

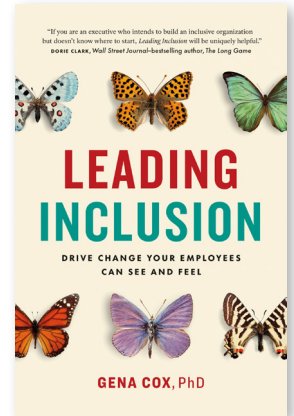


Executive Book Summaries®

Leading Inclusion

Drive Change Your Employees Can See and Feel

by **Gena Cox**



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THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Creating an organization that truly values inclusion starts from the top down. Leading inclusion should go beyond a moral responsibility. It should become a vital leadership competency.

The book *Leading Inclusion: Drive Change Your Employees Can See and Feel* lays out strategic steps leaders can take to infuse an organization-wide vision for diversity and inclusion that makes marginalized workers feel seen, heard, and valued. Here, we are introduced to a “Respect First” R.E.D.I. (Respect, Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion) approach that plays a critical part in crafting and implementing lasting change.

Author Gena Cox deploys her extensive research from several one-on-ones with DEI practitioners, executives, and employees of color to create a comprehensive framework that brings real results. Her words and insights enable leaders to forge a mindset for bold action this change requires so much.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- How to build a truly inclusive workplace from the top down.
- How to build the REDI mindset and vision.
- Why CEOs and c-suite executives play a vital role in creating a culture of inclusivity.
- How to develop and deploy a result-yielding REDI framework.

Introduction

Race and ethnicity classifications vary significantly across the globe, as do the histories and social forces influencing the human experience. However, race-based mistreatment is the most commonly reported form of workplace discrimination in the US, and racial equality is still elusive in broader society. Employees of color, particularly black employees, continue to face occupational segregation that pushes them to the bottom of the workplace hierarchy.

I wrote this book to show leaders like you how to lead an inclusive organization, by setting a vision for diversity and inclusion and cascading it into the organization. The goal is to lead in a way that employees can see and feel the difference in their day-to-day work experiences. In this book, I focus on the inclusion experiences of people of color, primarily black people in US workplaces. Nevertheless, the insights can enhance the work environment for any employee, regardless of their natural human variation.

I decided to use my unique training and experience as a Ph.D. organizational psychologist, executive coach, black woman, mother, and immigrant to help business leaders address this persistent inclusion challenge in America's workplaces. I want you to feel empowered to act not just to improve diversity but also to enhance feelings of inclusion for all who work in the companies you lead. This book is your partner as you work to make America better, one employee at a time.

Part 1: Skin in the Game

Chapter 1: CEOs Can Change America, One Employee at a Time

George Floyd's and Breonna Taylor's killings illuminated racial injustice and disparities in the US as never before. Racial discrimination and the resulting trauma are like a national medical mystery; the pain is real but the source is often not known or acknowledged. Healing from racism requires action and support, including from those who have not experienced it and don't understand it.

Stakeholders, especially employees, expect business leaders to address these issues.

Since persistent racial segregation has isolated Americans from people who do not look like them, leaders may need to study history and current social trends to understand these new leadership expectations.

Leaders must infuse REDI into their core business strategy. REDI stands for Respect, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion. It is a term I use instead of DE&I (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion). The REDI Outcome is a "respect-first" model – because if leaders don't first ensure that underrepresented employees feel respected, none of the other outcomes will matter, nor will they be sustainable. Incorporating REDI in their business strategy will then drive the kind of meaningful change that employees and other stakeholders can see and feel. REDI requires a long-game approach. The REDI 10/4 model suggests ten actions you can take to make a positive difference and four you should avoid. The REDI 10/4 Effective Actions are:

- Get out front. As a CEO, C-suite executive, or board director, you must take the lead in managing racial issues. Not taking action will lead to a loss of credibility among your employees.
- Communicate with employees first (before you communicate with the press or other public media about the issue)
- Communicate as soon as possible.
- Acknowledge your feelings.
- Communicate with all employees.
- Provide quick, sensible support.
- Gives employees a forum to help them express their feelings.
- Develop a "crawl-walk-run" connection strategy so your employees don't feel cornered and have time to think about what they want to say.
- Listen and analyze.
- Use employee surveys to get fine-grained data.
- The REDI 10/4 No-Nos include:
 - Do not talk only to the employees of the group directly affected. This approach further "otherizes" those employees.
 - Do not assume that employees from the targeted group will share their experiences unprompted.
 - Do not ask the most senior person from the targeted group to be the company's spokesperson for the issue.
 - Do not ask the marketing department to highlight the targeted group in ways that seem performative or inauthentic.

Business leaders can help eliminate race-based workplace disparities by listening to and connecting with employees of all races.

Chapter 2: Yesterday Explains Today

Most Americans live racially segregated lives. Slavery in the US created systems that perpetuated systemic disparate treatment of black Americans based on race and ethnicity. Although the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation ended slavery, black people's lives since then have generally continued to be separate from and mostly unequal to the lives of the descendants of those who designed that oppressive system.

Systemic racism has resulted in disparate outcomes by race and ethnicity in many aspects of life, including education, healthcare, home ownership, and workplace experiences. Racial segregation has aggravated these disparities and made it difficult for Americans to know and understand the connection between these historical facts in black Americans' current experiences.

Business leaders can help eliminate race-based workplace disparities by listening to and connecting with employees of all races. Segregation costs us a lot: we misunderstand each other, we distrust each other, and we avoid each other. We also hesitate to reach out to an action base that can shrink the gap. But as an executive, you don't have a choice. You must lead all employees, so you must provide leadership to help others understand these realities so you can make sure all employees in your organization have an equal chance to thrive. This needs an Inclusion MBA: A Mindset for inclusion and a willingness to take Bold Action. Only then can leaders bridge the gap, emerging as inclusion role models for those around them.

Part 2: Mindset: Rethink What You Believe

Chapter 3: The Diversity and Inclusion Imperative

Stakeholders (especially employees and investors) are calling for REDI changes, and the rising generation (Generation Z) is pushing for more, and faster, change than prior generations. Investors want social justice and the common good. Today, there are increased calls for transparency and accountability.

However, it is difficult to build and lead an inclusive organization without first understanding the experiences of those who have been traditionally excluded. Most Black Americans are descendants of enslaved laborers and post-Emancipation, domestics, field hands, and janitors. Their parents worked hard but often did not have equal access to education, healthcare, nutrient-rich food, and housing. Today many of their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren may still not have equal access to the promise of American opportunity. Some may be working in your company today and some of them are marginalized at work, on top of all their other challenges. It will take intentional acts of noticing to see these patterns, understand these human experiences, and create solutions to counter their impact on your employees.

CEOs need to lead REDI by being active participants in making the workplace better when it comes to racism. Corporate executives have the unique power to make REDI changes that can enhance the experience of all employees including those from traditionally underrepresented groups.

Americans want CEOs to lead on social issues. Gen Z is not about the status quo. This generation is more radically and ethnically diverse than any other. You must create and maintain an environment in which traditionally underrepresented groups do not face systemic hindrances and are unequivocally safe to voice the injustices they experience.

Chapter 4: Understand Your Beliefs about REDI

Leaders must practice REDI to effectively lead all employees. But despite good intentions, some executives' REDI work may be hindered by implicit (and conscious) bias and by REDI anxieties. The leaders I mentioned consistently mentioned three factors that fostered anxiety and inhibited their REDI action:

- REDI role uncertainly. Some executives said they were unsure how to prioritize REDI, because of a lack of clarity about the problem within their organization and concern that the issue would consume disproportionate time relative to their other obligations.

- **REDI dodging.** Some expressed discomfort with conversations about social and political issues, including racial justice in the workplace.
- **REDI distance.** Many leaders I interviewed recognized and acknowledged they did not have experience interacting with people who did not look like them.

Leaders must recognize and fix their own implicit biases. However, REDI leadership will depend more on addressing systemic bias in organizations than fixing individual employees' unconscious biases. Leaders who want to lead the REDI strategy must intentionally learn about and connect with a wide range of employees.

Use the five-step REDI Action model as a framework to prepare for modeling the way toward an inclusive organization. The essential mindset for driving REDI change is knowing your "why," and the essential behavior is modeling the way.

Your efforts to build an inclusive organization will be influenced by both conscious and unconscious factors. If you want to make even a dent in the REDI challenge, I encourage you to follow the comprehensive five-step REDI Action model to process your feelings in preparation for action:

- Understand what you believe about REDI.
- Face your REDI Anxieties.
- Connect with people you currently do not understand.
- Build your personal Get REDI plan by creating a personal REDI advisory team, recruiting mentors, educating yourself about the demographic characteristics of your workforce, continuing your self-education, giving face time to a greater variety of leaders, and preparing to answer the key REDI questions.
- Model the REDI way like the organization's primary change agent.

Chapter 5: The Truth About Working in Your Organization

It is a truth, regularly discussed among employees, that the higher leaders are in organizations, the fewer details people share with you about what is happening below you. Management literature is replete with situations where critical information does not make it to the top of the organization in time to prevent a disaster. Executives exist in a bubble that may obscure certain realities of employee experience.

The higher you are in an organization's hierarchy, the harder you must work to encourage colleagues to tell you what is

really happening below you. It is not easy for employees to speak truth to power, so you must consistently and intentionally create conditions that will help employees speak up. This is what is known as "psychological safety." You must create a culture of psychological safety and then listen intently to what employees want to share.

The typical day-to-day experiences of high-level executives likely differ from those of their employees, customers, and suppliers. Add to that the fact that employees may avoid telling you the truth or might tell you what they think you want to hear. And to top it off, because you are human, you might misperceive some things and fail to perceive others' exclamation. You can overcome these barriers by making it OK to speak up, by listening more than you tell, by asking incisive questions, and by making sure you get data from a variety of sources and not over-rely on your inner circle.

As business leaders begin to address REDI in the workplace, most direct their human resources department to hire more people of color. However, since under-representation (diversity) and day-to-day experience (inclusion) are distinct issues, solutions must also be distinct. Your first remit as a senior leader is to clarify whether you have a diversity issue, an inclusion issue, both issues, equity issues, or no issue at all.

To really understand employee experience, understand how managers behave. Insist that managers support all employees (not just the chosen few) with 100% leadership.

Part 3: Boldness: Make Inclusion Scalable

Chapter 6: CEO and Board Using the Same Playbook

REDI strategy should be on the board's priority list. Progress on REDI will be influenced by how board directors interact among themselves and with the CEO and by the organization's pattern of responding to change. Both CEOs and the board must get comfortable talking about race and ethnicity. You can't generate realistic solutions to challenges that have their bases in race if you can't even talk about the subject.

Workplace cultures are shared, pervasive, enduring, and implicit and impact most interpersonal and group outcomes. The emotional component of REDI work and the vulnerability it requires might be an opportunity for CEOs and board members. It could connect them and enhance their

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shared REDI understanding. Diverse boards are needed to help drive REDI outcomes. Individual board members must be willing to search their hearts if they are to make our REDI progress.

Chapter 7: The C-Suite Inclusion Infusion

The C-Suite's reactions to the REDI strategy will vary, just as representation patterns and their parts of the business may vary. Your executive team members can make or break your efforts to build an inclusive culture. CEOs must help the C-Suite understand the REDI "why" and lead other decision-makers and managers to the necessary mindset.

Involve the entire C-suite in defining the REDI vision and hold them accountable for outcomes that support your REDI vision. Define the REDI vision to lead the rest of the organization and hire the CDO after you define the REDI vision. When you create a high-level REDI Vision before you select a CDO, the person you hire will have the clarity needed to hit the ground running. Use the six-point REDI Vision framework below to organize your thoughts:

- Assess the current organizational culture and employee experience. Your team can accomplish this by using employee surveys, reviewing passive operational and performance data, and conducting interviews and focus groups.
- Define your REDI BHAG. What is your Big Hairy Audacious Goal (BHAG) when it comes to REDI? It doesn't have to be a detailed strategy, just a North Star that answers questions like, "What do you want to accomplish?" "What do you want employees to say about REDI twelve months from now?" "What matters for your organization?"
- Make REDI work your core work. If you want to see improvements in diversity and inclusion outcomes, make the work part of the overall business strategy.
- Define the focus. Define the specific REDI elements – respect, equity, diversity, inclusion – on which you want the organization to focus.
- Strategically place the CDO (or other REDI leader)

in the organization structure. The best use of a CDO is as a "coordinating mechanism" – someone who can aggregate the viewpoints of many decision-makers to address collective choice problems. Anything less may not help you make meaningful change.

- Define the characteristics and success criteria for the CDO role.

Chapter 8: A CDO with Resources and Political Clout

CDOs cannot be successful if those upon whom they depend for political, strategic, and financial support do not yet have a REDI Vision. The REDI lead role is often set up to report to the CHRO, and this structure works when the CHRO is a confident political powerhouse, when REDI issues have already been on the C-suite agenda for many years, or when the organization already has the outlines of a REDI strategy. One big challenge with the CDO-reporting-to-CHRO model is that it fails if the CHRO is threatened by the attention the CDO will inevitably get from the rest of the C-suite. However the CDO needs the authority to influence outcomes in various functions across the enterprise, not just talent management outcomes. Aside from completing your REDI Vision before hiring the CDO, here are the other things you can do to support the CDO:

- Define a fit-for-purpose CDO role and let that determine where the position will sit in the organizational structure.
- Ensure that the C-suite is in sync regarding messaging within their areas of responsibility. You want each member to feel they are part of this key decision and that they are expected to partner with the CDO.
- Define a REDI budget that can accomplish your REDI Vision. Don't make the CDO beg for the resources they need to do the job.
- Set up the CDO role as a strategies partner to all other parts of the business – a coordinating mechanism, not a siloed functionary.
- Encourage partnership from the start.

Chapter 9: Meeting in the Middle

73 percent of US managers are disproportionately White. Many managers lead people who do not look like them. Managers have the power to make or break your REDI strategy.

One of the reasons so many employees are dissatisfied with their jobs is that their managers do not pay enough attention to the daily human experience on the teams they lead. REDI requires a new manager mindset about interactions with all employees, especially employees of color. People of color do not need “special leadership” or more leadership. They need their leaders to provide them with the same support they mete out to other colleagues but often withhold from them.

Use your REDI Vision to effectively frame the “why” for your managers. Make it clear to all your managers that REDI work is a priority for you and them. Set the expectation with each manager that 100% leadership will be required – they must be designated hitters for each member of their team. Communicate your high-level REDI vision to your managers before your CDO starts. Let managers know that although the CDO will lead the REDI vision, the CEO and the entire C-suite will have skin in the game and will be active partners with the CDO.

You need your REDI program to make sense to your whole organization. Your primary stakeholder for this work is your entire employee population. Once you know what you believe, have a strategic REDI vision, and know how to start removing the barriers to our REDI work through partnership with your executive team, board, and managers, you are more likely to be successful in diversifying the talent in your organization and building an inclusive work culture.

Part 4: Action: It Won't Be Easy, But It Can Be Done

Chapter 10: HR and the Science of Inclusive Leadership

Effective REDI solutions should be built upon data-based insights that show leaders what matters most. Ad hoc actions may not hurt but may result in disappointing outcomes or unintended negative consequences. To get valid REDI data insights, leaders must ensure that the insights your advisors provide are disaggregated in a way that will enable you to see the patterns of the demographics that matter in your organization. Here are the questions to ask

yourself when strengthening the link between HR and inclusive leadership:

- What is the basis, in data, for the guidance you are currently receiving about REDI work in your organization?
- How is your organization defining the success of the REDI work?
- What accountability mechanisms are in place to ensure that managers’ actions are aligned with your REDI expectations?
- How will you know which of the REDI actions you are taking are making a difference for your employees?

Chapter 11: Seeing All Women Clearly

Gender disparities in the workplace are well known, but women of color face a double-whammy when they must deal with the challenges of gender and race simultaneously. Women of color are asking for leadership to be redefined. Any such redefinition will benefit not just these women but all employees. Organizations will benefit when leaders establish systemic practices, including sponsorship and allyship, to help men and other women understand the experiences of women of color and support their thriving at work.

Chapter 12: How to Build a Workplace Culture

Executive leaders define the culture of the organization. Inclusive leadership should be part of the values you build into your organization’s culture. Employees need to see and feel what you’re doing; That is how they judge if your leadership is inclusive or not. Whether employees thrive or stay, or wither and leave will depend on how they feel about what you build.

A healthy organizational culture is a prerequisite and perfect starting point for the REDI journey. You and your company do not need to be perfect. You just need to be willing to learn continuously. You’ll make mistakes, but employees will have your back as long as you are honest with them. Keep what works; Discard the rest. Just keep driving change that employees can see and feel. And, as you do this, your business will thrive too.

Start by defining cultural expectations first. Then, put mechanisms in place to support execution. Planning is excellent, but execution is the actual test. Insist on accountability. State clear expectations and hold leaders accountable for their progress relative to those expectations. Quantify the desired outcomes.

Conclusion: Making Corporate America Better

Corporate life will never be the same. The COVID-19 pandemic changed the rules of the workplace for everyone. This is an ideal time for you to think about rebuilding better. Start with an Inclusion MBA (Mindset, Boldness, Action) lens. Build a REDI (Respect, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion) framework in all aspects of your business. Finally stop focusing on “the business case for diversity,” because what justification is necessary beyond the fact that all humans deserve to be treated fairly and equitably?



Dr. Gena Cox's nuanced insights and straightforward-yet-relatable style are why leaders seek her counsel. She is an organizational psychologist, executive coach, and speaker who blends research and real-world insights to help leaders enhance their influence and impact. Gena is the author of *Leading Inclusion*, an award-winning guidebook for building inclusive organizations from the top down. As a prominent voice on human-centered leadership, she guides leaders as they respond to evolving stakeholder expectations. Gena believes “diversity and inclusion” are nothing more than effective leadership and healthy work cultures.

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