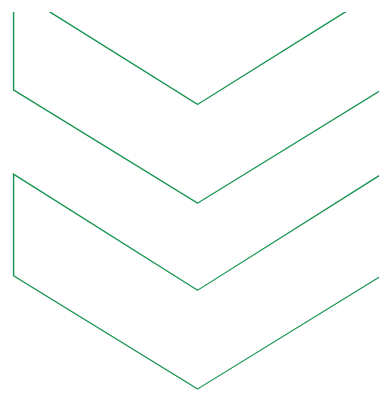


**Are We
There Yet?**





Consider the following scenario.

It was a great celebration. After years of focused effort, the company had finally claimed the No. 1 spot in a national diversity-ranking program. The CEO and diversity executive stood on a makeshift stage in the company's cafeteria as cameras transmitted the event to employees around the world.

"Thank you for your superb efforts in bringing us on the wonderful journey to becoming the top competitor in the diversity arena," said the CEO. "Team, we have arrived." But even as he smiled, a loud internal alarm went off in the chief diversity officer's head — and rightfully so.

Every year, diversity executives at organizations that win diversity awards from ranking programs face an interesting challenge: How to celebrate their milestone wins while avoiding the false impression that their companies have arrived at the top of the diversity pinnacle for all time.

This is a real challenge, because organizational leaders have a tendency to look at these milestones as a sign of project completion, an arrival of sorts, an attitude most would never consider for other areas of the business. To their surprise, after the initial period of jubilation, many of these award-winning organizations find they have either dropped in rank or are completely off the list the following year, and sometimes for many years afterward.

That's usually the moment when the CEO turns to the diversity executive and asks, "What happened? Didn't we complete this project correctly and reach the status of best of the best? I thought we were done, and that diversity was now in our DNA."

'We've Arrived' — the Start of Losing Ground

Think of Aesop's fable of "The Tortoise and the Hare." The seeds for backsliding and disappointing losses are often planted when award winners believe they have an unbeatable lead. Trouble follows when organizations do not have a clear picture of the true nature of their diversity efforts, or the appearance of that lead prompts the organization to rest smugly on recent success.

"Diversity is not a project to be completed with a crowning success, but a journey of continuing evolutionary refinement," said Peter Blanck, University Professor at Syracuse University and chairman of the Burton Blatt Institute, an advocacy organization for people with disabilities.

The journey is critical. "Diversity and inclusion is a change management process that occurs in an ever-changing context," said Mike Davis, managing principal and co-founder of Global i365, a consulting firm.

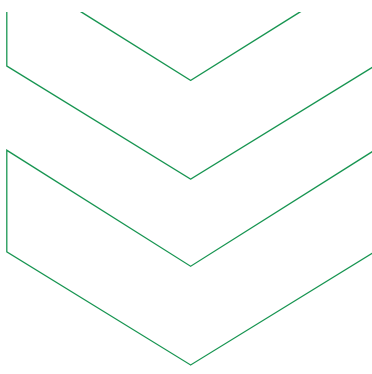
There is never an arrival, only continuous forward movement. "These awards are at best an indicator of where people are relative to evolving milestones at a specific point in time," Davis said. "To mistake these milestones for fixed points or the end of the competition is a mistake."

Here are three of the many reasons why mistaking milestones for the end of the game results in a company losing ground:

First, today's spectacular diversity performance will hardly draw a yawn in the near future. For example, organizations that launched outreach programs designed to bring more women and underrepresented people into their workplace 40-odd

It's great to have diversity achievements acknowledged with an award, but receiving one doesn't mean success is definitive and everlasting.

By Joe Santana



“Some organizations treat winning an award as if they are flying a plane that has reached its perfect cruising altitude and **so they flip on auto-pilot.** Unfortunately, that’s when competitors begin to quickly overtake and pass them.”

— Sahar Andrade, diversity and social media strategist, Sahar Consulting LLC

years ago could point to these as a unique distinction.

Today, such programs are commonplace, and it would be unusual to find a company that did not have one. When considering the legacy challenges related to underrepresented people, saying, “We are an equal-opportunity employer” is like saying, “We have email at all our workstations.”

“We’ve gone from touting outreach through attraction and retention and now are looking to achieve the deeper and more powerful states of engagement,” said Linda Stokes, CEO of PRISM International, a trade association for the commercial information management industry.

Second, while the bar goes up for achievement on legacy topics, as demographics and the business environment change new topics continue to emerge that make diversity challenges an ongoing concern. For example, effectively managing a workforce that’s composed of four generations today, and possibly five generations in the not-so-distant future, is a relatively new but important topic. Other examples of new diversity and inclusion topics include integrating returning veterans into the workforce, effectively inculcating people with disabilities into organizations and the implications of a multiracial workforce, the result of a new ability to check more than one race on census data.

Third, while the bar on old topics is going up and new topics are being introduced, diversity and inclusion executives have to be mindful that all of this is happening within the context of global competition for talent and business. The companies that are below the top 10 of the best diversity and inclusion lists are not resigned to their current position. Nor are they aiming to merely equal the performance of the award winners.

“They are going back to their offices to figure out a strategy that will get them ahead of these top contenders by enough of a margin to make them the new top competitor,” Stokes said. “Organizations are strengthening their game to compete at ever higher levels.”

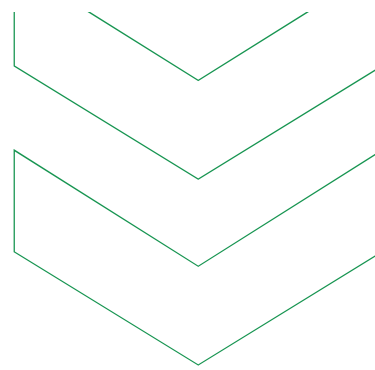
Organizations that fail to understand the continuously changing nature of the strategies and processes being managed and leveraged by a successful diversity and inclusion practice run the danger, like the hare in Aesop’s fable, of losing the ground they initially gained.

“Some organizations treat winning an award as if they are flying a plane that has reached its perfect cruising altitude, and so they flip on auto-pilot,” said Sahar Andrade, diversity and social media strategist for Sahar Consulting LLC. “Unfortunately, that’s when competitors begin to quickly overtake and pass them.”

How to Prevent the Fall

Diversity and inclusion executives can avoid a fall following an award by clearly communicating this is an achievement to be celebrated, but not the journey’s end. One way to do that is to ask the following five questions — paraphrased from a process outlined years ago by Kurt Wright in his book *Breaking the Rules* — when preparing to announce the award:

1. What has the organization done right that resulted in this award? Perhaps use of a new tool resulted in greater identification and development of women and people of color across the enterprise. Mentoring across departmental level and line of business increased, producing several high-level promotion success



stories. Cross-collaborative problem-solving also increased, leading to several viable product solutions that impacted the organization's stance in the marketplace. Or, maybe the company recognized a new dimension of diverse suppliers and leveraged them in a new and profitable way.

- 2. What quality or resource did the company specifically possess that made this success possible?** Continuing the aforementioned fictitious example, perhaps the company examined and tested a variety of its tools until it found one that resulted in greater identification and development of underrepresented talent through a strong collaboration between functional areas.
- 3. Where might the company have opportunities to do even better in this area, other areas or new areas?** At this point, the gears should start to shift to what the company needs to do to retain the top spot and build on its lead. The diversity executive should evaluate trends against the organization's strategic agenda and begin to formulate a picture of what may be a challenge five, 10 or even 20 years out.
- 4. What resources and actions does the company require to address current and future challenges?** The diversity executive must consider what existing or new tools, investments and actions will be needed to retain the firm's lead in the areas where the company is strong, build a lead where it still has development opportunities, and identify where it should prepare for future opportunities and challenges.
- 5. What is the company committed to doing next?** What will the company do to hold onto its lead next year, when others will be adopting its best practices and turning them into common practices? What will it do in areas where it is not No. 1 and there is clear room for improvement? What will it do today to address the challenges on the horizon?

By incorporating responses to these questions into communications with business executives, managers and employees, diversity executives can celebrate success and focus on how to proceed in the diversity and inclusion race.

Here's an example of the type of communication that can result from this exercise:

"We are proud to be the No. 1 organization in the area of developing women and minority senior leaders. Due in great part to leveraging the great tools developed in our learning and development organization, in alignment with the needs of a changing workforce, we are excited to celebrate this great achievement today.

"As we look to the future, we realize that with four generations in the workforce and a fifth looming on the horizon, we need to increase our focus on creating an environment that most fully leverages what this age-blended workforce has to offer while retaining our leadership in the area of female and minority leadership development. We therefore set our eyes on the next target, even as we celebrate this huge milestone today."

That speech is simple, celebratory, yet recognizes the need to soldier onward.

The bottom line is awards and recognition always should be a cause for celebration. They are the external evidence of achievement at a single point in time within the ongoing journey. However, we should always remember the journey continues. Celebrate today and plan for tomorrow, because we are definitely not there yet. «

Joe Santana is senior director, diversity for Siemens USA. He can be reached at editor@diversity-executive.com.

Awards and recognition always should be a **cause for celebration.** However, remember the journey itself continues.