***SELECT SPEECHES from***

**JOHNNY C. TAYLOR, JR.,** President & CEO, SHRM

*Insights and observations, motivation and inspiration from the author of*

***RESET: A Leader’s Guide to Work in an Age of Upheaval***

*I give a lot of speeches. As a CEO, it comes with the job. And it’s something that I really enjoy: getting out in the community and connecting with people. The travel can get complicated, but one of the unexpected benefits of the pandemic was that it afforded me more chances to join many more state council and chapter events in the past year—virtually, that is. I have traveled virtually to Hawaii, the Bahamas, Alaska, Michigan, Florida, and too many more to mention. I have often given multiple speeches in the same day. I’m grateful to all those who invited me.*

*I have also been able to bring SHRM’s thought leadership on the COVID response, DE&I, Second Chances, and other issues to many more external audiences, nationally and globally, from the EEOC and National Association of Manufacturers to YouTube influencers and the International Organization of Employers.*

*Here I have chosen five speeches that are particularly memorable and impactful to me, and I hope to the audiences who heard them. I think they connect directly to the key topics that I have discussed in this book.*

**Hire the ‘Wrong’ People for the Right Reasons**

**Keynote Address**

**SHRM Annual Conference and Exposition**

**June 24, 2019**

**Las Vegas, Nevada**

*The SHRM Annual Conference in 2019 featured the theme “Creating Better Workplaces,” with a strong underlying thread of how untapped talent can help close the skills gap. We designed this presentation as a dynamic multimedia event on a big stage, including recreating the job-seeking experience of people just released from prison, people living with disabilities, and older workers. I was proud to share the stage with special guests who told their stories: criminal justice advocate Alic e Marie Johnson and three inspiring individuals with disabilities who forged career success: Kelly Mac, Kayla McKeon and Adam Gorlitsky.*

**“How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives.”**

Annie Dillard said that beautifully in her book, *The Writing Life*.

Across a lifetime, people spend almost 4,000 days at work—more than 13 years.

**Workplaces are where life happens.**

* It’s where people learn, grow, serve and lead.
* It’s where attitudes and values are shaped.
* It’s where they build a future for their family and a legacy for themselves.

But workplaces are also where people are too often excluded, divided, exploited, and underutilized.

In this time where there are more jobs than people to fill them, too many employers are squandering the top talent inside their businesses—and waiting outside their doors.

Mismanaging this key resource is a disservice to business, and it harms us as a country competing in a global economy.

It harms the emerging industries of the 4th Industrial Revolution.

It harms the social fabric of our communities, and future generations.

Workplaces are where real social change begins.

So when our workplaces don’t meet our standards, how can we expect to improve our communities and our societies?

I’m Johnny C Taylor, Jr., and I want you to join me in creating better workplaces for a better world.

HR professionals are at the center of all that people hope for and aspire to.

Think about it. There are more than 162 million Americans in the U.S. workforce today.

Globally, 3 billion people go to their jobs every day. Each of them is affected by HR in some capacity.

Whether it’s navigating their nervous first day at work, purchasing a new home, sending their kids off to college—all the way to their very last day before retirement, HR is there, impacting lives, shaping culture.

And unlike any other profession, weare the ones who create workplaces that change lives, transform organizations and leave an indelible mark on society.

Each of you has the capacity—in fact, the responsibility—to inspire the best in people.

* To create inclusive and engaged workplaces;
* To create an environment of positivity and productivity;
* To make workplaces better, and in turn, create a better world.

HR has a life-changing impact on people outside of our workplaces too.

* Those who applied but didn’t get the job—or even the interview.
* Those who may have been qualified, but weren’t a “good fit.”
* Those whose military skills don’t directly translate in the civilian world.
* Those who may not think like us, walk like us, or talk like us.

Now, to be clear… I’m not saying that everyone who applies for a job deserves that job. But everyone deserves the dignity of work.

As stewards of workplaces, we play a role that is bigger than any one of us. Our focus should not be on keeping the “wrong” people out, but to bring more of the “right” people in.

And frankly, let’s consider what is reallymeant by “wrong”

Because in terms of potential employees, “wrong” or “unqualified” is sometimes just a substitute for “different.”

Finding the “right” in someone who looks “wrong” on paper forces us to consciously put our bias to the back and look at things… well … *differently***…**

Hello. My name is Alice Marie Johnson.

More than 2 decades ago, in desperation, I got involved with the wrong people, and did the wrong things.

I made the biggest mistake of my life.

In 1996, I was convicted for a first-time, non-violent drug offense.

My sentence was life in prison.

While behind bars, I lost both my parents. I lost the moments of watching my children grow up. I lost 21 years of my life.

But I was very fortunate.

My case was taken up by influential people who believed my sentence was too harsh. They took my cause to the highest office of the land, and I was granted clemency.

My good fortune did not stop there. After my release, I was able to find a new career…a new purpose.

But there are many more like me who are not so fortunate. After serving their debt to society, they are shut out— re-sentenced to joblessness and economic insecurity.

Like me, they only want to find their purpose—in the dignity of honest work. After my release, I have become a published author. My book, *“After Life: My Journey from Incarceration to Freedom,*” makes a compelling case for the need to give others a true second chance in life.

They have as much—or more—to offer as I do.

By hiring the formerly incarcerated, HR professionals like you can stop the cycle of poverty, unemployment, and recidivism.

When you give people second chances, you can change lives. *You* can create a better world.

**[Johnny returns to stage]**

[Johnny:] Thank you, Alice. I know it has taken a lot of courage for you to share your story so frankly. And I know it is still painful to remember. But we are so glad you shared it with us.

Alice is one of 700,000 people who are released from prison each year only to find themselves locked out of the labor market.

She is the 1 in 3 Americans who have a criminal record, and she is a true testament of the potential of all people to share their gifts.

Like people with criminal records, people with disabilities are not who you think they are.

Disability is complex, covering a rainbow of conditions and situations.

And their barriers are not just physical.

There are people with hidden disabilities throughout your workplaces now.

And even in this room.

But there are millions more waiting outside our workplaces.

What a waste of talent that we need now.

It’s time we put our biases aside and put this untapped talent back to work.

* They are not charity cases, grateful for our help.
* Nor are they superheroes, overcoming obstacles in a single bound.
* They do not need extra help from others to do their jobs.
* They are not costly to hire.
* They can become leaders, changemakers, and innovators in your organization.

They are like you in almost every way. And for some of you, they *are* you.

These talented individuals are true ambassadors for transforming workplaces. There are millions more proving themselves at work every day.

And I want to remind you again that not all disabilities are as visible or perceptible as these.

In your workplaces right now are people performing with invisible disabilities, like mental health challenges, chronic pain, epilepsy, ADHD, and other medical issues that have no outward signs.

They need to be supported and included equally.

And let me expand that further: People bring challenges to work that are much broader than disability.

Every person brings layers of personal adversities and histories with them as they seek their opportunity to succeed.

HR has the profound responsibility to empower them to be their best.

In this context, I want to take this moment to mention returning veterans, a key focus of SHRM and the SHRM Foundation, through our Veterans at Work Initiative.

So many vets returning to the workplace have a tough time finding the right job—and in many cases, *any* job.

Their resumes don’t look like anyone else’s and can be hard to translate into a civilian role. But they have skills you can’t find just anywhere, and they enhance every profession.

And that goes for our profession too.

In fact, if you are a member of the military, including active duty, guard, reserve, or veteran, I want to recognize you.

Could all members of the military please stand?

Thank you for your service, and for elevating our profession with your unique leadership skills.

Now I am going to urge you to think differently about another rich source of talent.

They experience more discrimination and exclusion in the workforce than just about anyone else. Ironically, they are also some of the most experienced talent you’ll ever turn away.

They’re called “overqualified” Or not likely to “fit in.” Or “unable to adapt.”

And we’re not just talking about septuagenarians or octogenarians.

We are talking about people over 50.

That’s about a third of you!

Age discrimination is starting to affect Generation X!

Four decades after the ADEA became law, nearly two-thirds of workers 55 to 64 years old say their age is preventing them from getting a job.

And over one-quarter of stable, longtime employees sustain at least one damaging layoff after turning 50.

Age discrimination in the workforce is not just illegal—and morally wrong, I’ll add—It is damaging to your bottom line and to your culture.

When we exclude older workers, we are also excluding a goldmine of work and life experience.

We miss out on the mentoring and idea exchange that only comes with a truly multigenerational workforce.

Age discrimination hurts society, and strains communities, our economy and our health care system. Unemployment sends older people into poverty and puts their health at risk.

Ageism is rampant in high-income countries like the U.S. especially.

Here in America, we place a premium on youth, vitality and “newness.” Aging is often seen as a debilitating process that robs people of these prized attributes.

Is that what you believe? Of course not. But beliefs are not actions.

Our workforces need to ACT.

We need to energetically recruit older workers—and develop the skills and prospects of senior talent already in your workplaces.

We need to explode the myths and trash the biases about who older workers are and what they can do.

Here is what an older workforce really looks like:

Age is a number. Let’s hire people for what they can do, better and differently than anyone else.

* *Different* is powerful.
* *Different* enables creative problem solving
* *Different* is how change happens.
* *Different* is what we all have in common.

All of these people—and the workers they represent—are the future of work.

If we want our workplaces to flourish, we need to include and develop them.

We need to give people who have made mistakes second chances, so they can be in place to help our organizations grow.

We need to give people with disabilities opportunities to show us all they know and all they can achieve.

And we need to eliminate age discrimination at work every time we see it, and value the experience and knowledge that can only be developed by time.

We are asking you to do more than tap into underused talent pools.

I am asking you, as HR professionals, to create the workplaces where everyone can thrive.

* Where everyone is valued.
* Where everyone learns.
* Where problems get solved, differences are resolved, and individuals can evolve.
* Where everyone shares in economic opportunity; family security; safer, stronger communities; and the fruits of a better world.

And where people spend thousands of good days that add up to good lives.

Join SHRM as we help create these better workplaces, led by HR professionals like each of you.

Thank you.

**Inclusion Begins in the Mirror**

**Inclusion 2019: Shifting Workplace Culture**

**October 28, 2019**

**New Orleans, Louisiana**

*Our 2019 diversity and inclusion conference occurred in a year of heightened awareness around sexual harassment and escalating political divisions in our country. Some members had raised objections to our invitation to New Orleans Saints quarterback Drew Brees to speak at this event and to our earlier inclusion of Ivanka Trump at our earlier Employment Law and Legislative Conference. It was important for me to challenge the notion that SHRM should reject certain voices because of political differences. Diversity of thought and experience is a valid inclusion issue, and HR leaders must have the courage to identify and explore our own inherent biases.*

The cobbler’s kids often have no shoes.

Today, I am in a room of really talented—very influential—Inclusion & Diversity professionals from some of the biggest employer brands on the planet.

We teach others about how to think about Inclusion & Diversity.

But we don’t realize how many biases (some conscious–some unconscious) we bring to work every day.

We don’t appreciate how many of our own employees are watching us—and modeling us—our good and our not-so-good actions.

So this morning I want you to hear what I’m saying… and question yourself.

To ultimately become someone who preaches *and* practices good and strong diversity and inclusion.

When is the last time you openly disagreed with someone at work?

* How many times do your values, beliefs and attitudes affect your attitude about others?
* How do you respond to conflicts around politics at work?
* What does being right really mean?
* What does inclusion reallylook like?

Maybe I should start with what inclusion does NOT look like.

And here I am going to give you some hard truth.

When we announced Drew Brees would be our keynote speaker, a group of HR professionals called for SHRM to exclude him because of his association with people who didn’t share their views on LGBTQ issues.

But Drew didn’t commit a crime. He wasn’t accused of harassing someone or discriminating against anyone. He was simply associated with a legitimate non-profit organization that holds a viewpoint that is different than theirs. And according to Drew, these are not even his views.

So he’s got to go? How about*that* for inclusion?

And here’s another example. A different small but vocal group of SHRM members have protested our public policy work in Washington because of their personal views about who sits in the White House.

Never mind that the U.S. is seeing a growing skills gap problem as so many potentially skilled workers continue to sit on the sidelines.

Forget the fact that right this minute, our schools are preparing students for jobs that may not exist a few years from now.

And disregard America’s desperate need for a world-class workforce where business must compete for top talent to survive.

Let’s postpone the need for public-private workforce development solutions that skill up our workforces.

Let’s sit down instead of standing up for what’s right in pay equity, harassment-free workplaces, and overburdensome policies that make HR’s job so challenging.

That’s the message being sent:

Because we disagree with the personal and political leanings of the guy in the Oval Office—despite the commitments we made to ourselves, our organizations and the people we serve—we should sit on the sidelines while others who know *far less* about today’s workplaces call the shots.

That’s not good policy, that’s bad politics.

As stewards of workplace culture, leaders of human potential, and flag-bearers of better workplaces, we sometimes aren’t aware of our biases, even when we have been called to be the example.

Excluding someone—or ourselves—because some people’s views or experiences are different from our own goes against the very focus of this gathering.

You have to wonder—if you feel this way about topics outside your organizations—does this bias show up in the workplace too?

And I’m not simply pointing a finger here. I have my own work to do too.

And that is why we are here today.

We are here for an honest, transformative take on what inclusion means—not just in our workplaces, but in ourselves.

And not only when we are like-minded, but especially when we disagree.

Welcome everyone to Inclusion 2019—the conference formerly known as D&I.

A lot has happened in this space.

Our notions of how workforce diversity impacts business and people have changed.

For a start, diversity—just diversity—doesn’t work.

You can hire the most multicultural, multi-generational workforce imaginable. But left alone, their differences are going to cause more problems than they solve.

So we are leading with inclusion at this conference.

Now maybe we should pause and unpack that word, *inclusion*.

Inclusion is a part of belonging. And belonging is one of the most basic needs in life (according to Maslow), just like food and shelter.

Belonging helps us see value in life and our work, and it helps us cope with stressful and painful situations.

And we know what inclusion looks like:

* Being invited to the right meetings.
* Having access to the tools and opportunities to shape outcomes.
* Having a seat at the table and a pathway to growth.
* And feeling part of the team.

But more deeply, inclusive workplaces do much more:

They give everyone the opportunity to succeed individually on their merits and inherent gifts.

Inclusive workplaces guide us to be conscious to our own biases and actions that may silence others.

They recognize when someone is being sidelined based on nothing more than how they look or what they believe.

When people are excluded, here’s what happens:

* They won’t do their best work.
* They won’t offer their best ideas.
* Their productivity decreases while absenteeism increases.
* They will leave.
* And even worse, some of them will stay while slowly ruining your brand.

Did you know that right now, there are many people at your organization who are thinking about leaving?

In fact, our data show about half of your workforce has considered making a move.

And it’s likely because of your workplace culture.

Is it because they don’t feel valued and included?

As the stewards of culture, you have the potential and power to engage your workforce. To set the tone for inclusion across the organization. And to give each employee a reason to stay and grow with you.

Earlier I asked you, “What does inclusion look like?”

Well, now I want to share with you what I call the five truths about inclusion—fundamental and powerful truths to achieve real inclusion at work:

1. **Proving the Presence of Respect**

What does it feel like to respect someone?

You believe that the person is worthy of your regard and attention because of the specific qualities and capabilities that they bring to your workplace.

What does it look like?

Acting in ways that show you are aware of your colleagues as complete individuals who deserve respect. You recognize that they have rights, opinions, wishes, experience, and competence.

Respect in the workplace is such an important element of inclusion. And when it is absent, toxicity blooms, and everyone loses.

SHRM’s new report, *The High Cost of a Toxic Workplace Culture*, shows that toxicity in the workplace is rampant.

Almost two-thirds of working Americans say they have endured a toxic workplace, and a quarter say they have experienced more than one!

Employee turnover due to workplace culture has cost American businesses $223 billion over the last five years.

We can do better.

We need to bring together People Managers, HR and other workplace leaders in common cause: to foster respectful workplaces.

1. **Valuing Strengths**

Everyone brings different strengths to the workplace, and each are valuable.

Some come with a true gift of talent. Others possess a strong work ethic, creativity, people skills, or sound project management.

How are you tapping into the strengths of your people and developing them?

This is something the SHRM Foundation is focusing on when it comes to inclusion of individuals with disabilities in America’s workforces. And our own research shows we have a lot more work to do in understanding how to leverage their distinct potential.

There is a sizable gap in knowledge among HR professionals in understanding disabilities in the workplace. More than half of us in HR have never participated in disability inclusion training, and that number increases to over 60 percent when we look at managers at work.

Which brings me to the third truth:

1. **Cultivating Inclusive Managers**

We know—and data from SHRM’s new Culture Report shows—that People Managers play an outsized role in organizational culture.

They are the ones who propagate the culture, for good or ill, laying the foundation for employees to succeed at work—or not.

As leaders, we must encourage People Managers to be deliberate about identifying and recognizing the unique strengths in their team. No one should be expected to “do it all,” but should be valued for their distinct abilities—which together compose talented teams that create a strong culture.

And there is plenty of room for improvement at the management level: One-third of U.S. workers claim their manager doesn’t know how to lead a team, and almost as many don’t trust their manager to treat them fairly. Another three in 10 say their manager doesn’t encourage a culture of open and transparent communication.

True inclusion at work doesn’t happen without managers who lead inclusive workplaces.

1. **Aspiring to an Intentional, Resilient Culture**

So, say you have great managers, and everyone gets along. Does that mean you have a truly inclusive workplace?

Don’t count on it.

Inclusive cultures aren’t static. All it takes is the addition of one toxic leader, reduction in force or public relations crisis to change everything.

So… be intentional about creating a resilient culture of inclusion that is built to last through transition.

Now, I’m also not saying that everyone should be included, all the time. Attempts to stretch your culture into one that includes absolutely everyone is going too far.

And let’s face it. That coworker who everyone knows should really just quit probably shouldn’t be invited to the meeting anyway. Not to mention those who bring their own brand of toxicity to work.

When you take the time to create a workplace culture that fits—fits your organizational values, your business priorities, your customer base, your local environment and your future plans—not everyone is going to belong in it.

1. **Evaluating Your Biases**

Finally…. biases!

We all have them!

And sometimes our bias is not only triggered by how someone looks, or where they come from, but also by how someone thinks.

So, when we ask employees to bring their authentic selves to work, do we mean it?

What if they voted for the other guy?

What if their deeply held beliefs run counter to your own?

What if you just fundamentally disagree on what you perceive as true or false?

In this hyper-politicized society we are in, more and more political bias is showing up at work, because more and more….we are talking about it at work. 42 percent of American workers say they have personally experienced political disagreements in the workplace.

We don’t have the right to be agreed with, but we have the right to be heard respectfully.

Inclusive workplaces encourage authentic dialogue about diversity, inclusion, acceptance, and belonging. They create space to challenge our thinking—yours and my own.

And here’s the thing:

No one is immune. We can’t be expected to rid ourselves of every vestige of our prejudices and bigotry. A lot of it was baked into us as children, and some of it is human nature. But we can be aware that we are not acting on it.

Let me remind you of a moment a few weeks ago when the nation sat up and took notice: Ellen DeGeneres was spotted with President George W. Bush at a baseball game.

It was jarring for many when they had to consider that two people from different backgrounds, who stand in stark disagreement on many issues close to their hearts, can actually be …friends.

What a powerful example they provided.

Some people didn’t like it. And I would ask those people to accept that this is a damaging bias they live with.

If you really want an inclusive culture, it starts with people in the room looking in the mirror and acknowledging their own intolerance.

I’ve found myself called to look in the mirror too.

Some time ago, when I was a hiring manager, I was interviewing candidates. One woman entered my office dressed completely in male attire: men’s shoes, a suit, a tie, the works.

I was a little shocked, and almost instinctively, I prepared to write her off for being different. I was uncomfortable. I didn’t understand her choices, so it was easy to reject her.

I had to face that in myself. I know better today.

Now what about you? What have you overcome? What have you changed your mind about? How have you evolved?

We can learn from each other that overcoming bias is possible!

We can keep each other honest.

Have you had to confront your own bias? About someone’s age, criminal record, appearance, political beliefs?

Over the course of the next three days, let’s talk about it, and learn from each other—starting right now.

Let’s put inclusion in action. You can start today to implement real, intentional inclusion at work, putting these five truths into practice.

What is one thing you intend to do right away, when you get home, to put these truths into practice and create a more inclusive culture in your workplace?

Just one thing. Take a minute and then write it down.

Then, so we can see and share our wealth of ideas, please stick it to the wall just outside of this room. I think we will see some really strong intentions we can put into practice.

Now before you start writing, let me leave you with this:

Despite increasing awareness about diversity, the world is as divided as it has ever been.

These divisions show up every day at work, and what happens at work spills over into home, family and society.

As humans, we are not good at compartmentalizing. That is why it is imperative that we— people who care about culture and our employees’ experiences—do everything we can to fix what’s wrong at work.

* To detoxify our workplaces.
* To learn to disagree without being disagreeable.
* To create intentional cultures of respect and inclusion.

When we do that, we also create places of positivity and solutions.

And when we create better workplaces, the people we serve can be better spouses, better parents, better friends, better citizens.

They go out and create a better world. Thank you for being part of this movement.

**What COVID-19 Has Taught Us**

**SHRM Paragon Labs Conference: Innovation in the Face of Adversity**

**Navigating COVID-19 Using Tech**

**May 29, 2020**

**Virtual**

*In May 2020, businesses were absorbing a new reality: Remote workplaces were going to be a long-term feature of the COVID-19 pandemic, and HR was leading the effort to maintain business continuity through people. I coined the term “workplace first responders” to describe HR’s role during the upheaval. In this presentation, I outlined the short- and long-range future of work to predict what COVID-inspired changes were here to stay, and how HR can strive to balance lives and livelihoods in the difficult decisions we were making in real time.*

Good afternoon to all of you. I hope you are safe and well.

This summit on innovation represents one of the positive aspects of what we are all going through—the prospect of creating better workplaces and a better world because of what we are learning from COVID-19.

According to the latest Edelman Trust Barometer, two-thirds of people surveyed globally believe the pandemic will bring new ideas and improvements to how we work, live, and treat each other.

I agree with them. But we also have a lot of work ahead of us as business leaders and people experts.

There has never been a better time for the mission of Paragon Labs. SHRM launched this new division late last year as a conduit to discover, engage, and invest in start-up technologies that will empower HR to create better workplaces through innovation.

Even before the massive disruption of the pandemic, the workplace was changing drastically— and faster than many could plan for.

Now, we expect the Labs to move from strength to strength, armed with what we are learning every day from COVID-19—about our workforce, our future, and our evolving role as HR professionals.

So, what has COVID-19 taught us?

It has taught us that in times of widespread community crisis, HR serves asworkplace first responders.

As you have come to find out, this is tough, emotional work. But this is a tough, skilled, compassionate profession.

Everywhere I look, I see hardworking HR professionals rising to the challenge, even as they strive to balance their own families, health, and remote work.

In just a matter of days, we ushered our workforces into a COVID-19 world of telework, virtual meetings and, unfortunately, furloughs and layoffs.

We had to divide people into “essential” and “non-essential.”

We had to “fly blind” when making financial decisions after our budgets, projected revenues and growth strategies were shattered.

We had to answer employees’ many questions—and calm their fears.

And we’ve had to make terribly hard decisions that directly impact people’s lives and livelihoods.

We cannot underestimate this last point. Things are bad out there right now, and they will get worse. But they are going to get better too.

As difficult as it is, all business leaders must look at the current economic climate with clear, unflinching eyes.

Last week, with our partner, Oxford Economics, SHRM released the next in our series of research findings:

* By the end of 2020, only 20 percent of metropolitan areas and **11 percent** of smaller communities will recover employment levels seen before the outbreak;
* Nearly four in 10 smaller communities are not expected to recover pre-COVID-19 employment levels by the end of 2024.
* $1.3 trillion in income has been lost by the U.S. workforce, 20 percent ($260 billion) of which represents earnings from employed workers.

Let me put that 1.3 trillion in perspective.

A stack of 1 million hundred-dollar bills would be 3.3 feet high—the height of a chair.

A stack of 1 trillion? That would tower 631 miles high—2.5 times higher than the International Space Station.

But let’s bring it back down to earth. Because 1.3 trillion isn’t just a number: It’s mortgages, rent, car payments, student loans, college tuition, retirement savings.

It’s food and medicine.

In parts of the world, starvation is going to reach levels we haven’t seen since last century.

This is our reality—and it underscores the urgency as we move to safely reopen and return to work, here in California and across the country.

This is HR’s time to be strategic and lead our people and our society through this struggle. We are the ones who will put our workplaces back together—better than ever before.

COVID-19 has also taught us that we can’t do it without leaning into data and technology.

Data has never been more important in the work of HR.

Beyond information about the virus itself, we must understand exactly what has changed—and will change—in business operations, budgets, and workforce management. And we need to know how it will change.

This is essential. Every step of the recovery journey demands that employers strike a delicate balance between people and profits. Every step of the way, the American business community must get it right if we are to come out the other side, ready to return to our role as the world’s leading innovator.

Every employer is being asked to make critical, seemingly impossible trade-offs during this time, so they must be equipped with the best data available.

That’s why SHRM’s research team has been working overtime, surveying HR professionals, employers, business leaders, and others, to find the best approaches to ramping up again and adapting to the new realities.

Just about every other week, we are releasing new research on all aspects of the pandemic, from the impact on small businesses to the emerging mental health crisis—where once again, HR will be positioned as a first responder.

What else has COVID-19 taught us? That workplaces have changed forever.

First, where work happens will be different.

Business travel and large-scale meetings will be curtailed.

More imperatively, remote work will become a widely accepted alternative to onsite work.

Twitter and Slack have announced that their workforces can permanently work remotely, and other tech companies will probably follow suit.

And why not? Think of the money companies can save on office space, parking, security, utilities, cleaning, coffee, and all the other things that people need at work.

But our data show that not everyone wants to work remotely, and while about one-third of people working from home today say they are more productive, the other two-thirds say they are either as productive—or less productive.

Just last week, I was having a conversation with the CEO of a large media company. When he learned I was from SHRM, he asked me what I thought of the approach Twitter and other tech companies are taking toward remote work.

I told him it all boils down to culture. And every culture is different. What may work for Jack Dorsey at Twitter may not work for other companies that are fueled by face-to-face teamwork.

Let us remember what happens in the office. This is where diverse individuals come together to strategize, collaborate, and generate social interactions that turn the office into an idea factory.

That’s how sparks of innovation catch fire.

Still, there is no right or wrong when it comes to remote work and other cultural expectations.

The problem comes when business leaders rush to follow the example of others rather than being intentional and authentic about their own culture.

In fact, this moment of crisis is also the moment to test your culture. Do your guiding principles still work under pressure? Do your leaders and teams reflect what you believe in as an organization?

It’s time to be truthful about who you are, not who you want to be or what your brand says.

When you have a full understanding of your organization’s true culture, you can own it, recruit for it and promote for it.

COVID-19 is also teaching us new strategies for talent management.

For example, a trend toward remote work will make finding key talent easier when we can tap into workers located anywhere in the world. That prized performer in New York City can easily be recruited to your team in Silicon Valley.

And we will innovate training and professional development through technology. Virtual learning—augmented by new applications of virtual reality—will come into its own and change the landscape of education.

Employees will be able to learn quickly and as needed. I believe that COVID-19 has indirectly moved us closer to solutions for our country’s skills gaps—when we can upskill and reskill 24/7 from anywhere.

COVID-19 has also taught us that telemedicine works. Especially for those seeking psychological and emotional support. This will be important for HR as we brace for the ongoing mental health impact on workers. Employers will be solution providers, expanding support for mental health and wellness in the workplace.

Now I am going to challenge HR leaders directly on the subject of innovation.

Workplace technology, including HR tech, has been booming for years. But the HR profession still has a reputation for being tech-averse.

It’s time for HR leaders to go through a soul-searching process. If your HR team doesn’t know the tech, it’s time to learn it and become very comfortable with it.

Technological innovation is part of the HR job now, so everyone must pick up the reins and learn to use it to create better workplaces.

Technology is HR’s most important partner, and can solve our greatest workplace challenges.

SHRM and Paragon Labs are creating a bridge between HR and technology, but we need you. We need to hear your problems and your best ideas for solving them. This is a two-way street.

Finally, let me leave you with this.

Back in the 2009 financial crisis, everyone turned to chief financial officers to lead business recovery.

At this critical time, CEOs are turning to us in HR for answers. Using our best data and tech, we are the ones who can achieve the right balance of keeping employees safe and productive while protecting and preserving the business. CEOs are counting on our speed, our expertise, and our creativity in reshaping the workplace for resistance and recovery.

We as a profession are prepared to lead our workplaces into the new normal, and to make them, and the world of work, even better.

Let’s use this opportunity—and what COVID-19 is teaching us—to really think about how we can leverage technology, our cultures, and each other to rebuild our workplaces, and our society.

Thank you.

**We’ve Seen This Movie Before: Why Diversity Efforts Fail**

**Power to Fly Diversity Reboot**

**June 15, 2020**

**Virtual**

*When I accepted the invitation to speak at this women’s leadership conference earlier in the year, I intended to talk about the impact of COVID-19 and how our society is uniting with the message of “We are in this together.” But the George Floyd murder, three weeks prior to the event, showed the world that our society was hopelessly divided on the matter of race and social justice. So I switched gears. I wanted my audience to accept that workplace diversity programs were outdated and ineffective, and why. I wanted to explain what business leaders must do to create real change. And I wanted to inspire them to step up with courage and commitment, empowering people to talk about race and bias at work. If we do not act boldly and fearlessly now, we will find ourselves right where we started, enacting an endless cycle of injustice, violence, and estrangement.*

Good afternoon everyone, and thank you so much for inviting me to this very important Summit.

When I received the offer several weeks ago, I had a much different speech in mind.

I was going to talk to you about the impact of COVID-19 and how our society is uniting with the message of “We are in this together.” About how businesses and workforces are aligning to get back to work and create safer, smarter, better workplaces for a better post-COVID world.

But in a matter of days, society split again. And the discord will naturally be reflected in our workplaces and on our teams.

I commend Power to Fly for organizing this event, months before the tragedy of George Floyd.

You generously planned for these important conversations, and invited me to speak about diversity from the perspective of our workplaces.

I am going to talk to you for a few minutes about the realities of inclusion and diversity in today’s difficult climate. But then I want to spend just as much time listening to you. So I will save as much time as we can in this hour for your questions and concerns about what’s happening in our workplaces and our world.

First. I want to share that I am not a diversity expert. People make assumptions about me because I am a black CEO of an HR association.

The black community, like every other, is not monolithic. And like each one of you, I only know what I know from my own personal experiences. No one can or should carry the weight for an entire community.

And that is why we rely on the expertise of skilled, experienced Inclusion & Diversity professionals, who can synthesize the experiences of many across the workplace and make I&D meaningful for all.

The division we are witnessing, in our streets and in our workplaces, is probably the most strident call to action of our careers.

And sadly, it seems like the only time our society really focuses on racism is when America is in flames.

And it keeps happening.

Almost 30 years ago, it was Rodney King.

Twenty years ago it was Amadou Diallo.

And over the past decade it was Trayvon Martin, Freddie Gray, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Philando Castile, Sandra Bland, and so many more.

Today, it‘s Ahmad Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd.

And like all those other times, as people split into factions, business leaders start to fret again about whether they are doing enough for inclusion and diversity in the workplace.

Until it falls down the priority list once again.

That cycle of outrage, then promises, then amnesia is the real tragedy.

And shame on us.

Racism is still rampant in America’s workplaces. It has never stopped.

I am not talking about “microaggressions,” or unconscious bias in hiring and promotion. Routine abuse, threats, and racial epithets are still happening with depressing regularity in the workplace.

Ask any employment lawyer.

And in the majority of discrimination cases that make it to court, the employer knew about the unacceptable behavior and either chose to do nothing to end it, or even participated.

Today, all over the country, leaders, managers, and coworkers are trying to have difficult conversations about race—and I commend them. We are all trying to get comfortable with being uncomfortable.

But there is one conversation all organizations should be having: Why, after decades of vigorous, evidence-based diversity programming, are we not getting the results we want? Why are we failing?

I believe there are three reasons:

One: Organizations are not putting sufficient resources into their I&D effort.

This takes significant financial investment. But it also takes investment in the form of visible, visceral commitment from the CEO and the entire C-suite. This is not just the job of the chief diversity officer.

Effective I&D also requires investing in the right expertise. Now, more than ever, organizations need to spend money and time to hire smart, academically prepared, and experienced Inclusion & Diversity experts. It’s not something people should just get promoted into because they are an HR person of color.

Look at it this way: When you hire a chief financial officer, it’s going to be a really rigorous process. You may start with an executive search firm that specializes in financial leadership. You may look across your networks and industry to see you can recruit the best in the business. And if you are a Fortune 500 company, you are going to pay them at minimum $500,000.

I would argue that today, your chief diversity officer is just as—or more—valuable to a company. But they tend to top out at $300,000 in the largest corporations. But there are many chief diversity officers out there who are highly trained, experienced, and worth twice that.

If you believe in diversity, spend like it.

**S**econd: Be aware of the differences between inclusion and diversity. And live them.

Let’s face it. Hiring a diverse workforce is easy. But if those new hires are excluded, and sidestepped by the culture, we’ve achieved nothing. And we may have done some damage.

Diversity isn’t the goal. It’s the outcome of the organization’s efforts to cast a wide net for talent and to value people’s unique capabilities in whatever package they come in.

You see, without the I, the D is never going to be possible.

At SHRM, which serves a profession that is predominantly white, we have had back-to-back African-American board chairs, male and female. And our previous CEO was also black.

Within SHRM’s U.S. employee population, 64 percent of employees are women, and 46 percent are non-white. We also actively source candidates from underrepresented populations, including veterans, the formerly incarcerated, and people with disabilities.

So we check the box on diversity. But that’s not the same as inclusion. That’s the piece we all need to get right.

In the week following the murder of George Floyd, I knew it was imperative that I speak to my staff about it. As a Black man, and as a CEO, I needed to issue an unambiguous statement that SHRM stands in solidarity against injustice, racism, and discrimination.

I urged the SHRM Team to commit fully to the work we do for our members every day to help them bring about positive change in workplaces that spills out into the world.

That includes rooting out bias in the workplace, standing against pay inequities, standing with people and groups who have been traditionally locked out of the workplace, elevating the importance of inclusion, and using our platform for good, around the U.S. and around the world.

SHRM’s inclusion commitment actually begins with the workplace we build for ourselves.

To give you just a snapshot, our benefits are inclusive of same-sex spouses or partners, and we plan team activities all year to promote empowerment and belonging, such as International Women’s Day and Women’s History Month, Black History Month, Pride Month, etc.

And because inclusion is not just a matter of race, gender, or orientation, we also recognize and support the hidden differences that people bring to work with them. An example of that is a recent panel we organized during Mental Health Awareness Month to allow employees to speak freely and learn from each other about their mental health journeys.

We also recognize that people’s beliefs and political affiliations are also a form of diversity.

I am most proud of what we call SHRM’s “Culture Club”—a hand-picked group comprising a diverse representation of the employee population the provides input directly to me on what they are seeing in our internal culture. And I will tell you that these conversations can be both uncomfortable and incredibly enlightening.

Some organizations can’t succeed because, although their workforce is diverse, they are not inclusive. Others are focused on being inclusive, but their leadership makeup tells another story.

I’m thinking of one multinational corporation based on the west coast—no names mentioned—which has spent years telling their customers how they are so focused on sustainability, expanding human potential, and fostering a creative and, yes, diverse, workforce.

That’s their brand.

But when you go to their website and check out the bios of the C-Suite (which I do a lot), every one of their chiefs is white. And mostly male.

Are you telling me this mega-corporation can’t do better on diversity?

Sure, this company, like almost every major U.S. employer, has African-American leaders on their board. And that is great. But besides the CEO, the board of directors doesn’t hire people.

You know who does? The CTO. The CFO. The chief marketing officer. And every People Manager below them.

You know it and I know it. We need diversity commitments from the people who meet every day, not once a quarter.

And that raises the third failing we see in I&D. Inauthenticity.

When it comes to workplace diversity, we need to hold the entire organization more accountable to the promises they make in public and to their workforce.

Otherwise, let me tell you what that African-American employee feels when she looks around and sees all those white faces making all the important decisions in this so-called “woke” organization.

She recognizes the hypocrisy. And she is angry. She is sad. She loses confidence.

I have been there.

It gets into your very psyche and erodes your self-esteem. It brings up those feelings of being “less than.”

It’s like that expression, “Don’t tell me you love me, show me.”

I am so tired of organizations saying the right things, writing six-figure checks to the right causes, and rolling out campaigns about how “woke” they are, but they are not committed to the work.

And I&D *is* work. It’s tough and it’s delicate.

And it brings up extremely complicated issues. Not only around race, but also religion, gender, culture, and so many more.

* We have rampant ageism in the workplace. But it’s one of the most subtle and prolific types of discrimination.
* In more than half of U.S. states, you could still be fired if you are LGBT. Shocking! But thankfully this isn’t the case as of today! Just this morning, the Supreme Court ruled that workers cannot be fired for being gay or transgender.
* People with disabilities who want to work find it extremely difficult to find opportunities, probably because more than half of the people who hire them—People Managers—have not participated in any kind of disability inclusion training.
* Gender discrimination and sexual harassment claims are on the rise. And two years after the #MeToo movement ignited, 61 percent of male managers admit they are uncomfortable mentoring, working alone with, or socializing with a female colleague.

That is extremely harmful, because when women are not on the radar, it limits their opportunity for advancement. And the entire organization suffers.

If I may, I’d like to humbly offer some advice to the many women leaders who are on this call:

Continue to cultivate and support other women leaders. But you can achieve your objective by also including men in your mentoring.

I will quote SHRM’s Chief of Staff and Corporate Counsel, Emily Dickens, herself an accomplished black female executive and attorney:

“We can advance female leadership by working harder to develop men to be successful leaders and mentors of women. We can create confident, empathetic, successful men who will someday chart a course of leadership for our daughters and granddaughters.”

So to recap:

* Invest real money into your I&D expertise.
* Be intentional about both sides of inclusion and diversity throughout your organization.
* Commit fully, be accountable, and be authentic.

I began by talking about the history of black lives cut short. And when this happens, our country strongly reacts.

This reactivity happens in the workplace too. When incidents occur, HR reacts. Leadership reacts. Employees react.

And that reaction can be damaging to everyone.

We need to be proactive, not reactive.

We have that opportunity now. We can use this moment as a catalyst. We can use this moment to all do our part to fix our company cultures to be what we all want them to be.

Remember, we have been here before.

It’s like *Nightmare on Elm Street*—1, 2, 3, 4, and 5. When the movie’s over, and we leave the theater, we know there will be another sequel, it will be more egregious, and we won’t have to wait long.

This has to stop.

Shame on us if, in 2025 ,we find ourselves in the same nightmare again, wondering why bias and racism persist in our workplaces and still puzzled about went wrong.

Because we know.

You can help stop bias, at least in your workplaces. Those of you who are executives—you can stop it. Those of you who manage people——you can stop it. Those of you who are “just” employees—You can stop it.

*We*can stop it.

**Building Our Empathy Muscle**

**State of the Society Address 2020**

**November 20, 2020**

**Virtual**

*It was the end of a strange, difficult year. Lives had been turned upside down by a global pandemic. The murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and other Black Americans at the hands of law enforcement had sent outraged citizens into the streets. And the most divisive election season in living memory still had everyone on edge. High emotion flooded our workplaces, and people were trying to have difficult conversations about injustice and ideology. The lack of empathy in our society was very much on my mind. I truly believe that if businesses, led by HR, can build the empathy muscles of our leaders, managers, and employees in workplaces, we can mend the gaps of a larger society torn apart. We can create better workplaces and a better world.*

Here at SHRM, the year 2020 is one none of us will forget.

On one historic day in March, SHRM headquarters went dark.

But despite a global pandemic, economic uncertainty, strident calls for racial equity, and a historically divisive election, nothing at SHRM stopped—or even slowed down.

Every SHRM employee, and every SHRM family, saw life disrupted overnight. From conference planning and business travel to summer vacations and graduations, plans were turned upside down. And workloads doubled.

The SHRM team adjusted quickly, reimagining projects and functions, having difficult conversations about injustice, and forging ahead into the unknown.

We invented new ways to keep our remote workforces engaged, and new ways to ensure we could return to work safely and confidently.

We figured a lot of it out on the fly—our guiding principles and strong culture leading the way.

The SHRM culture we have been cultivating so carefully enabled us to reach out to steady each other and stretch to look around the next corner.

And through the chaos of this year, SHRM and our staff continue to lift up our members.

Day in and day out, wherever you are, we are *here*. To answer our members’ calls and emails. Creating new knowledge and research to help you make critical decisions. Continuing our work to elevate this profession we all love.

I have never been prouder or more grateful for Team SHRM. Each of them are integral to the work we do to bolster your efforts and support your work as volunteer leaders. We will continue to provide everything you need to guide you throughout the year—every year.

Good morning, good afternoon, or good evening—from wherever you are tuning in.

And welcome to SHRM’s first-ever virtual State of the Society Address.

I hope you enjoyed the quick tour of our 5th floor, and meeting some of the team.

In previous years during this meeting, many of you have been able to visit us at SHRM headquarters, so we wanted to give you a tiny taste of that.

One thing that hasn’t changed this year is that I have the great privilege of presenting the prestigious Michael R. Losey Excellence In Human Resource Research Award.

And this year’s award goes to a true human resources superstar—and as close to an HR household name as there is. Of course, I am talking about Dr. Dave Ulrich.

His work has shaped the HR profession as we know it—he’s been called the “father of modern HR” for his thought leadership in HR outcomes, governance, competencies, and practices.

As a leadership expert, he has made a career of introducing fresh new ideas to leading people and organizations—including connecting leadership with customers, measuring leadership effectiveness, and showing how it shapes investor expectations.

Dave is the Rensis Likert Professor at the University of Michigan’s Ross School of Business and a partner at the consulting firm RBL Group.

Dave is a prolific author of 30 books and a popular speaker known to audiences in 90 countries. He’s given workshops for over half of the *Fortune* 200; coached the world’s top business leaders; and earlier this month was named a Distinguished Fellow in the National Academy of Human Resources.

Dave Ulrich’s contributions to shaping HR into a leadership profession cannot be overstated. I am so happy to honor him with SHRM’s highest research honor, the Losey Award. Dave, thank you for all you have done to make this great profession what it is today.

My friends, this has been a year for the books.

Looking back to where we were in January is truly surreal. And can confidently tell you that the State of our Society is agile, resilient and ready for the future.

As you just saw in our 2020 “highlight reel,” SHRM has been deeply involved in the critical workforce issues of the day. I am so proud of how our chapters and councils so quickly rolled out and amplified our resources for Navigating COVID-19, and for driving racial injustice and bias out of the workplace through the Together Forward @Work comprehensive research and response platform.

Even before the pandemic emerged, we were out front on closing the skills gap, working with business leaders and policymakers to remove barriers that leave some of the best available talent on the outside looking in.

Our “When Work Works Against Us” campaign tackled hidden bias, exclusion, ageism, toxic work environments, and other constraints that keep individuals from performing their best at work and even driving them to more inclusive workplaces.

We couldn’t afford it then, and—even with higher unemployment rates—we can’t afford it now.

As you just heard from Wendi Safstrom, the SHRM Foundation has been a major player in these efforts to bring attention to untapped talent like older workers, veterans, people with disabilities, and the formerly incarcerated. I’m really proud of the incredible fundraising and partnerships the Foundation Team has gone after this year.

I also want to tell you how excited we are about Paragon Labs, SHRM’s new innovation lab and venture capital arm. By partnering with startups in the workplace technology space, we will unlock the potential of individuals and organizations to shape the future of work in areas like performance management, learning and development, and the employee experience.

I can also report that the State of the Society is financially sound.Despite the disruptions of a global pandemic, SHRM’s financial position is exceptionally positive. Our risk management strategies have enabled us to withstand the impact to our business, and we feel comfortable that we can seamlessly continue our services to members and stakeholders. We don’t know what 2021 will bring, but we are ready to maximize efficiencies.

Although we had to miss our Annual Conference, we moved other signature events to an all-virtual format, and I am proud that our members have come right along with us, even growing in numbers.

In fact, last month’s Inclusion conference attracted a record number of participants. And to whet your appetites for SHRM21 in Chicago, we have launched “Tune in Tuesdays”—monthly virtual events featuring fresh perspectives from workplace experts, curated news you can use, and solutions focused on all things work.

One of the best things about social distancing—if I may be optimistic—is that I have been able to join many more state council and chapter events this summer and fall. I’ve traveled virtually to Hawaii, Bahamas, Alaska, Michigan, Florida, and too many more to mention. I thank all of you who invited me.

I have also been able to bring SHRM’s thought leadership on the COVID response, DE&I, Second Chances and other issues to many more external audiences, nationally and globally, from the EEOC and National Association of Manufacturers to YouTube influencers and the International Organization of Employers.

One thing is clear: CEOs and CHROs across industries are hungry for our guidance in creating safe, inclusive, better workplaces.

I’m happy to report that Membership and Certification are moving full steam ahead, despite the complications of the pandemic.

SHRM Membership has proven incredibly resilient during the unavoidable events this year.

Despite no discounting, a dues increase, and a dramatic changes in unemployment rates, our member numbers have remained steady with a slight uptick in Enterprise memberships.

SHRM certification and credentials continued to prove their value and popularity this year.

For the first time in SHRM certification history, more than 30,000 people were granted eligibility to take either the SHRM-CP or the SHRM-SCP exam.

In another milestone, we achieved 111,000 total certified professionals, with 72 percent recertifying their SHRM-CP or SHRM-SCP this year.

Continuity in testing was a priority for SHRM, and by May we had pivoted to live remote proctoring as an option, enabling examinees to test from the security and comfort of their homes.

And in June, we introduced a new program allowing certified professionals to earn Professional Development Credits for work they do to support their organizations and maintain business continuity in response to COVID-19.

I’m especially proud of how we have been able to grow certification among military members, veterans, and military families—by 945 percent!

We also introduced student pricing for the certification exam to match student membership pricing.

Thanks to all of, you, I know you each had some hand in these great numbers.

On the policy front, many of you heard earlier this week from Emily Dickens, head of government affairs, sharing our policy platforms and plans going forward.

Following any election, SHRM’s policy team is extremely busy. There are a number of newly elected congressional and state representatives who look more and more like America. Our team is looking forward to meeting each of them and introducing them to SHRM’s expertise and leadership.

In the time I have today, I can only give a snapshot of what has been a consequential year—in many ways a good year—for SHRM.

We owe this success to all of you. Everywhere, I see our volunteer leaders rising to incredible challenges, even as you try to manage your own personal obstacles.

Thank you for your continuing commitment to SHRM and our profession, even when it has been hard.

Together, I believe we have profoundly elevated the profession, and demonstrated how HR is the key to better workplaces for a better world—in times of prosperity and adversity.

Now, I’d like to move from the State of the Society, to the state of our own, lower case, society.

This is something all HR professionals should be deeply aware of and integrating into our day-to-day work.

The state of our human society is ailing, and has been for some time.

There is a malaise.

* Suicide rates have risen 25 percent in 20 years.
* Reports of domestic violence have risen sharply.
* One in four people SHRM surveyed feel down and depressed *often*.
* Our recent research, the Journey to Equity & Inclusion, found that 20 percent of U.S. workers feel unvalued at work. For Black workers, it’s one-third.
* Not undervalued. *Unvalued.*
* People have lost faith in our oldest institutions.

We all feel it. People are sad and scared.

This is not just because of the Black Swan events of this year.

* It’s not just the disruption of a global pandemic, as terrible as it has been for so many. We know there is an end point coming. People are going back to their workplaces, and as many as 40 percent never left them.
* Our economy has suffered, but we didn’t get to the Depression-era rates of unemployment the doomsayers predicted.
* It’s not just that we have racial strife. Although what we have seen this year has challenged us to ask more of everyone. Still, injustice, violence, civil rights protests, and counter-protests have been in the public consciousness for more than 70 years.
* It’s not economic uncertainty. Our fortunes rise and fall with regularity in this country.

We have been going down this path for a while.

We have a truly American problem.

We have an empathy deficit.

A gap in goodwill.

For a lot of reasons we can point to—political divisions, the isolation made easy by technology, the deterioration of civility—we have given up on understanding the hearts of our fellow humans. We’ve lost the ability to look through others’ eyes, to walk in their shoes.

How did we arrive at this empathy gap?

Me versus you.

We are increasingly tribal as a society. And we live in a world of separate identities.

If it’s not red vs. blue.

* It’s men vs. women.
* Urban vs. rural.
* Black vs. White vs. Brown
* Immigrant vs. Native
* Blue collar vs white collar
* Millennial vs. Baby Boomer

Even more insidious, underlying this bifurcation are messages like:

* “If you aren’t with me, you’re against me.”
* “I’m right, so that makes you wrong”
* “You’re not like me, so I don’t like you”
* “Someone like you hurt me—so I’ll hurt you back.”

*Lack of empathy* is widespread because *lacking empathy* is extremely easy these days. It takes no thought and it takes no sacrifice to reject or invalidate someone else. Much of it can be done quite handily on the anonymous Internet.

Look at the media we consume. It has become so fragmented, we can curate exactly the right messages that make us feel good or feel aggrieved—depending on what entertains us.

We don’t even have to *know* what the other side’s opinion or experience is. As long as it’s different, it’s fair game.

The empathy deficit shows up every day at work. Much of the resurgence of DEI programming in the wake of the George Floyd killing was supposed to encourage open conversation and mutual understanding—but often it bypassed empathy.

Well-meaning programs devolve into grievance sessions. A way for one group to beat up on another in a so-called “safe space,” rather than listening and trying to relate to the other’s experiences.

Look, no one ever changed anyone else’s mind by convincing them they are wrong.

This is why SHRM’s Together Forward @Work platform focuses so much on having difficult conversations with smart guardrails.

With boundaries, discussions don’t turn into debates, people aren’t punished for their opinions.

HR, as curators of workplace culture, are the ones to set expectations for these conversations so they are actually effective.

Another reason we have an empathy gap: I want it *my* way.

For years, we’ve seen fellow Americans face off nose to nose, shouting at one another over ideology.

But deep down, we really want the same thing. To make a decent living. To take care of our families. To enjoy personal freedom. To end this [damn] virus.

But we each want to do it *our* way. Although we have the same goals, we aren’t unified by them.

Because we have been conditioned to think only of ourselves—the opposite of empathy.

Society is now all about the individual. We’ve become a “have it your way” culture, A Burger King culture.

The work environment encourages this. We have conditioned employees to expect an individualized experience. They want tailored health and retirement plans. They want customized training and development, and growth pathways.

But once upon a time, societies —and politics—did not celebrate the individual above all. They were grounded in the notion of a common good and collective responsibility.

That’s because we as human beings naturally want to find shared ground.

I bring this up a lot when I talk about DE&I and the nature of inclusion. When you meet a stranger, what’s the first thing you do?

You start looking for things in common.

Where did you grow up?

Where did you go to school?

Do you know my cousin \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_?

That search for commonality is what enabled early humans to survive as a species, when isolation meant death and extinction.

It was about including people in the tribe, discovering commonalities, as well as unique skills

they bring to the unit.

This is why empathy is not necessarily something we can teach or learn. It’s inherent in human nature. And it’s more like something we should exercise.

Empathy is a muscle we all have. But we need to strengthen it.

It won’t surprise you to hear me say, HR has to do something to reverse the empathy deficit in the workplace. To close the gap. To work the muscle.

Empathy is not a soft skill. It’s a business skill. It’s what enables people to work cooperatively with others who have very different experiences, preferences, styles, and opinions.

In measuring empathy in organizations, researchers focus on the behavior found there. And it’s on a downward slide.

* Employees’ and HR professionals’ ratings of their own organizations’ empathetic behaviors have fallen steadily since 2018.
* 91 percent of CEOs say their own company is empathetic, but only 68 percent of employees agree.

I’ve chosen the VLBM to talk publicly about the empathy deficit in the workplace for the first time.

It’s not just because HR needs to be more empathetic. In fact, HR outperforms other functional leaders in empathy-related skills like building organizational talent, coaching, developing others, and leading teams.

That’s not it. It’s because, you, volunteer leaders, have the position and power to close the gap and build up the atrophied empathy muscles of our organizations and workplaces.

So what can you do?

First, You are the eyes, ears, and hands of your local employee and business communities. I ask you to consistently make the business case for better, more empathetic workplaces.

The business case is really a talent case

I’ve just seen some research about Gen Z, who are now entering the workplace.

* 83 percent say they would choose an employer with a strong culture of empathy over an employer offering a slightly higher salary. That’s compared to 75 percent of other employees.

* 79 percent would choose an empathetic employer even if it meant changing their role, industry, or career path.

* 83 percent would consider leaving their current organization for a similar role at a more empathetic organization.

That’s all we need. Our future talent having another reason to leave because of workplace culture.

Second,make the connection between empathy and performance in your organizations. The Center for Creative Leadership’s research found that empathy in the workplace is positively related to job performance.

HR leaders can identify the intersections where empathy and performance come together.

And standing at those intersections are your People Managers. So give their empathy muscles a workout.

When asked who has the most impact on building a culture of empathy, employees’ top response was their manager—not their CEO, their co-workers, or their HR leaders.

That’s why empathy is such a large part of SHRM’s People Manager Qualification.

These days, with so many people working away from each other, Managers are on the front lines when people are struggling with work or stress. This is new for them.

Think about pre-COVID, How involved did we get with how people were managing their personal lives at home? We had responses for workplace harassment, but not for domestic abuse. For administering Family and Medical Leave, but not for supporting people juggling work, childcare, eldercare, and home schooling and maybe even an out-of-work partner.

When a parent has to come to work and leave the children home to learn on their own, that parent is not bringing all of themselves to the job. And those children may not be getting the best preparation for their future. And they are *our* future.

Now this is a manager’s concern, which makes it very much an HR concern. The lines between work and home aren’t blurred—they are nonexistent.

An empathetic manager’s actions can be as simple as:

* Watching for signs of overwork and stress in others.
* Showing sincere interest in the needs, hopes, and dreams of their reports.
* Being willing to break the “office wall” and offer help with personal problems.
* Showing compassion for personal loss and cheering for personal achievement.

Beyond managers, there is a whole reservoir of empathetic people all around your workforce. Do you know who they are?

Earlier this year, SHRM had all of our employees take the Clifton Strengths assessment. It was a great exercise to learn about the gifts and passions of each of our team members.

One member of our HR team had the idea to connect together the 20 or so employees who scored empathy as one of their top three strengths. And they meet every other Monday on Zoom to talk about manifesting empathy and understanding into our day-to-day work.

Finally, volunteer leaders, you can steer your councils and chapters to provide programs and resources that promote empathy and belonging in your local business community.

Empathy is at the heart of so many of the resources and platforms we have been developing for members and the entire HR profession. You saw many of them featured in the opening video and I urge you to share these resources and ideas everywhere.

* What is empathy, but getting talent back to work, and ensuring that people who have made mistakes get a second chance?
* And making sure that older workers, people with disabilities, veterans, and others locked out of the workplace have equitable opportunities to succeed in a job?
* What is empathy but guiding difficult conversations about racial justice and equity at work—conversations that can change lives?
* What is empathy but making sure that inclusive workplace cultures extend to differing political opinions?

Empathy requires us to put the *we* before *me*.

Now more than ever, we need people to see for each other. To think for each other. To wear the metaphorical face covering—even if we are young and healthy, to protect those who aren’t.

The workplace is the best place to build empathy muscles. Because it’s where the working population spends the majority of their waking time. We have an opportunity to make an empathy impact that will be felt in homes and communities and around the world.

And now is the time. We have new leadership in all branches of Washington and in our states, a vaccine on the way, a New Year ahead, and a lot of ground to make up after the “Great Pause.”

Thank you Volunteer Leaders, for giving me the opportunity to talk about this issue that is so important. I hope you will take it out into the world with you.

You are the pulse of the profession, the heart of SHRM, and the empathy coaches who can build the muscles that ensure our workplaces are restored and ready for anything.

Thank you. And God bless.