

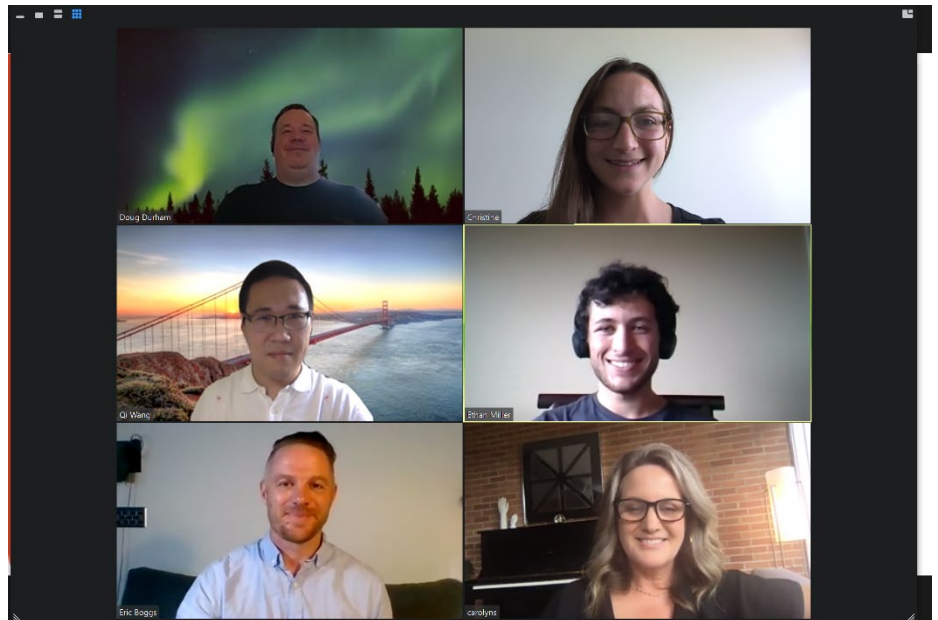
People: A Pillar of Sustainability

By Sophia McDonald Bennett

Environmentally-minded organizations have always labored to do what's right for the earth, and many have long been engaged in efforts to improve wages and working conditions for their employees and give back to their communities. And, the recent attention on movements such as Black Lives Matter and #MeToo, as well as the plight of immigrants and people from indigenous cultures, has rightly brought the need to increase efforts around justice, equity, diversity and inclusion (JEDI) to the forefront of people's minds.

Many of us who are committed to these ideals are still trying to figure out how to include this work into our personal and professional lives. To that end, BRING is working to incorporate a JEDI framework into the Rethink Business consulting program. Many participating businesses have reached out to us in the past few months and said something along the lines of, "I want to do something to dismantle a culture that either willingly or unknowingly supports sexist, racist or discriminatory behavior, both in broader society and in our company. My staff really wants to do something right now. But we're not sure what our first or second step is."

With support from Lane County (and inspired in part by the county's work to develop and train their staff on how to apply an equity lens to all decision-making processes), BRING is working closely with a team of University of Oregon students to develop JEDI-focused questions into the Rethink Business framework. The students will assist in putting together a checklist that businesses can use to increase diversity, equity and inclusion practices at their organizations and work to bringing justice to people who have been hurt by systematic racism. That project will be finished this fall.



UO students Doug Durham (Flex MBA, '21), Qi Wang (MAcc '21), Ethan Miller (Undergraduate Senior, '21), and advisor Eric Boggs (Lundquist College of Business Instructor of Management), presenting findings to the Rethink team to wrap up the project.

And, October is too late to begin this work; it has already been put off for centuries too long. We asked Terrill Thompson, principal at Banyan Coaching and Consulting, for some ideas about things companies can do now to get started in their JEDI efforts.

The first thing Thompson cautioned is that there's no "quick fix" to these problems. "There's not something you can do to check a box and say, 'I'm done with JEDI work.' To really do JEDI work means to take a look at all aspects of the organization and embed that lens into every part of a company's work." That's not something that gets done in a week or a month. And even when that goal has been accomplished, most companies must continue to be open to questioning their practices and continuing to evolve their thinking as new information becomes available.

If a company is made up of mostly white staff and owners, a good first step is self-education. (See the included list of resources.) "It's really important to be pushing ourselves, particularly as white folks and non-black folks, to understand why anti-blackness is so pervasive in our culture," Thompson said. "I also hope that as we're doing that, we're also looking at how we've treated indigenous people and the invisibility around native folks in this area."

A good second step is to examine the structure of the organization and identify anything that might be helping or hindering people of color from succeeding in the organization. Thompson recommended focusing first on practices around hiring, promotion, and professional development.

"One of the big challenges around recruiting, for example, is we tend to recruit in circles where we're comfortable, and where we're comfortable is with people who look like us," they said. "If you want to attract a more diverse workforce, you have to be really intentional about doing outreach to groups and places where people of color are."

When it comes to hiring, make sure job announcements go out to a wide range of people and places. Post them in online message boards, publications, schools or businesses frequented by people of color. Reach out to organizations that serve people from diverse backgrounds and ask them to share announcements with qualified candidates in their network. Also, Thompson recommends questioning whether a position really requires a college degree. Many people of color can't afford or otherwise don't have access to college. Asking for a bachelor's degree is likely to significantly shrink the diversity of the applicant pool.

An important next step is to make people feel comfortable and welcome from day one, which includes the interview process. "If a person shows up for an interview and your panel is all white, that sends a message," said Thompson. If at all possible, include employees with diverse racial backgrounds and life experiences in the interview process.

All employees at a company need to be consciously given access to all opportunities, especially those around promotion and professional development. "A lot of this is about access," said Thompson. "We have policy, but organizational culture often trumps policy. Even if on paper everyone has access to professional development, who knows that and who feels they have access to it may be different."

The simple act of asking people to participate can make a big difference. Don't just send employees an email letting them know about opportunities. Verbally encourage them to apply. If people of color don't take action, gently and kindly ask why they didn't and if there are barriers that are preventing them from exploring a promotion or going to a conference.

America's long history of racism has left us with many barriers to overcome, but even our recent history of trying to be a more just and fair society has left us with biases we need to overcome. "Especially in Lane County, one of the big challenges is that we are imbedded in a culture that believes in color blindness, and the intent behind color blindness is to treat everyone the same," said Thompson. "However, when we're not consciously and intentionally paying attention, leaders, and especially white leaders, are less likely to notice the disparities that are actually there. Having this color blind approach is actually perpetuating racist structures."

"We really need to recognize that it's not about being a good person," they continued. "Most people are well intended, but there are structures in place that are upholding the systems that are keeping people of color from being able to advance, and we have to look at those structures and shift them." The current focus on criminal justice reform is one example of this, and there are also opportunities to change the way individual businesses are structured to create a better environment for everyone. The first step is acknowledging that

problems may exist, no matter how well intentioned we are. Once those problems are out in the air, owners and managers can take steps to solve them.

One step businesses may be able to take rather quickly is looking at where they spend their money. Are they making charitable contributions to nonprofits that engage in diversity and inclusion? Are they supporting organizations that purposely exclude people of different races, ethnicities, religions, sexual orientations, gender identities, or life experiences? Are they making purchases from companies owned by Black or native people? “Oftentimes what is most convenient is not what is most ethically sound,” said Thompson. Trying to steer at least some of the company’s dollars to new partners can be a way to give people of color a boost.

These efforts, which may involve changing your mindset and work processes and questioning assumptions about yourself, can feel overwhelming in so many ways. Recognizing that JEDI work is a long process, Thompson encouraged people to do it in a way that’s sustainable. That may mean seeking outside help to steer the company through sticky spots, uncomfortable conversations, and new process development. And it may mean breaking actions down into manageable chunks rather than doing everything at once. The goal of BRING’s JEDI checklist is to do just that, but there’s no need to wait for it to get going. Begin today, especially with the self-education, and you’ll be more prepared to tackle that list once it’s ready.



Many of our Rethink businesses already have strong JEDI practices in place. These are the entrance doors to Marley's Monsters' employee work area; a constant reminder of the company's commitment to Justice, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion.

Since 1971, BRING has worked to change attitudes and behaviors regarding waste. Today, we focus on the urgent issues of consumption, climate change, and community resiliency. Through our reuse store and community education programs, we fulfill our mission *to provide vision, leadership, and tools for living well on the planet we share*. Visit us at bringrecycling.org