Life for Me Ain't Been No Crystal Stair: The Effect of Institutional Racism on Minorities in the Organization

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The progress of minorities in American society has been one of blood, sweat, and tears. Racial minorities in the United States have battled obstacles and jumped several hurdles in order to attain success and maintain a strong existence. When examining the history of minorities in organizations, parallels exist between the corporation and society. As in other times in history, minorities remain at lower levels of the corporation, earn lower wages, and experience higher workplace stress than their White counterparts. This situation remains in spite of attempts to eradicate discrimination in the work environment.

Although individual racism affects the ability of a minority person to advance, institutional racism provides key input in the progress of minorities in the organization. Institutional racism is based on a system of policies and procedures that prohibit racial minorities from utilizing certain rights for no other reason but race. Thus, it is critical that we examine the systematic bias placed on people of color in the organization. Unfortunately, when individuals or groups assemble to discuss racism, the focus remains on single incidents executed by a single person, ignoring the important effect of structural inputs on the perpetuation of racism. The purpose of this paper is to explore the effect of institutional racism on the promotion of racial minorities in organizations. This paper also evaluates strategies implemented to reduce the effects of institutional racism.

One interesting result of institutional racism is that ghettos have developed within the organizational structure. Within the environment, there are avenues or career tracks by which minorities are allowed to advance. These tracks have more to do with social science fields such as human resources divisions and general management areas, but career development for fields in finance and the sciences is very limited. There is careful consideration of how the placement of a minority in a hard science could threaten the profit margin of the organization. Due to low numbers of underrepresented groups entering the math and engineering professions, this inequity will continue because there are not enough people in the pipeline.

Affirmative action serves as an official, legislated plan to combat institutional racism. In effect, affirmative action was implemented to include groups of people that historically had been excluded. However, in some ways, it has been viewed as a separate issue in the organization, a program that in reality has a detrimental effect on the plan's beneficiaries. In addition, the affirmative action plan has been perceived as a negative and insignificant part of the organizational structure that maintains a quota system. In order to evaluate the

effectiveness of affirmative action, it is necessary to research for data as to the position and compensation levels of target groups as compared to majority groups.

As racial minorities increase in numbers, networking has become common. These networks offer sources of support in the workplace to people of color. Research demonstrates that minority networks provide access to information and in many situations, the networks provide more support than mentoring relationships. The development of informal networks highlights some of the inadequacies of formalized processes in the organization. In areas where people of color in the organization lack support from the traditional structure, informal networks will develop to enhance chances of success. Institutional racism is a factor in the failure of mentoring programs. Once a group is viewed as needing assistance, there arises an unequal power status that can be accentuated in formal mentoring relationships.

It is interesting to analyze how organizations, through using policies and procedures, can systematically bar minorities from promotions into higher-level positions. One tool is through the performance evaluation. Performance evaluations allow supervisors and managers to appraise the productivity of subordinates. This method is hailed as an effective, objective means by which to measure performance and subsequently, pay raises and promotions. However, most evaluation techniques fail to account for subjectivity of the evaluator/supervisor.

Because institutional racism centers around systemic issues, it is difficult to eliminate. Organizations make statements that they are equal opportunity employers. However, the inequities in hierarchical position and compensation emphasize the existence of a biased system. Instead of emphasizing the need for the members to change, the organization should look to itself as a beginning source for change. Because of the future demographics of the United States workforce, it is critical that organizations include all groups in the operational and strategic activities.

PRESENTER
Alisa Mosley is a doctoral student at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. She received her bachelor's and master's degrees at Florida A&M University. Her research interests include diversity, behavior management, and teams. She has worked for several public and private organizations including BUD, Sprint, and Exxon Company USA. In addition, she has consulted with public organizations in the area of affirmative action effectiveness.