

HIRING FOR DIVERSITY & INCLUSION

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How do you develop a culture of diversity and inclusion at your business? How do you create behavioral change and cultivate a safe and respectful environment? A successful organization must recruit and hire employees with diverse characteristics, backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives to realize its full potential. Diversity and inclusion ensure the organization benefits from a broad base of ideas and solutions that best serves customers and their expectations. It is important that ALL employees and leaders have the character to accept persons that do not look like you, think like you, talk like you, or act like you.

On April 15, 1947, Jackie Robinson became the first Black American baseball player to play in the major leagues when he took first base for the Brooklyn Dodgers. When the Dodgers signed Robinson, it heralded the end of formal racial segregation in professional baseball that had relegated Black players to the Negro leagues since the 1880s.

Robinson was clearly not the first Black player with the skill level to play in major league baseball, but he was chosen to be the first. Why? Robinson's temperament and personality were an integral part of desegregating baseball. He represented himself and his race with dignity.

Robinson's character, his use of nonviolence, and his unquestionable talent challenged the traditional basis of segregation that had then marked many other aspects of American life. He influenced the culture of and contributed significantly to the civil rights movement.

Why is the story of Jackie Robinson so important in 2020 regarding inclusion and diversity? When Dodgers owner Branch Rickey signed Robinson to the contract, the onus was not only on Robinson to perform to the best of his ability but also on his all-white teammates to be welcoming and inclusive of his addition to the team. This meant supporting him on and off the field. Rickey understood this move would have never worked if he did not have players like Pee Wee Reese on his team to stand up for and support Robinson publicly.

Starting shortstop Harold Peter Henry "Pee Wee" Reese was a strong supporter and became Robinson's best friend on the team. Reese was born in Ekron, Meade County, Kentucky and raised in Louisville. According to Reese, when he shook Robinson's hand for the first time, it was the first time he had ever shaken the hand of a Black man. In his first year with the team, during loud heckling at an away game in Cincinnati, Reese walked over to Robinson, engaged him in conversation and put his arm around his shoulder in a gesture of support that silenced the heckling crowd. When Robinson died in 1972, Reese was one of the pallbearers.

The question for businesses right now is: who do you have on YOUR team? Who do you have representing and supporting your business? To create a truly diverse and inclusive environment, efforts need to go beyond simply making the "diversity" hire; even more important is the team surrounding him/her/them. Creating an environment of diversity is not only hiring a diverse staff but ensuring that all members of the staff are welcoming and appreciative of the individual and what they represent. While the "team" starts with leadership, the sales and marketing team is an integral part of the diversity and inclusion culture.

Your sales and marketing team likely are the “face” of your business. That face should appeal to every segment of the population with authentic statements in conversation and marketing. It must be inviting to all genders and races and reflect the community and society the business is a part of. The marketing must address different perspectives (both race and gender) to avoid damaging and insensitive campaigns. Now more than ever, there is a need to have diversity of thought. Failure to do so can and will alienate potential customers and brand supporters when the goal is to broaden your brand’s appeal.

Your diversity hire(s) should not be a “token” hire but an authentic move that illustrates the company’s desire to provide an equal and inclusive working and selling environment. What should you want to know about any applicant regarding diversity and inclusion? Is your **current** team embracing of diversity and inclusion?

The following are five examples of questions that should be asked when conducting an interview for a diverse company (new hire or current employee). These questions should be asked of ALL applicants.

- What is your definition of diversity and how or why do you think diversity is important?
- Describe your understanding of diversity[inclusion]and why it is important to this position.
- What do you think the most challenging aspect of working in a diverse working environment is?
- Can you give us an example of a time when you worked with or helped somebody of a different culture/background from your own?
- What is the most common mistake in an organization’s thinking about diversity?

In 1955, seven years after Robinson debuted with Brooklyn, the Dodgers won the World Series over the New York Yankees. The win was a testament to not only their skills on the field but also their camaraderie on and off the field. Your business can create your own “champion” Brooklyn Dodgers team which can only come from authentic commitment to diversity and inclusion throughout all tiers of your organization.