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Facebook is failing its black employees and its black users

15-19 minutes

The following memo was written and circulated by me to all of Facebook's employees around the world. It was sent November 8, 2018, shortly before my final day at the company.

Facebook has a black people problem.

One of the platform's most engaged demographics and an unmatched cultural trendsetter is having their community divided by the actions and inaction of the company. This loss is a direct reflection of the staffing and treatment of many of its black employees.

In my role as Strategic Partner Manager for Global Influencers focused on Underrepresented Voices, I've been uniquely exposed to the issues surrounding the internal and external representation of black people here. Through formal meetings, backchannel conversations, and casual chats over coffee, some common themes have emerged:

Black people on Facebook

Black people are one of the most engaged demographics on Facebook…

Black people are far outpacing other groups on the platform in a slew of engagement metrics. African Americans are more likely to use Facebook to communicate with family and friends daily, according to research commissioned by Facebook. 63% use Facebook to communicate with family, and 60% use Facebook to communicate with friends at least once a day, compared to 53% and 54% of the total population, respectively. 70% of black U.S. adults use Facebook and 43% use Instagram, according to the Pew Research Center. 55% of black millennials report spending at least one hour a day on social networking sites, 6% higher than all millennials, while 29% say they spend at least three hours a day, 9% higher than all millennials, Nielsen surveys found. Black people are driving the kind of meaningful social interactions Facebook is striving to facilitate.

…but their experiences are sometimes far from positive.

Black people are finding that their attempts to create "safe spaces" on Facebook for conversation among themselves are being derailed by the platform itself. Non-black people are reporting what are meant to be positive efforts as hate speech, despite them often not violating Facebook's terms of service. Their content is removed without notice. Accounts are suspended indefinitely.

When these rulings are upheld with little recourse, it upends the communities of color Facebook claims to be supporting. It decreases the likelihood that people will continue to engage at the same level on our platform. Even high-profile figures who are plagued with these issues sometimes have to wait until it's a major press story for it to be addressed.

There is a prevailing theory among many black users that their content is more likely to be taken down on the platform than any other group. Even though the theories are mostly anecdotal, Facebook does little to dissuade people from this idea. Black people continue to use the platform because for many it is still their best way to connect directly with the causes they care about. Our communities should be able to trust that we have their best interests at heart.

Underrepresented groups are being systematically excluded from communication.

Facebook is a company built on data. When determining where to allocate resources, ranking data such as followers, greatest number of likes and shares, or yearly revenue are employed to scale features and products. The problem with this approach is Facebook teams are effectively giving more resources to the people who already have them. In doing so, Facebook is increasing the disparity of access between legacy individuals/brands and minority communities.

You can see this reflected in everything from the guest lists of Facebook's external programs, the industry events the company has historically sponsored, the creators and influencers who appear in Explore tabs on Instagram, the power users who are verified on the platforms, and more. So many positive advancements have been made in recruiting and in engineering with formal programs that are inclusive of or specifically uplift communities of color. We need that same lens at all areas of the company, particularly those that are external facing.

Black employees are commonly told "I didn't know black people worked at Facebook." Though relatively small in number, we are here. What this translates to is the black people who invest so much time into us want their opinions to matter and they're not seeing that reflected externally.

Diverse communities represent new ideas and opportunities for growth.

We are continually missing opportunities to engage with groups whose use of our family of products is fundamentally different than the general population. Rather than focusing on the most global household names and brands for whom Facebook only moves the needle slightly, we should invest more in partners who are household names in their own communities. These partners are often delighted to have any kind of interaction with Facebook and are more than willing to experiment with us. Many teams have found successes with this approach – more diversity in content partnerships, higher engagement numbers in previously untapped segments, feedback that can be cycled back into a general best practices, and so on.

Teams that require diverse perspectives should hire diverse people.

Black employees at Facebook are frequently asked publicly and privately to volunteer their input for projects that involve race in some way. Questions like "What do black people think about…", "Is this racist?", or "Is this graphic culturally appropriate?" are common. Black employees often do these things gladly (and within reason) because someone has to. Otherwise, these issues would go untouched by people of color. However, this one-off approach isn't sustainable. If your team's work affects particular communities, it is far more effective to hire people from those communities who have the context of your team's processes and goals. This allows more room for black people who would otherwise be obligated to volunteer to be more productive in their own roles.

Hiring diversity-focused employees isn't a cure-all.

There is a top-down emphasis on diversity with pledges from the M-team [executive leadership] to address the systematic issues the company faces. And on the surface, it's working. There has been a wave of hiring in the last two years of employees specifically focused on representing the voices of diverse communities.

However, what's been missing in many cases is a plan of action for how their work will roll up into the greater team goals. According to shared feedback, these employees sometimes find their resources for carrying out diversity initiatives are deprioritized in favor of team-wide efforts that impact broader communities. For some, their work devolves into serving as an address book to add a few names of color to projects. Efforts that promote inclusion, not just diversity, are being halted at the managerial level.

Inclusion should be a team effort. It is not enough to simply hire people to focus on diversity. Everyone on teams whose work focuses on varied cultural backgrounds should be responsible for ensuring the outcome of their work is representative of those groups. The people who focus specifically on diversity should be given agency to carry out not only their fundamental goals but to keep their team accountable as well through measurable impact.

Black Employees at Facebook

For any tech company, it is important to have staff that reflects the communities the platform seeks to empower if it intends to be successful. A huge congrats to the teams who have helped increase the number of black employees from 2 percent of the workforce in 2016 to 4 percent in 2018.

Major kudos to the Diversity team, Facebook employee resource groups, and the clusters of volunteers who have created internal support systems for employees from shared backgrounds. When you interact with people who look like you, it drives retention, forges relationships and increases loyalty to the

company. And it's [good for business]. This makes the work of the Diversity team and the teams that touch these issues so important.

Although incremental changes are being made, the fact remains that the population of Facebook employees doesn't reflect its most engaged user base. There is often more diversity in Keynote presentations than the teams who present them. In some buildings, there are more "Black Lives Matter" posters than there are actual black people. Facebook can't claim that it is connecting communities if those communities aren't represented proportionately in its staffing.

Racial discrimination at Facebook is real.

Facebook's disenfranchisement of black people on the platform mirrors the marginalization of its black employees. In my time at the company, I've heard far too many stories from black employees of a colleague or manager calling them "hostile" or "aggressive" for simply sharing their thoughts in a manner not dissimilar from their non-Black team members. A few black employees have reported being specifically dissuaded by their managers from becoming active in the [internal] Black@ group or doing "Black stuff," even if it happens outside of work hours. Too many black employees can recount stories of being aggressively accosted by campus security beyond what was necessary.

On a personal note, at least two or three times a day, every day, a colleague at MPK [Facebook headquarters in Menlo Park] will look directly at me and tap or hold their wallet or shove their hands down their pocket to clutch it tightly until I pass. The frequency is even higher when walking through Classic campus or Building 20. To feel like an oddity at your own place of employment because of the color of your skin while passing posters reminding you to be your authentic self feels in itself inauthentic.

HR is often a dead end.

Black employees will sometimes to turn to HR in search of a resolution, as employees from all backgrounds do. We often find, however, that our experiences are rationalized away or we're made to believe these disheartening patterns are a figment of our imagination. That our eyes and ears are deceiving us and we're simply not being a team player. It becomes clear that the conversations with HR are more often than not meant to protect the manager and the status quo of Facebook, not support the employee.

Black staffers at Facebook know that by raising our voices we risk jeopardizing our professional relationships and our career advancement. As much as we'd like to convince ourselves these are minor inconveniences, they continue to eat away at us and affect our work. It's only when talking to other black employees experiencing the same issues that we come to accept that it is a pattern of behavior deeply connected to the culture at Facebook. And so we talk amongst ourselves, in small groups or one on one, finding ways to cope with the additional stress that comes with being a person of color at this company.

Certainly, these aren't the experiences of all black employees. But these issues are so widespread that they should be an ongoing cause for concern.

Low morale leads to low production.

We need black employees, women, and people of color to feel good about working at this company. Numerous studies have shown that biased treatment in the workplace greatly impacts employee productivity and the desire to advance in the company. Facebook has a number of perks — from food to health benefits to spa services — that are meant to boost productivity and morale. A discrimination-free workplace should be a perk as well.

We can assume good intent. We can also assert that there is a pervasive problem at the company that needs to be addressed promptly in order to stem the tide of apathy. "We're thinking about it" can only hold us over for so long. Facebook can't engender the trust of its black users if it can't maintain the trust of its black employees.

I care deeply for this company and I've been blessed to be able to work closely with so many teams on building everything from arena-sized activations to campus Q&As with diverse influencers to programs dedicated to strengthening the retention of employees of color.

Being stationed at Facebook headquarters has required a great deal of sacrifice — being cut off from family, friends, and my now former fiancé, compromising my health and my sense of security. I've done all this willingly because I strongly believe in this company and its ability to positively impact the world. But to continue to witness and be in the center of the systematic disenfranchisement of underrepresented voices, however unintentional, is more than I'm willing to sacrifice personally. I've lost the will and the desire to advocate on behalf of Facebook.

Because of these reasons and other issues related to my role, I've decided to leave the company. After my departure, I'll be focusing on rebuilding my life and the further development of my recently launched sci-fi drama podcast. I'll seek to rebuild the confidence and optimism that brought me to Facebook.

It's been an honor and a pleasure to collaborate with partners who represent some of the most vibrant communities on Facebook and Instagram. I am deeply appreciative of the people of color and allies whose work has advanced the representation of diverse groups throughout the company.

Recommendations

It will take an effort at all levels for Facebook to improve its relationship with diverse communities. The future of the platform depends on it. Based on conversations with teams across the company in the last year, here are my recommendations:

- For any team that has one or more people dedicated specifically to diversity, require a strategic plan for how that work will be incorporated into larger goals for the team. Create metrics for other team members to incorporate into their goals as well that ensure representation is everyone's responsibility.

- Implement data-driven goals to ensure partnerships, product testing, and client support is reflective of the demographics of Facebook.

- Level up cultural competency training for Operations teams that review reported infractions on Facebook and Instagram. Whenever possible, avoid relying solely on algorithms or AI to triage these problems.

- Create internal systems for employees to anonymously report microaggressions. This includes using coded language like "lowering the bar" or "hostile," disproportionately giving lower performance review scores to women and people of color, or discouraging employees from engaging in cultural activities outside of their agreed upon work schedule. If these reported infractions surface a pattern, require the manager and/or team to attend sensitivity training to amend the behavior.

- Support emerging talent and brands by creating a pipeline of communication and scaled support that allows them to further build with the platform.

- Establish more regularly-scheduled focus groups with underrepresented communities, particularly the Black and Latino users who over-engage on Facebook and Instagram. Use these conversations to gain insight on how to grow the platform.

- Be deliberate about demographic representation of attendees at external events. Do not relegate invitations to partners of color to "diversity" events.

- Work toward surfacing more case studies that originate from within ethnically diverse communities, not just geographically diverse. Showcase these examples more frequently in internal and external presentations and opportunities like campus newsletters.

- Continue efforts to recruit and hire for roles in offices outside of MPK. Expand the staffing beyond the teams that already have a significant presence there.

- After the conclusion of the diversity audit, create a plan that includes action items on the manager and employee level. Ensure that the incoming Head of Diversity Integration sets goals for teams that they are kept accountable for and roll up into overall company goals.

At a company whose family of products directly affects the lives of 2.5 billion people worldwide, representation and inclusion should be of the greatest importance to everyone. Diversity defines our external image and relationships. It is therefore important that inclusion is methodically woven into the fabric of the company.

In leading by example internally, we show that being your authentic self, within Facebook's terms of service, extends to everyone on our platform.