



Indivisible

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Denise Hamilton is a nationally recognized Diversity and Inclusion leader and author of *Indivisible*, a book that challenges readers to move beyond diversity and inclusion to indivisibility. As a keynote speaker at the recent Maryland Bankers and Virginia Bankers Associations Joint Convention, I had the opportunity to attend her session. To be completely honest, I went into it with initial skepticism.

My experience with Diversity and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives has left me skeptical. Often, these efforts seem to prioritize selecting employees, customers, and suppliers based on arbitrary categories determined by DEI experts, rather than fostering the intended outcomes. True diversity of thought, deeper customer empathy, and a strong sense of belonging among employees – all crucial for outperforming competitors – seem to fall by the wayside. As I see it, qualifications, attitude, and effort are subordinated to box-checking. If not recognized for a great attitude, why have one? If not rewarded for great effort, why put it forth? What's the incentive for continuous improvement if it doesn't translate to upward mobility? To me, this way of executing DEI initiatives leads to incredible divisiveness and ultimately will negatively impact corporate culture and performance.

That's the mindset when I entered Denise Hamilton's presentation, but that is not how I felt at the conclusion. In fact, I'm not sure she sputtered any of the traditional bromides we often hear from DEI experts. Instead, Denise brought a thought-provoking new way to lead to indivisibility. Here are six ideas she encourages us to consider for creating an indivisible workforce.

1. Don't believe everything you think.

If you are trying to create an indivisible team, the first ingredient is humility. Look no further than my bias that resulted in the skepticism described above. This bias influenced my openness to Denise's entire presentation, and therefore to me handling situations differently. If a colleague resists going on a multi-day, multi-city business trip, do I think it's because they don't want to work hard? Or, do they have a sick parent, a particularly busy backlog of other work, or will miss an important event for one of their children? Don't always believe the first thought in your head and then seek confirmation that you are right. Be open to alternative possibilities.

2. Be an owner not a renter.

Banks can foster an ownership mentality by providing opportunities for employee empowerment, recognizing and rewarding employees for doing something extraordinarily well, and by providing opportunities to own company stock. The goal is to create a culture where employees take initiative, own projects, share ideas, take responsibility, think strategically, continuously learn to improve themselves and the bank, and ensure that individual goals are aligned with bank goals. Industry veteran, Joe Bertotto, wrote a book about this subject called *Pick Up the Gum Wrapper*.

3. Fight homeostasis.

Homeostasis is the process that maintains your internal environment amidst a changing external environment. Also known as inertia, and frequently referred to as “that’s the way we’ve always done it.” When there is uncertainty and change, human nature is to try to get back to the way it was. To create an indivisible workforce, we must have a culture that fights inertia, embraces change, and makes it ok to make mistakes while implementing change. You are indivisible because all on your team are experiencing the same unease about doing things differently. Because homeostasis is human nature, we must actively fight it.

4. Listen for echoes.

What I believe Denise meant was to listen for words unspoken. She gave an example of a prospective employee that turned down a job with a company because they “couldn’t afford it.” When asked what they meant by that, the prospective employee said there was a lot of travel involved, and the employee would pay upfront for the travel and be paid back via expensing it monthly. And they couldn’t afford to carry the travel expenses while waiting for reimbursement. Understanding why the employee turned down the offer enabled the employer to gain a greater understanding of the challenges that this employee and others face.

5. Don’t let words get in the way.

I suffer from “planning your response.” That behavior when you are thinking about your response while someone else is speaking. It does not result in effective listening, so I am constantly on guard about this natural inclination. The inclination is amplified if someone uses a trigger word. The listener immediately stops listening and is either formulating their rebuttal or checking out of the conversation altogether. Denise had a slide on trigger words. There is societal pushback against people that are constantly triggered by words. But Denise had a list, such as Diversity, MAGA, Woke, or Roe. I might have triggered everyone reading this article with only four words. We don’t have to use these words when communicating. It doesn’t facilitate effective communication and will block us off from hearing our teammate or our teammate hearing us. This is particularly true when teammates come from diverse backgrounds. Don’t let words get in the way of building an indivisible team.

6. Do something.

Sometimes the broader challenge is so great you are unclear as to what you can do to make a difference. Denise described her five-foot rule: do something in your immediate vicinity that moves you forward as you strive to create an indivisible team. For example, if you manage a small team, periodically include a fun exercise during a meeting for each team member to share something about themselves that the rest of the team may not know. This will help the team develop a deeper understanding of their teammates regardless of backgrounds and past experiences, resulting in a better appreciation of one another.

If you were hoping for an article that suggests choosing employees, promoting employees, praising employees first and foremost because of race, gender, or sexual orientation you are likely disappointed. When choosing employees, selection should be based on who is the most qualified and best fit. When promoting employees, do so by merit. You start choosing by what is politically

expedient, then all employees that fit favored classes will be presumed to have been chosen because they are in the favored class. Unfair to those that deserve that promotion and divisive at best. It is not the way to form an indivisible team, and Denise suggested nothing of the sort.

For Veterans' Day in November 2021, the Virginia Bankers Association asked me what I thought the banking industry could do to attract more veterans, which represent six percent of the U.S. population. Here was my response:

“We can be intentional. There are plenty of organizations that can help you hunt for veterans entering the workplace. Most vets would look for jobs that are either related to what they did in the service or government contract work because that’s where they think they can make the most impact. They are probably not thinking banking. But wouldn’t we benefit from having our team chock full of people that work well in teams because if they didn’t, people could have died? Wouldn’t we be better if we had team members that were formally trained in how to lead teams for maximum performance and took total ownership for the team’s performance? Vets don’t think banking is an option. It’s our job to let them know we need them.”

What if your population is thirteen percent black, ten percent Latino, and six percent veterans? Do those populations have people willing and able to learn, have great attitudes and will put forth superior effort? They, like veterans, may not think banking is an option because so few of those they know go into banking. Why would we limit our talent pool to 71% of our population? Like I said in 2021, we must be intentional. Polished gems come in many sizes, shapes and colors and from many places. Before those gems set out to find you, you must first set out to find them.

And once you do, you are on your journey to form an indivisible team.

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