>• Qualifying responses</li> </ul>
Introspection & Direction		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thought leadership</li> <li>• Assigning membership requirements, tasks</li> </ul>
Considering Consequences & Trying Solutions		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Naming what is lost when we do nothing</li> <li>• Intentional task assignment and course correction</li> </ul>
Performative Allyship & Bridging Communities		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Going through the motions to assuage guilt</li> <li>• Sharing the burden with outgroups</li> </ul>
Immersion & Redefining Ingroups		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collective involvement</li> <li>• Defining group responsibilities</li> </ul>
Consciousness-raising & Committing		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Normalizing diversity talk</li> <li>• Assigning dollar amounts to efforts</li> </ul>
Transition & Highlighting Inequity		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Going from “we” to “our;” sharing outlooks</li> <li>• Comparing Black experiences to others</li> </ul>

Table 3: Rhetorical Visions as EDI Strategies

## RESEARCH FINDING: DISTRIBUTION OF RHETORICAL VISIONS AS EDI STRATEGIES

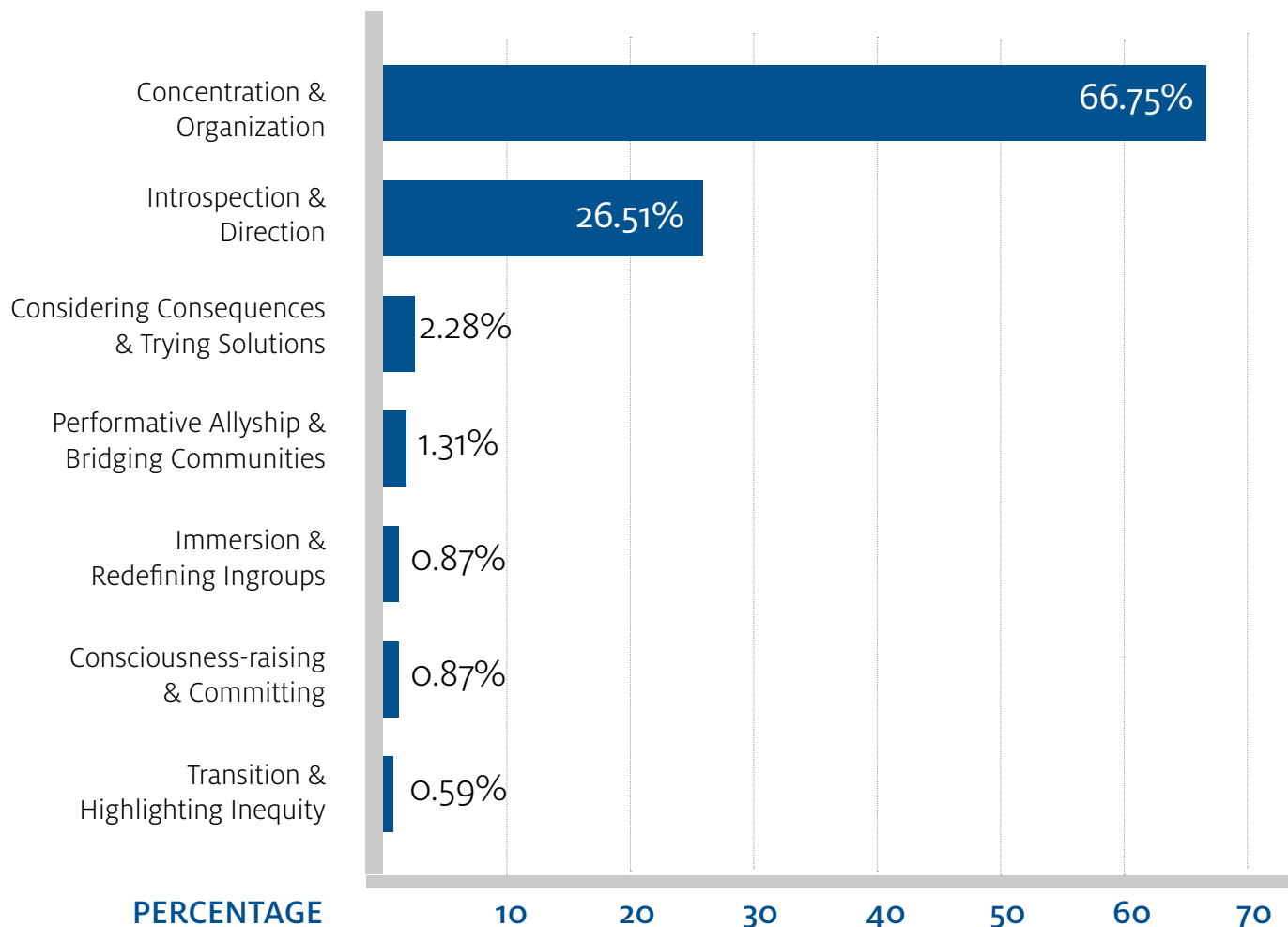


Figure 5: Proportion of EDI Strategies in the Statements

Rhetorical visions/EDI strategies are best understood by example and distribution.

**Nearly 70% of statement content reflects an EDI strategy of Concentration and Organization.**



These strategies rely on diagnostics such as data collection and organizational development, suggesting that most organizations are adapting their approach to EDI from one that emphasizes cosmetics, compliance, and personal development to one that actively recognizes a need to work toward systemic change.

Take this excerpt as an example of **Concentration and Organization**:

**“We have begun working on a long-term strategy that will address four main areas of focus: Education, Equitable Justice, Enterprise Equity Opportunity, Economic Empowerment.”**

Words like **“working,” “commitment,” “focus,”** and **“requires”** reveal the persona of senior leadership as committed to policies that address inequities. The role of senior leadership is to demonstrate commitment to more equitable policies and ensure such policies and procedures are in place. Statements indicate that these organizations are actively aligning and socializing EDI strategy with key stakeholders to ensure actions are taken and outcomes are met. In doing so they are moving away from a cosmetic approach, toward one that emphasizes conversation and commitment.



66.75%



0.87%

**Consciousness-raising and Committing** goes a step further in realizing a transition from conversation to commitment. Here, statements demonstrate that data-informed decisions have been made to normalize anti-racism and assign human and financial support to EDI work. An example is found here:



**“We’re on a journey to become anti-racist, creating organizations that are more diverse, equitable and inclusive places where everyone can do the best work of their lives. Our goal... is to partner with our vendors, suppliers, and consultants to provide opportunities to people who are... marginalized.”**

Words such as **“anti-racism,” “journey,” “partner,” “provide,”** and **“people who are marginalized”** reveal the persona of senior leadership as being willing to take responsibility for current and future states of organizational culture. Further, leaders have identified and understood gaps in priority setting and implementation, and wish to persuade their stakeholders to help them in challenging existing power dynamics.

Compare this to an example that embodies the **Introspection and Direction** strategy, which represents 26.51% of the statement content.



“As we process our emotions this week... let us choose our words thoughtfully and with a genuine aim of understanding and true progress... but let us not remain silent. Talk to each other... And if you see ways our company can be doing more, tell me.”

26.51%

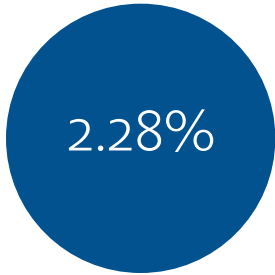
**Introspection and Direction** relies more on personal development and less on the roles of context and systemic change, suggesting that the organization is in the early formation of an EDI strategy that has not yet been aligned to talent or business strategy. In other words, change belongs with the individual. Based on the Introspection and Direction excerpt above, we might say the organization is learning how to distinguish symptoms of EDI-oriented pain from root causes. The persona of senior leadership is to model self-reflection and thought leadership (“**process**,” “**understanding**,” “**progress**”). As such, senior leadership is continuing to embody the heroic role with which it has been cast (“**genuine**”).

Stakeholders are instructed to demonstrate EDI commitment through open dialogue and sharing the need for an EDI strategy even though nothing has yet been developed. When leaders speak in these ways, they indicate they are interested in moving from a cosmetic-oriented motive for EDI work to a conversational motive for EDI work. Conversation is an important motive for action because people need to talk again and again to promote psychological safety and build cultural will to support EDI efforts with human and financial resources. In the aftermath of *The Age of Black Death*, leaders are recognizing the value of repetition.





By contrast, 2.28% of statements reflect an EDI strategy of **Considering Consequences and Trying Solutions**. This strategy relies on active integration of EDI and business strategies. Integration requires ongoing attention to change sense-making among key stakeholders to ensure business and talent outcomes will be met. When deploying this strategy senior leaders work toward fulfilling the hero role by: holding themselves accountable for ensuring equity in the industry and communities served; holding managers accountable for meeting EDI metrics; modeling how managers can adapt their communication and leadership styles to meet the evolving needs of the workforce and society at large.



Take the following statement as example:



**“Advancing racial equity requires a more intentional focus on challenges faced by communities of color and a commitment to becoming an anti-racist institution. If key racial gaps for Black Americans in wages, housing, education, and investment were closed 20 years ago, \$16 trillion could have been added to the US economy. If these gaps are closed today, \$5 trillion could be added to US GDP over the next five years.”**

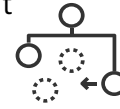
With words like “intentional,” “challenges,” and “anti-racist institution,” senior leadership demonstrates dedicated effort to policies that address systemic inequities both internal and external to the organization. Moreover, by considering what has been lost to systemic oppression, senior leadership demonstrates an ability to take on multiple perspectives that are as much about larger systems of power as they are about institutional responsibility for lived experiences of everyday stakeholders.

Considering and naming what has been lost is an important act. Life outcomes that have historically gone uncouncted are now counted and addressed through more relevant solutions. And so, a cultural norm is set that envisions EDI as both a goal and a process, one that guides individual’s thoughts and actions, and moves toward a goal of remaking organizational culture and reshaping institutional impact.

When leaders speak in these ways, they indicate they are engaging in sincere conversations and are increasingly committed to EDI work.



Even more open communication and intention are evidenced in 0.87% of statement content, which reflect an EDI strategy of **Immersion and Redefining Ingroups** and in 0.59% of statement content reflecting **Transition and Highlighting Inequity**. These strategies rely on maximizing inclusion, ongoing recalibration of policies to ensure equity, integrated EDI and business strategies, and promotion of systemically excluded employees to senior roles, suggesting that senior leadership is motivated by a full commitment to culture change.



An example of **Immersion and Redefining Ingroups** is shared here:

**“As much as we... pride ourselves on our accomplishments in creating a diverse and inclusive workplace, we must do more. And we must do it now... we have spoken a lot about uniting as one... At a time when the deep fractures in society are impossible to ignore, this unity is more essential than ever before.”**

Words like “**must do more,**” “**now,**” “**unity,**” and “**creating**” reveal leaders as active participants in a long-term process of constant reevaluation and shared responsibility.

An example of **Transition and Highlighting Inequity** can be found in this excerpt:

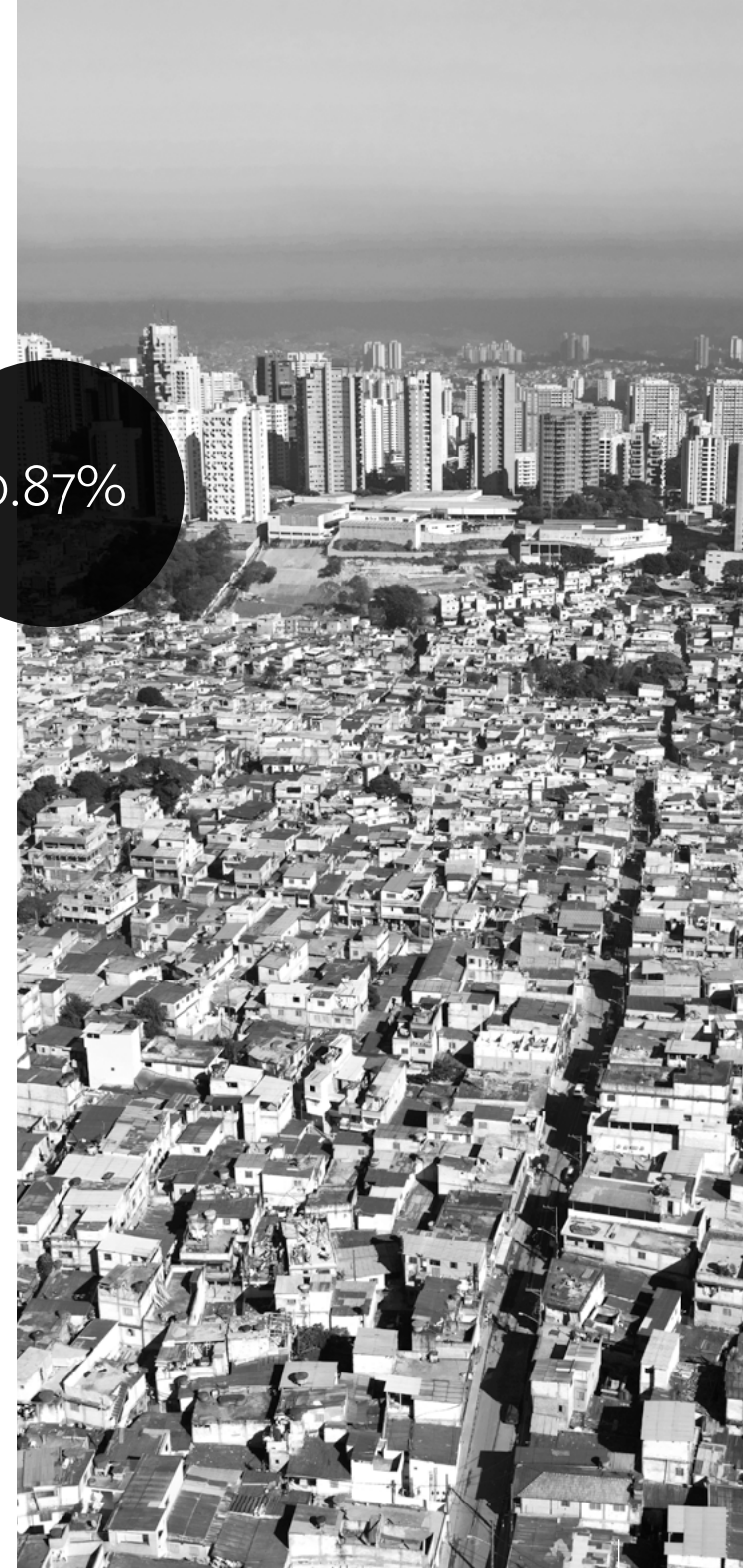
**“Our more than 300,00 employees are a microcosm of America, and a reflection of the diversity that is foundational to who we are as a country... Studies have shown that your zip code can have as much impact on your health as your genetic code, [this organization] will focus on social determinants of health in Black and under-served communities.”**

Words like “**our,**” “**your,**” “**we,**” and “**reflection**” indicate leaders’ willingness to embrace the effects of systemic oppression and take responsibility for addressing them. Further, by comparing Black experiences to others, leaders are explaining why collective recognition and action are needed.

**Essentially, what is happening to Black people is happening to all people.**

0.87%

0.59%





Statements characterized by *Immersion and Redefining Ingroups* and *Transition and Highlighting Inequity* indicate a higher likelihood that:



- Organizational policies are reviewed regularly to address inequities and complaints.
- High engagement in and contributions to a culture of learning and development.
- Hiring, promotion, and retention metrics are reviewed regularly.
- Accountability measures are adjusted accordingly.

In terms of change sense-making in the statements, leaders continue to talk about racism in ways that call out power imbalances and give voice to the systemic inequities and injustices that Black people and all systemically excluded people face. When leaders speak in these ways, they indicate they are moving even further away from a cosmetic motive for EDI work and growing more committed to EDI work grounded in discussing and acting on concerns without fear of failure, retaliation, or minimization.



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## KEY FINDING 3



Cosmetic motives are overrepresented, as **95.98% of statement content lacks key details accounting for long-term culture change.**



As discussed previously, statements both reflect and deflect the lived experiences of the leaders and stakeholders they represent.

Take the following statements as examples.

**“To the Black community — we see you. You matter and your lives matter.” “[This organization] stands with the Black community.”**

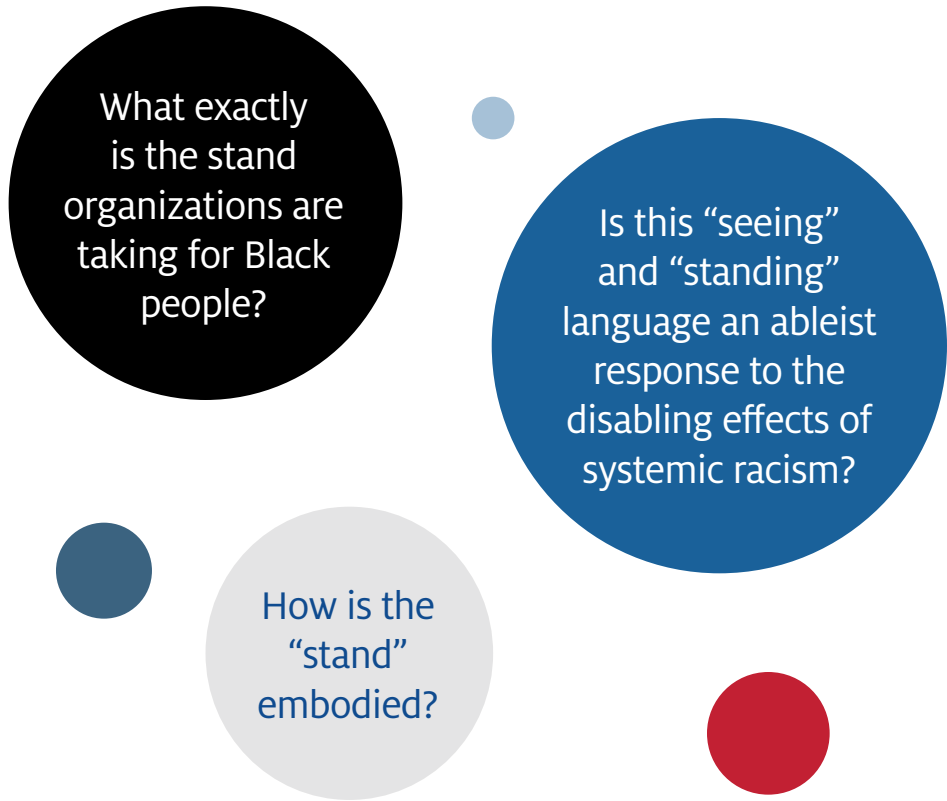
**“Today [May 31, 2020] on [our web] pages we share our support for racial equality in solidarity with the Black community and in memory of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and others who don’t have a voice. For those feeling grief, anger, sadness and fear, you are not alone. We stand in support of racial equality, and all those who search for it.”**

The statements address Black people with more frequency than white people. Such inclusions and omissions suggest the statements are motivated by a desire to cosmetically address an external crisis as someone else’s problem. In so doing, these responses create social distance between racial groups, centralize white people and perspectives, and assign responsibility for dismantling systemic racism to systemically excluded people.

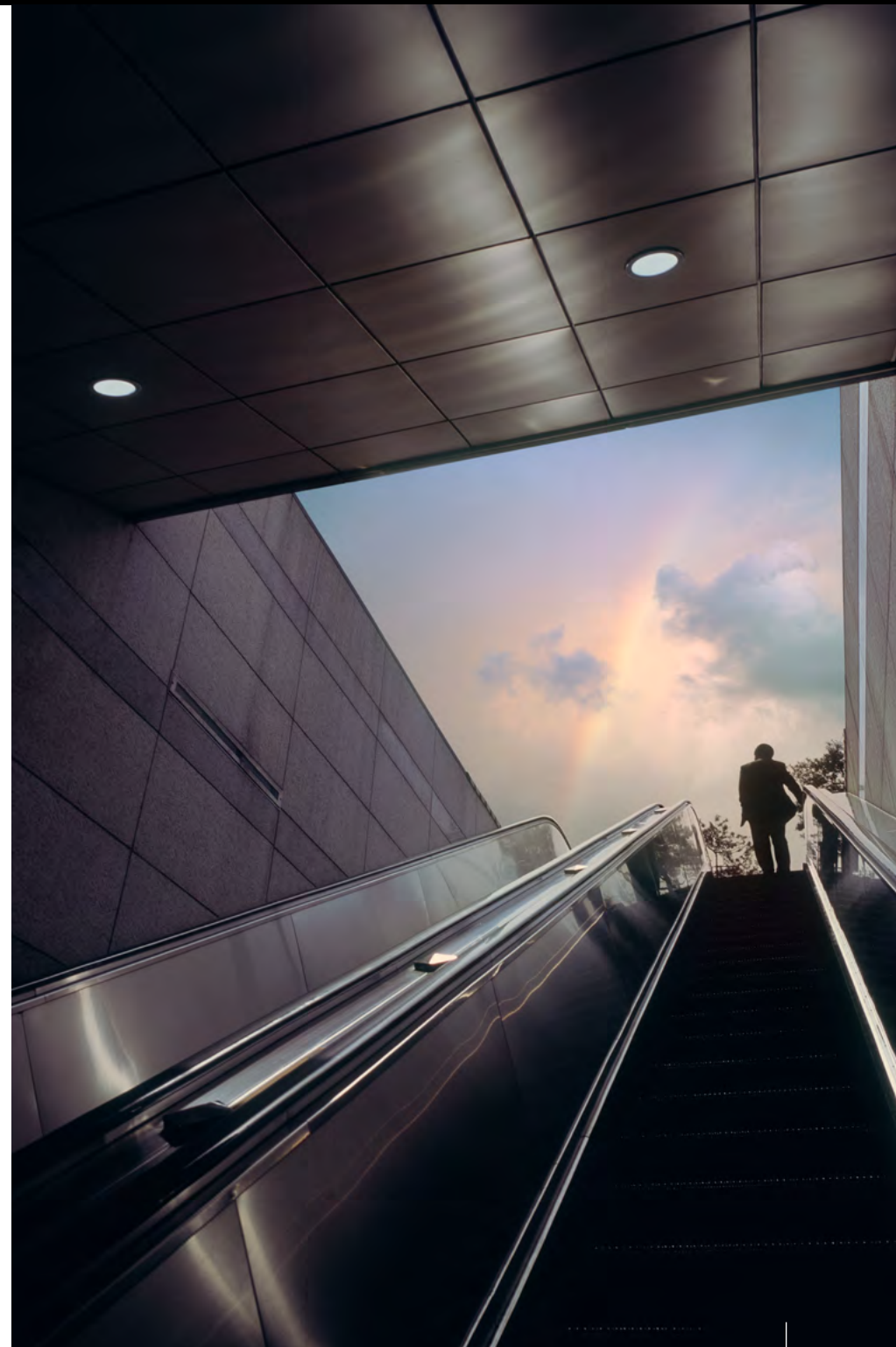


Further, these statements avoid using words such as **“race”** and instead use words like **“racial equity”** or **“diversity.”** Following up on existing sociological research on corporate statements from the technology industry (Hamilton, 2020), the next phase of our project will measure the rhetorical ratio of mentions of **“Black people”** and **“communities”** compared to **“white people”** alongside other EDI representation metrics.

Omissions and deflections are hallmarks of the **Performative Allyship and Bridging Communities** EDI strategy. Omissions and deflections allow leaders to position themselves as unintentional victims of *The Age of Black Death* and eschew responsibility for dismantling systemic oppression. Further, these rhetorical choices exclude specific details about what “we see you,” “we stand with” you mean.



Answering these questions ethically requires organizations to account publicly for how they are clearly distinguishing strategic priority setting from strategic priority implementation.



## SUCH ANSWERS REQUIRE ASKING DEEPER QUESTIONS ABOUT POWER AND POLITICS, INCLUDING:

Who is and is not doing the work?

Whose priorities are addressed and in what order?

How is systemically excluded talent engaged and retained?

Who is expected to benefit and how?



Approximately 1 in 3 employees and job seekers are interested in the answers to such questions, as they would not apply to a job at a company whose workforce is not diverse (Glassdoor, 2020).

Details like these address resources dedicated to and anxieties inherent in doing EDI work that changes everyday actions among stakeholders, internal operations and systems, and social systems of oppression.

Our findings suggest that more information is needed and that correlations among EDI strategies and motives exist. After publicly announcing their efforts, organizations and their leadership should keep the communication going and broaden their efforts so they can engage and retain systemically excluded talent while reducing uncertainty about EDI-oriented culture change. Organizations are encountering a pivotal moment in their journeys to sustain progress toward diversity and realize the full range of potential across the workforce by cultivating cultures of inclusion and equity.

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## NEXT STEPS IN THE RESEARCH

### Aligning Messages, Motives, and Metrics

Certainly, our data reveals that organizations are intentionally shifting their foci to acknowledge systemic discrimination of systemically excluded people. What remains to be seen is whether this rhetorical shift signals a long-term culture change.

It also remains to be seen whether, when, and how organizations are turning their strategic rhetorical visions into real rhetorical communities, whose EDI narratives, actions, and processes will continuously evolve.



## NEXT STEPS IN THE RESEARCH INCLUDE:

### Expanding our Dataset

Comparing the emergent EDI topics and topics from our current data set to those of Fortune 1000 companies will allow us to contextualize and (re)evaluate our findings. It is important for us to learn as much as we can about the social, cultural, historical, and organizational conditions that are producing this knowledge. We can better understand both the functional limitations of our model and ethical obligations of the EDI interventions enacted.

### Continuing the Conversation

We will also explore the diverse commitments, identities, and relational conflicts within organizations' rhetorical communities. To do so we will analyze relationships between the themes in the corporate statements and stakeholder diversity and inclusion ratings from Glassdoor. We will compare the data to what we have already learned to chart how organizational leadership responds to first-hand accounts of systemic oppression and how they can be held accountable for living their values from employees' perspectives.

### Measuring Commitments

Using data obtained from [Refinitiv](#), we will learn more about how organizations can avoid reputational risks along with traps of false inclusion and poor planning of universalism as they strive for success in EDI. That means examining hiring and retention processes and public advocacy.

As internal, external, and public equity interventions are made, we will pay close attention to:

- Leaders doing the work
- Stakeholders who benefit
- People who are neglected or harmed
- Whose priorities are triaged and whose are overlooked



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## NEXT STEPS FOR LEADERS

**Take Action!** How can committed leaders understand and apply what we are learning? Sustaining organizational commitments to EDI requires a willingness to create solutions for problems that have not yet been solved by publishing statements alone.

## Reveal Relevant Opportunities

- Realize it is no longer possible to avoid systemic oppression or publicly reconcile contradictions between cosmetic diversity and substantive change.
- Acknowledge how and why systemic exclusion is a problem that affects society and business at all levels.
- Define commitment for your organization and ensure everyone has a role to play in reflecting, naming, and bringing about sustained change.
- Identify 2-3 strategic actions to drive change. Typical starter actions include representation reporting, metrics, listening sessions, and raising awareness of EDI efforts.



## Move Beyond a “View from the Top”

- Action can be taken from any place. We focus here on explicit recommendations for leaders because of the positional power they hold to catalyze ongoing systemic change and find blocks toward the EDI strategy envisioned.
- Leaders can examine employee reviews on sites like [Glassdoor](#), which describe specific issues employees are encountering along the hiring path from recruitment to retention and promotion and exit.
- Make space for insights about how employees work within formal and informal networks, about how diverse and inclusive the organization’s culture is, and about systematic advantages and disadvantages associated with employment and performance.
- Capture data about development actions and metrics regarding diverse representation, pay equity improvements, progress reports, rewards, relationship roles, and potential impacts of and fears about EDI work.



## Embrace a “Listen-first” Approach

- EDI work is at the core of leadership development. Before announcing EDI efforts publicly, leaders should listen to what their stakeholders are saying about how equity, diversity, and inclusion impact their professional and personal lives.
- Leaders can identify gaps between what their organizations are saying and what they are doing, reconsider assumptions they are making, and find guidance and support.
- Listening first allows leaders to demonstrate an ethic of care and accountability. For instance, leaders can listen for ways to facilitate equity in professional development, quality employment, and healthcare.
- Listening must lead to action. When leaders gain new insights about EDI, they are better able to identify and mitigate bias, and ensure a sustainable budget for EDI work.



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## CONCLUSION

In this study we learned more about organizational change as a process of communication initiated by senior leaders. While it is perhaps not surprising to learn that leaders, like everyone else, are at different points on their EDI journeys, our study is the first (to our knowledge) to develop criteria for evaluating the content of and motive for corporate responses to EDI-related issues.

Specifically, the study shows how leaders:

- Imagine themselves and reveal their motives
- Shape culture by using setting, character, and action fantasy themes
- Strategically include/exclude key details needed for realizing long-term impact of their rhetorical visions and strategic EDI efforts

Our findings are significant because they prove EDI is both an ongoing symbolic process and a set of material goals. The insights from this study suggest that leaders and leadership development practitioners should use their words carefully to craft equitable, inclusive, and diverse cultures while setting specific targets, measuring progress, and holding themselves publicly accountable for the promises they make.

Given that organizations are placing more and more of their social and economic resources to support EDI, having leaders who can reveal relevant opportunities, move beyond a view from the top, and listen first is invaluable, both in terms of the long-term success of individual leaders and to future organizations.



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## ABOUT THE TEAM



### Marcia Alesan Dawkins, Ph.D. (she / her / ella)

Marcia is a Senior Research Scientist at the Center for Creative Leadership and contributor to the Leading Effectively blog. Her current research focuses on promoting equitable and inclusive organizational cultures through strategic communication. Her thought leadership and award-winning publications have been featured in media outlets such as BBC World, NPR, AOL Originals, ABC News, HuffPo Live, along with several podcasts. Prior to joining CCL, Marcia was a communication professor at the University of Southern California, corporate consultant, and columnist.



### Ramya Balakrishnan, M.S. (she / her / அவள்)

Ramya is a Data Scientist at the Center for Creative Leadership and contributor to the Leading Effectively blog. Her current work involves data collection, building AI based models, and data visualization to drive key insights from internal and external data. Her thought leadership combines cutting-edge data science, data ethics, and machine learning techniques to analyze information equitably and effectively. Prior to joining CCL, Ramya was a data analyst with Tokai Carbon.



### Veronica Lin (she / her / 她)

Veronica is a multi-disciplinary designer passionate about communicating ideas and aspirations in a clear and representative light. She honed her craft designing materials at the Center for Creative Leadership, building human centered operations at IDEO, and freelancing with creators around the world. Her approach is shaped by a deep and enduring curiosity about people, as reflected by her background in Sociology and Psychology.

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