

How Diversity of Thought Can Fit into Your DEI Strategy

Inside the DEI journey of a Black-owned business, Uncle Nearest, which has become the fastest-growing whiskey brand in the United States.

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Nathan Green, known to many as Uncle Nearest, was an enslaved man in the 1850s in Lynchburg, Tennessee. He was known to make whiskey using a special technique he learned when cleaning water back home in West Africa. His method of filtering whiskey through sugar maple tree charcoal became known as the famous “Lincoln method.” It’s still used today.

Jasper Daniel, an entrepreneur, saw genius in Nearest Green's method and product. When the Civil War ended, Jasper bought a distillery and named it after himself, subbing in the first name Jack. Jack Daniel's first master distiller was Nathan Green, Uncle Nearest, now a free man, mentor and close friend to Jack. Green worked at the distillery for many years until he retired.

Fawn Weaver was so inspired by the story and Nearest's family (some of whom she interviewed) that she invested \$1 million of her own money in 2017 to found a distillery in Green's name. Now, Uncle Nearest has become fastest-growing whiskey brand in the country. Within the company's first four years, Weaver raised \$60 million. Today, Uncle Nearest is the bestselling African American-owned and founded spirit brand of all time. Its three ultra-premium whiskeys have won hundreds of awards including being named one of the "Top 5 Whiskies in the World."

In the \$70 billion wine and spirits industry, where less than 1% of wineries and distilleries are Black-owned, and there is a lack of BIPOC leadership, Weaver knew that as a Black woman she would be fighting an uphill battle from the start. But Weaver was undaunted. She sought not only to make history as an inclusive brand breaking barriers as the first spirit to commemorate an African American and the first to have a Black master distiller on record, but she also to create a top-performing organization. Her strategy for making it happen was to embrace diversity in all forms, including diversity of thought.

The Tricky Topic of Diversity of Thought

As a researcher and consultant, I'm wary of the term "diversity of thought." In principle, it's good. Having many ideas from many people who think in many ways will improve performance.

However, the concept is often used as a scapegoat. It's a way to avoid difficult DEI conversations around race, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability and so on. I have heard countless leaders suggest that since they have diversity of thought on their teams, they don't need to be focused on demographic inequity or changes to the makeup of teams. Even if their leadership teams comprise mostly men, mostly white, from mostly from the same colleges and socioeconomic backgrounds, they use diversity of thought as their excuse not to work on those other, necessary DEI tasks.

True DEI progress requires both types of diversity. Diversity of thought isn't always found where you expect it to be found.

Intentionality Is a Virtue

Fawn Weaver was deliberate about bringing diversity — and diversity of thought — to Uncle Nearest. Some may assume that because her distillery is owned run a Black woman, DEI is less of a concern to Weaver. Not so. Every organization, no matter their demographic makeup, must be intentional about the equitable nature of their systemic structures, such as hiring and promotion, in addition having a strong focus on making the culture diverse, equitable, and inclusive.

It started with hiring a team in an industry with a deep lack of demographic diversity. One way Weaver could have approached this was to prioritize hiring minorities to start her company. Yet, she wasn't thinking that way. She is adamant that minority-owned businesses that seek to grow to the highest levels of success must prioritize diversity in hiring, even when their counterparts do not, and that the notion of "Black-only excellence," for example, will ultimately be a disservice to the business and the communities that will be positively impacted by the business.

“I want to position Uncle Nearest with Jim Beam, Jack Daniels, and Johnnie Walker, brands that have sustained for 150 years. You cannot do that by limiting your diversity.”

To be clear, Weaver would seek demographic diversity on her team; she was not foregoing that part of her DEI journey. She was only saying that she was not interested in that alone. Diversity of thought, which would come from multiple types of people, and often unexpected people, would be what would make Uncle Nearest a brand beyond its diverse roots, competing with august incumbents.

Her success in cultivating diversity and diversity of thought comes from largely avoiding four DEI pitfalls many companies fall into.

Pitfall 1: A lack of cultural clarity.

Companies aren't clear and deliberate about who they are and what they stand for. Weaver fosters diversity of thought even before you work there: Prior to submitting a resume, you must review the company's 10 core principles, which include clear statements about its devotion to diversity.

Pitfall 2: A lack of intentionality from the start.

Most companies today, even the ones we identify as doing the best with DEI, are playing catch-up on their diversity demographics. Weaver set out to create a team that would embody diversity of thought and reflect the world around her. Yes, this would help her create the internal culture she desired, but equally crucial it would be a team that would be a significant competitive advantage in the wine and spirits marketplace.

“I'm African American,” Weaver says, “but the first two people that I brought in alongside me were white. I was looking for energy, not color. And as I'm looking for the energy, and as I'm looking for the diversity of thought, it was imperative that my company looked like America. Today

if you look at my team it is almost identical to the demographics of America. We are 50% women. If anything, we try to over-index on Black, Latinx and LGBTQ populations, but the goal is to mirror America.”

Pitfall 3: Tradeoffs aren’t acknowledged in a DEI strategy.

The reality is that there are less people from underrepresented groups in major industries such as finance and technology (and spirits) because of systemic structures that have historically limited access and opportunity. To build up a pipeline of diverse talent, tradeoffs need to be built into the strategy.

Leaders must acknowledge these disparities and realize it will take time and sacrifices to fix it. If an organization is committed to increasing their diversity of leadership, they may have to keep a position open longer than expected to identify a diverse slate of candidates. They may have to recruit outside of their typical top schools. They may have to reevaluate if the requirements they have always had for the job (such as a bachelor’s degree) are actually indicators of success. They may even have to consider nontraditional candidates who have had career success in other industries or business functions. Leadership teams must explicitly create opportunities for the DEI strategy to be implemented. This will always require tradeoffs.

Weaver is vocal about her willingness to embrace the tradeoffs in order to build the most diverse team: “I would keep a position open for two years before I put the wrong person in it. I can tell you, if we were, for instance, to fall to 40% women in team members, I would hold those positions open for women, because I want their percentages in my company to match that of America.”

Pitfall 4: A belief that diverse cultures do not need explicit DEI initiatives.

Achieving demographic diversity, as Uncle Nearest has, doesn’t obviate the need for DEI programs. You need to continue to build that culture

through programming or else the job of DEI falls to the diverse people within it sharing their lived experiences and navigating difficult conversations about what it is like to be gay, or Indigenous, or disabled. It's unfair to expect them to be the representative for their entire group.

The reality is that while people can share their individual experiences, most people without specific education or training are not equipped to navigate conversations about difficult DEI topics. Thus, even organizations with demographic diversity and diversity of thought benefit from professional DEI education and other initiatives to create inclusivity.

“We regularly have diversity training to educate our team on topics such as the Tulsa massacre and Juneteenth,” Weaver says. “We’ve done skills building to have everyone walk through their journey together and identify their own implicit biases. Every time we do training, team members share that one of their favorite parts of our culture is that we create space for everyone to learn about these topics together.”

Using History to Build Better Together

Weaver’s intentional efforts to foster diversity and diversity of thought have been instrumental to its success. Now, she’s thinking bigger.

In 2020, Weaver had an epiphany: “The piece I think our industry was missing until now was that we were all trying to figure out how to foster diversity within the American spirits industry separately,” she says. So, Uncle Nearest and Jack Daniels parent company formed the Nearest & Jack Advancement Initiative to increase diversity in the American whiskey industry, starting with the Nearest Green School of Distilling at Motlow State Community College in Tullahoma, Tennessee, aimed at helping build a more diverse pipeline of talent for the entire industry.

(Weaver's also leading other efforts to help develop more diverse talent and businesses in the spirits industry).

Weaver stated in a 2020 interview:

You had this interesting friendship and bond that was created during the most racially divided time in our nation's history. Now, to bring the names of those two people together to help solve [problems] now is the most rewarding thing I have ever done in my life, hands down.

I think the beauty of companies that began in the last few years have the opportunity to let today's standard for DEI be the foundation they're being built upon. Ten years from now, this conversation looks very different because we have solid foundations being built right now and that has never been the case before now.

One effect of her efforts, Weaver has noticed, is how intentional diversity creates lasting, familial friendships among people with remarkably different life experiences.

"I saw a quote recently that said something like, Company culture isn't buying a beer keg, it's creating a culture in which people want to have a beer together. Our team members go out of their way just to hang out. We have an annual summit, and it will be like a big giant family reunion. And it's not because we're doing things to make it feel that way. Literally, just people walking through the doors are going to feel that way. This company culture is unique, and I'm not confused about what we've built. It's special."

Editors note: This is an edited excerpt from the author's book [The Necessary Journey: Making Real Progress on Equity and Inclusion](#), which will be published on November 8, 2022.

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