



Diversity

Talk About Privilege at Work

by Lee Jourdan

Talk About Privilege at Work

by Lee Jourdan

Published on HBR.org / August 02, 2021 / Reprint [H06HU1](#)



bowie15/Getty Images

Do you have privilege?

This seemingly innocuous question has been the source of much consternation in the diversity and inclusion conversation. The answer to the question is “yes.” If you are alive and breathing, you have some level of privilege. But let’s be clear: the amount of privilege one has varies significantly based on a number of variables. Importantly, we need to be able to discuss privilege and why it is important without it devolving into misunderstanding, defensiveness, or worse.

It can be a constructive conversation.

Why is it important to talk about privilege at all? Because it can raise awareness about advantages and disadvantages, it challenges norms that might work against underrepresented groups, and leads to a more diverse and inclusive culture, which ample research shows is a competitive advantage. For example, a [2020 McKinsey study](#) shows that companies in the top quartile for ethnic and cultural diversity on their executives teams have a 36% higher likelihood of outperformance on EBIT margin.

So, how do we talk about privilege? We start by talking about what it is not.

Privilege does not mean that you were born with a silver spoon in your mouth and never had to work hard or that you achieved success with no struggle. It simply means that you are likely to have enjoyed certain tailwinds because, based on parts of your demographic makeup, you are in the majority.

Because we all have privilege, the next step is to acknowledge your own. Doing so lowers defenses, demonstrates vulnerability, and sets the tone for inclusive behaviors.

As a Black, non-disabled, heterosexual man, I am privileged across many dimensions. Black is a privilege? At times, yes. Being Black means I do not experience some of the abuse directed against Asians, for example, in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. As a Black man, I might have other concerns about going to a store or for a run, but I don't fear this kind of prejudice. As a non-disabled person, I have physical access to buildings, and parking spaces, and my workspace requires no additional configuration. As a heterosexual man, I don't have to worry about coming out of the closet each time I am exposed to a new environment or meet someone new, and I can drop my kids off at school without worrying about them being questioned for having two moms or two dads. And as a man, even as a Black man, I am afforded the benefit of the doubt in countless situations where a woman would be questioned.

Next, you'll then want to encourage your team to think about the privileges they enjoy and how they change in various situations. A person's proximity to the majority matters. The closer a cohort is, the fewer headwinds they may face, and the more tailwinds they may enjoy. For example, if most of the workforce is defined as white male, white women will have more privilege than women of color. Indeed, according to [Deloitte](#), in 2020, "white women made the largest percentage increase in board seats gained in both the *Fortune* 100 and *Fortune* 500, larger than any other group or gender, a gain of 34 seats (15%) in the *Fortune* 100 and 209 seats (21%) in the *Fortune* 500."

In Henry Louis Gates' book, [The Future of the Race](#), he discusses a practice that existed during much of the twentieth-century in the Black community called, the "brown paper bag test." If your skin tone was lighter than a brown paper bag, you enjoyed certain privileges. If it was darker, you were discriminated against. In many regions of the world, having a lighter complexion can provide tremendous privilege. According to [a report from NBC News](#), the phenomena of *colorism* – "exalting lighter skin and assigning it higher value" has given rise to a multi-billion-dollar industry in South Asia.

Encourage people to consider who the majority and minority groups are on your team, in your business unit, across your organization, and in society, and how they fit into each venue – considering not just race, gender, and sexuality but also socioeconomic status, education level, and other factors. If they're willing, they can share these thoughts with teammates. Remind them, too, that the amount of privilege we have can shift as we move from the out-group to the in-group or vice versa.

Finally, talk about why this issue matters. When we understand our own privileges relative to others, we begin to recognize which teammates may be restricted from fully participating, reducing the effectiveness of the team. Pay attention: Who is speaking up? Who is not? Who is given the

automatic benefit of the doubt? Who must work harder to prove themselves?

When we address the nuances of privilege, everyone benefits. In the wake of protests following the murder of George Floyd, numerous organizations have made commitments to supporting not just Black employees but improving their hiring, promotion, and retention practices for all people of color. Advances for those in the transgender community help those who are gay or lesbian. When I was at Chevron, we launched a program designed to advance women in the workplace: Men Advocating Real Change (MARC) in partnership with Catalyst. It uses discussion circles to encourage conversation about the challenges female employees face. We then leveraged the MARC structure to create similar group dialogue about hurdles to overcome for all underrepresented groups.

Talking about privilege the right way can improve the dynamics of your organization, build trust and understanding, and leverage the value of your most important resource: talent.



Lee is a director on the boards of PROS Holdings (NYSE: PRO) and the nonprofit SEARCH Homeless Services. Previously, he served as the chief diversity and inclusion officer at Chevron and as vice president commercial and business development for its IndoAsia and Asia South business units. Lee is a co-Author of *From Shoeshine to Star Wars* and was recognized by *Business Insider* in 2020 as one of 100 people transforming business in North America.