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## Paradox Strategies



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The annual listing of  
10 companies that are at the forefront  
of tackling customer challenges

# Paradox Strategies

## Leveraging Cutting-Edge Research to Drive Innovation



Linda Hill

In a 2014 Ted Talk that has since been seen by more than 2.5 million viewers, Linda Hill, a professor at Harvard Business School differentiated between two types of genius: solo and collective. She argued a leader's job is to focus on collective genius – to unleash the talents and passions of many people, and harness these to carry out useful work. In launching her own advisory and consulting firm, Paradox Strategies, she has put words into action. Hill and her colleagues at Paradox, including other HBS professors and industry veterans, help leaders worldwide to build teams rich in diversity, successful at driving growth, and invested in improving the lives of their co-workers, customers, and communities.

Paradox works at the intersection of innovation and inclusion, showing how effective leaders deliver growth and performance by embracing an organization's collective talents. In this interview with Manage HR Magazine, Hill and two Paradox managing partners, Cheryl Whaley and Taran Swan,

share insights into strategies for nurturing individual differences to unleash an organization's full potential.

### Could you provide our readers with a brief overview of what Paradox Strategies does?

In the most general terms, we demonstrate the link between diversity and innovation. There is no question that a diverse and inclusive work environment can help an organization attract top talent and drive innovation. But you can't take for granted that this will happen naturally. To realize the benefits of diversity and inclusion, organizations need to follow best practices. Paradox helps companies and other groups define these approaches in the context of their own particular circumstances. We might do this through leadership coaching, workshops for boards, or an app, but whatever the tactic, our three pillars are innovation and agility; leadership development; and diversity, equity and inclusion.

Our definition of diversity includes a wide range of possible identities, from racial to sexual orientation to whether a person is partially sighted or uses a wheelchair. When we talk about inclusiveness, on the other hand, we mean a culture where differences are valued and a workplace where everyone enjoys equal access to opportunity. We link the moral case for diversity and inclusion with business imperatives – not just as an abstract concept, but through concrete policies and practices.

To develop these policies and practices, Paradox looks to academic research; to hone and tailor them, we tap into successful executives' experiences and perspectives.

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Many people think their organization is dealing with a selection problem, when really it's a development problem. The research shows that stars are made, not born**

**You also landed on our top 10 list last year. How has your work changed since we last spoke?**

As the world emerges from the Covid-19 pandemic, companies are keen to become more agile and innovative: they have seen the need for flexible thinking and action. But they can't do it without embracing diversity of thought within their ranks; this is what prepares them to cope, even to thrive, in environments like today's, rife with uncertainty.

**Linda, in your book “Being the Boss,” you discuss the imperatives for becoming a great leader. How do those connect to the drive for diversity?**

The book underpins the importance of diversity in leading innovation. I was focused on the factors behind successful innovation at the time, and noticed that the way most people conceived leadership would lead to styles that stymied rather than supported innovation. For example, many people think good leaders create a vision, communicate it, and inspire people others to try to achieve it. Although setting a vision is important, at Paradox we teach leaders to co-create that future collaboratively. We also found one of the main reasons high-potential individuals



Taran Swan

derail is that they can't manage their network properly – a skill left off of a typical leadership checklist. For these reasons, we came up with a simple yet powerful framework of leadership that involves three imperatives: manage yourself, manage your network, and manage your team.

“Manage your network” helps leaders manage their relationships with people over whom they have no formal authority, but who are hugely important for getting a job done.

We have a number of ways of applying this framework practically. For example, women and people of color may find managing their network tricky if they are having trouble building credibility with peers. This is something that Paradox might tackle through our “being the boss” microlearning tool – one of our products that has turned out to be enormously popular with our clients.

**What are some challenges your clients face in building an inclusive and diverse work culture, and how do you help them mitigate those?**

Although many organizations want to embrace diversity, they often fail to do so methodologically. We help companies identify the source or sources of ethnic or racial bias in their organizations, in part by looking at where the negative effects manifest – whether that be in hiring, retention, promotion, or elsewhere.

For example, we have found that senior managers often hire people like them. Because we tend to be drawn to people like

ourselves, this creates a sort of self-perpetuating homogeneity at the top, with White people often constituting over 80 percent of senior management, even in companies that are quite diverse. We help organizations change this by implementing more defined hiring and promotion processes.

Getting this right is not just a moral imperative: it widens your talent pool in a number of ways. Our research indicates that millennials look at a company's diversity before deciding whether to join – and they do not want to work for an organization that is not diverse. This is in part because they wonder if it will be innovative enough. In other words, they understand intuitively the link between a diverse company and a dynamic company.

**Changing processes, especially HR processes, in an organization can meet with internal resistance. How do you get around this?**

When it comes to building a diverse culture within the organization, companies come with diverse pain points. We start by conducting a rigorous, data-driven assessment of the clients' work culture using a proprietary assessment tool called re:Route™. It helps us understand the critical features of the client's work environment. We know whether the client encourages diverse thoughts and opinions, and we understand the mindsets and behaviors of the workforce. As many of our clients employ an in-house diversity and inclusion specialist, we work with them and use their data. We also insist upon having access to the leaders at the very top.

Most companies do not have a common language for talking about culture and may also lack the data that would help start the conversation. We tell our clients not to jump to a solution before diagnosing the core issue, and that the diagnosis is really an educational process, giving people a common language to initiate tough conversations around organizational culture. The framework, language, and data from the re:Route™ survey is tremendously helpful to companies in developing this common language and arriving at a common diagnosis. These elements

provide the required foundation for developing a customized change agenda that senior management owns and to which they will be individually and collectively held accountable.



Cheryl Whaley

Could you share an instance that highlights the benefits brought to one of your clients after implementing your unique strategies?

We worked with one of the Pfizer's leaders who ran the company's vaccine trials. He also ran the company's Pan-Asian Employee Resource Group (ERG). The professional relationships he made as an executive sponsor of Pfizer's ERG enabled him to complete the vaccine trial in record time. He used his professional network in the Philippines and other Asian countries to onboard people. The same network also helped him navigate the havoc caused by the pandemic around the globe. He used re:Route™ to understand how the Pfizer supply chain team could become more agile and innovative, especially during the pandemic. As he came to understand the power of the

global network, he leveraged his professional relationships to get the job done. In our work, we try to help people recognize and use these connections.

**What does the future hold for Paradox Strategies?**

Our goal is to deliver solutions in our three focus areas (innovation and agility, leadership development, and diversity, equity, and inclusion) from the boardroom to the individual employee. To achieve this objective, we continue to scale our programs. Part of the scaling is a push towards digital solutions, but also thinking about how to bring successful formats to new audiences. We are currently testing the Collective Genius Experience™, a day- or half-day-long simulation, which allows participants to practice in real-time the tangible behaviors that drive innovation and inclusion. Additionally, as a companion product to our organizational assessment re:Route™, we are currently developing re:Mind™, an individual assessment tool. We also plan to develop certificate programs for assessments, allowing coaches and consultants to use our material in their training programs. HR