



The Dangerous Pitfall for the C-Suite Abdicating Leadership (“Game Over”)

For DEI initiatives, the common danger for C-Suites is delegating too much responsibility too fast. In countering racism through DEI initiatives this is a very common danger, and it really does lead down the path to mediocrity. DEI initiatives are complex and emotionally charged. They require committed and sustained C-Suite leadership, including “modeling the way.”

Countering racism is simply too tough a challenge and operates on too many levels for the C-Suite to delegate too much responsibility too fast. DEI initiatives involve leadership at the individual, group, systemic, and cultural levels. Senior leadership must lead on all of those levels, particularly in the beginning.



DEI initiatives are a different challenge for C-Suites than the normal organizational challenges and require a surprising amount of courage and stretching by C-Suites to lead them effectively.

“In periods where there is no leadership society stands still.”
Harry S. Truman

Why the C-Suite Must Commit to Be Fully Present in the Lead Role

The C-Suite needs to be fully present in order to actively lead DEI efforts – a level of leadership that is required because DEI initiatives involve change at the cultural and systemic levels as well as the group and individual levels. And that leadership needs to be obvious and sustained in order to match the difficulty and complexity of the challenge. It is the foundation on which the extended leadership throughout the organization depends.

The C-Suite has perspective, leverage and can inspire the confidence needed. The C-Suite is positioned to see the potential benefits and it has the power to effectively lead the efforts to achieve them – from aligning the Board and organization design to leading the journey and removing barriers. No one else in the organization has the leadership leverage required. Nor can anyone else have the same impact in “modeling the way” and calling forth people’s best.

“When the C-Suite wiggles, everyone else gets whiplash.”

Without active sustained leadership from the C-Suite, organizations are pursuing mediocrity. There are some rare exceptions, but those exceptions are extraordinarily rare.

When the C-Suite leads, a web of aligned leaders and followers can support that lead. Supporting roles and structures, need to be in place to support the C-Suite. Key players to naturally be engaged early are usually Chief Diversity Officers, Diversity Councils, direct reports, key natural leaders, and selected outside experts.

It’s a “Warrior Challenge” for the C-Suite

There are lots of definitions of warriors’ codes, but a simple and inclusive one that is appropriate here is that a warrior “engages fully and with purpose and excitement.” This is the opposite of the approach where the C-Suite sits back to see what others can make happen.

A warrior approach is a full commitment of character and competence that is not diminished by fears of the experience or potential poor outcomes. It requires the

courage to “be all in” in the face of a journey that will be full of unknowns and daunting tests. Everyone will look to see if the C-Suite is all in.

“There are only two options regarding commitment; you’re either in or you’re out. There’s no such thing as life in-between.”

Pat Riley

It also requires an openness to learning – rapidly. Countering racism and leading DEI initiatives is new ground. Very few people have been here before and there is a good deal to learn. Racism has been built into our lives for 500 years and it lives in our communities, our organizations and ourselves. And much of how it lives is invisible – at an unconscious level or invisible because we don’t know how to look.

Therefore, part of the challenge for C-Suites is to take the lead and model rapid deep learning about racism – how it lives in the execs of the C-Suite, how it lives in the C-Suite as a group, how it lives in the organization, and how it lives in the community.

Remember. This learning is focused on a deep, complex, and emotionally charged topic. It is not the same as learning a skill or even a new role. It asks much more.

That is part of the “all in” warrior code and the best outcomes include an increased sense of positive urgency; increased confidence in being able to design effective DEI strategies and structures; and increased confidence in “modeling the way” and leading the required change. In other words, being “all in” should lead to an enhanced C-Suite confident in leading in new territory.

“If you are entrusted with bringing about change, you likely possess the knowledge needed to advance the organization and you might have a plan – but knowledge is not enough. You have to bring yourself to each interaction in a deeply authentic way. People don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.”

Doug Conant

“Modeling the Way”

No one in the organization will miss this modeling if it is done with some intention and transparency. The C-Suite is essentially saying, “As an organization we are going into the

unknown and we as the C-Suite are going first – with full commitment and confidence.” What others also hear – without it ever being said – is, “...and we expect you to follow us with full commitment.”

It’s simple. If the C-Suite is not modeling such a warrior approach, the organization will simply not take a warrior approach, the efforts will not match the challenge, and the results will be disappointing. The DEI challenge is simply that tough. The leadership role that the C-Suite takes is the foundation for the journey – the foundation on which everything else relies.

Modeling the wrong thing. One major problem with the C-Suite abdicating leadership is that it demonstrates for the whole organization that they are not the owners, do not have the confidence, and cannot be counted on to deal with an extremely tough challenge. Leaders exert a tremendous amount of power when they model behavior (no one misses it) and modeling stepping away is lost on no one.

Abandoning that leadership presence almost guarantees the pursuit of mediocrity for the organization. There is little to no chance that the organization will successfully answer the “Why?” question or successfully execute the ten systemic CSFs for leadership if executives delegate too much too fast.

Avoiding the Pitfall – Two Leadership Strategies

There are two strategies that the C-Suite can employ to maintain the required leadership presence. They are both well within the capabilities of C-Suites, but they are not easy – particularly the first strategy. The good news is that, done well, these two strategies combine to counter this pitfall very effectively.

Strategy #1 Confront the 3 “Guardians of the Threshold” – The First Big Challenge

Strategy #2 “Model the Way” - As Individuals and as a Team

“A ship is always safe at shore, but that’s not what it’s built for.”
Albert Einstein

Strategy #1

Confront the Three “Guardians of the Threshold”

The first leadership tests. A DEI initiative is a journey, not a project. And the tipping point is right at the beginning – at the threshold or beginning of the journey. That’s where the C-Suite encounters the three “guardians of the threshold.” In the classic myth of the heroic journey (which is the fundamental story of change) there are guardians of the threshold, which are designed to turn us back if we’re not ready for the journey. They are the first tests on the journey.

These three forces are normal and natural, and they cannot be avoided, particularly in cases where the C-Suite is primarily white. When not confronted directly, and with a serious commitment to deal with them, they put the organization on the path to DEI mediocrity – at best. That is because they undermine C-Suite engagement and presence, and that is the end of any pursuit of excellence.

Who are these “Guardians of the Threshold”

There are three natural and unavoidable guardians in any DEI initiative. They are perfectly capable of stopping or condemning a DEI initiative to mediocrity if they are not acknowledged and dealt with, particularly by the C-Suite.

Guardian #1 A Natural Indictment. An unavoidable sense of indictment for White people regarding racism and other diversity issues

Guardian #2 Venturing into the Unknown & Potential Loss. The requirement to face a great deal of unknown and a range of potential losses – from large to small – from real to imagined

Guardian #3 The Specter of Incompetence. Not being confident about having all the competencies required by the challenge

These Guardians are Toughest on the C-Suite

These three guardians naturally – and unavoidably - confront White people at all levels of the organization, but they are particularly tough for the C-Suite. These guardians are toughest at the C-Suite level because executives are not allowed to be wrong, unsure, lose, or be incompetent to any degree. It’s not fair, but that’s the way it feels – just the way it works with hierarchies. And members of C-Suites are usually their own toughest critics.



The Critical Success Factors (CSFs) for Dealing with the “Three Guardians of the Threshold”

Making the commitment to confront the three guardians of the threshold, the question then becomes, “How do we successfully deal with them?” Fortunately, there is a set of CSFs that can provide a lot of guidance and confidence and position the C-Suite for success in its central role. These CSFs deal with all three of the guardians of the threshold – as well as fitting with basic change leadership models that support the entirety of the journey.

The Basic CSFs for Each Guardian

Guardian #1: Acknowledge the Unavoidable Natural Indictment and Replace Any Guilt with the Power of Responsibility

The natural indictment is addressed by simply adopting a posture that “I’m not to blame for DEI gaps, but I am responsible as the CEO/member of the C-Suite for dealing effectively with it in our organization. I know this is one of the toughest challenges we will face and that we will need to take on a warrior approach to be successful. That is my commitment.”

There is little productive power in guilt. There is a great deal of power in taking responsibility to drive wise intentional action.



Guardian #2: Put the Unknown and Potential Loss in Perspective

There is no way to take all of the unknown out of the journey – there never is in significant change. This is a particularly severe problem with DEI initiatives because there is no single playbook and few examples of success. However, when the C-Suite is committed to being out-front and visible in “modeling the way”, it makes a big difference as fear of the unknown or potential losses shrinks.

First, when the C-Suit leads in developing the vision of the desired state, the core strategies to achieve it, the web of leaders to execute the strategies, and commits to building the competencies required for success, the journey becomes much more “knowable” and people believe they can find their way.

Second, C-Suite leadership also decreases the fear of loss as the desired end state and journey clearly have lots of continuity and there are valuable benefits to be achieved. Addressing the potential losses directly – from potential privilege/advantage to self-image to threats to relationships with other white people – can dramatically decrease anxiety that is normal and natural to DEI initiatives.



Guardian #3: Build on Strength - Focus on the 90% of Current Competencies and Define the 10% of New Competencies Required

This is the guardian that is deceptively problematic. However, the reality in most cases is that the C-Suite already has 90% of the core competencies required for successful DEI initiatives because they are the competencies required for any successful organizational improvement effort. The 10% of new competencies required can be developed with confidence and model for others how the leaders confidently acquire new competencies to meet new challenges.

That is a powerful message to the organization about being confident effective leaders in a changing competitive world. Not only does it “model the way” and build credibility for leading the DEI initiative, it also builds the C-Suite’s leadership credibility in general. In fact, this is an exceptional opportunity to build that credibility.



Strategy #2 “Model the Way” As Individuals and as a Team

C-Suites don't have the time, energy, or resources to simply “do more” or “do something different.” It is critical to be able to focus with confidence on where the leverage is in modeling the way.

There are a few key areas in which consciously modeling the way can dramatically increase the impact of the C-Suite on DEI initiatives. Those are noted below for individual C-Suite members and for the C-Suite as a team. There are four noted for individuals and only two for the team category because they are always high impact. But they should not limit the focus when opportunities present themselves in a particular setting.

“What you are speaks so loudly, I can't hear what you are saying.”
Ralph Waldo Emerson

“Model the Way” as an Individual C-Suite Member

“How do I deploy myself as a leader?” This is always a critical question for the C-Suite. In the case of countering racism, it is essential for the C-Suite to ask and answer that question as there is a tremendous amount of leverage in the answers. In fact, failing to put these personal CSFs in play will dramatically undermine the DEI initiative.

1. **Be conscious and disciplined.** Understand the importance of “modeling the way” and commit to consciously choosing the behaviors to model and the settings in which to model them. People throughout the organization (and beyond) closely watch C-Suite members to see what is valued. Actually, as a C-Suite member you really can't “not model the way” because people will

interpret whatever they see. So, it's important to value the role, decide what to model and model it with discipline.

2. **Focus on Your Current Core Competencies.** Focus on deploying the core competencies that you already have (probably 90% of what's required). Those competencies will be foundational for designing and successfully implementing DEI initiatives and clearly being confident in them will build people's confidence in the C-Suite and the initiative - and will encourage them to be confident in their abilities. This modeling helps establish a "building on strength" approach for the whole organization, which is essential.



1. **Identify the New Competencies Needed and Develop them Rapidly.** Identify the other 10% of specific competencies required – they may be new or simply deeper competencies. Model “no fear” and confident total commitment to rapid competency development as others will need to follow your example (and they will). Not only will this provide access to the best of the C-Suite and accelerate new competency development - it will also “infect” the rest of the organization.

“Nothing is so contagious as example; and we never do any great good or evil which does not create its like.”

Francois de la Rochefoucauld

“Model the Way” as a C-Suite Team

If DEI initiatives are true priorities for the organization, that needs to be clearly modeled by the C-Suite as a unit. Everyone watches the C-Suite to see what’s really important. Fortunately, there are a few things the C-Suite can consistently do to effectively communicate the priorities. Combined with the personal CSFs, this provides powerful leadership that no one misses.

- 1. Ensure High DEI Visibility.** Keep DEI on the C-Suite agenda (shows it is a priority and provides space to effectively address the issues). Keep it on other agendas where the C-Suite is involved. People pay attention to what the C-Suite prioritizes and pays attention to.
- 2. Model Healthy Accountability.** This is best done with frequent and informal “check-ins” with transparency within the C-Suite - and across the organization. What do we have to celebrate (particularly progress and interim achievements); what have we learned: what will we keep doing, start doing or stop doing? This reinforces DEI as a priority and fast cycle learning and calibrating action as the style.

These check-ins are based on the measures chosen – both quantitative and qualitative as well as the commitments made by the C-Suite regarding its role. Modeling the form of these check-ins as well as the results dramatically increases the likelihood that others will follow and hold themselves accountable in a healthy way.

There are only two items here, but that’s all that is necessary to have a major impact.

“Few things are harder to put up with than the annoyance of a good example.”

Mark Twain