When organizations fail to tap all the potential in the talent pool—including women and people of color—they stifle their capacity for growth. Programs to support diversity and inclusion in the workplace purport to mitigate a shortage of highly skilled employees. But how effective are they?

In the early 2000s, a large consumer goods corporation recognized that women of color were reporting significantly lower job satisfaction, lower trust scores, and significantly higher intention to leave compared with all other demographic groups of employees. In partnership with Global Novations, now part of Korn Ferry, the company implemented a multiyear diversity and inclusion initiative for women of color that sped up their rates of promotion by six months or more and decreased turnover by 50%.

Women of color cited their difficulties developing authentic relationships with their managers as a core problem. As part of this larger initiative, Korn Ferry consultants led coaching sessions that paired women of color with their managers. These sessions focused on solidifying relationships, discussing workplace challenges, and talking about advancement opportunities.

This holistic approach to reducing career headwinds resulted in significant positive changes in how women of color perceived the company. Before the initiative, 32% of women of color saw diversity reflected in the management of the company; after two years that increased to 62.1%. Within four years, women of color’s perceptions of the company’s commitment to their long-term growth and development increased from 50.8% to 70%.

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1 The first round of sessions were delivered to 208 executive-level women of color and their managers over a four-year period. The second round of sessions was delivered to 37 women of color and their managers over two months (post-session n = 15).
Tangible successes were also clear: Within four years, the number of executive-level women of color doubled, from 60 to 120 (representation increased from 4% to 6.7%). Women of color also reported significantly higher levels of job satisfaction and significantly lower levels of intention to leave than they had before.

Korn Ferry also gauged progress by comparing how managers and women of color perceived what was going on in the office. For example, managers reported helping their direct reports gain exposure to key decision makers in the company. But women of color didn’t report getting such help.

After the paired coaching sessions, perceptions were more aligned and favorable overall. Managers reported statistically significant gains in: being aware of their similarities to and differences from their direct reports (45% increase); understanding how to motivate and inspire their direct reports (35% increase); and having regular discussions with their direct reports regarding career paths (31% increase).

Women of color reported gains in understanding how they uniquely add value to the company (24% decrease in unfavorable responses and 17% increase in favorable responses).

The gaps between the two groups’ perceptions also shrank (see Figure 2). Women of color reported feeling more valued and respected after the sessions; likewise, managers reported valuing and respecting their direct reports more. Both groups indicated increased comfort with discussing workplace challenges. Managers reported celebrating and sharing their direct reports’ successes more, and women of color agreed. Finally, both groups indicated that women of color were gaining increased exposure to key decision makers.
The paired coaching sessions helped bridge gaps between women of color and their managers. Women of color voiced their career goals and received direct feedback from their managers. As a result of these sessions and the other parts of the program, the time to promotion for women of color accelerated by six to 10 months.

Figure 2

Closing the perception gaps.

In four key areas of engagement, women of color’s and their managers’ perceptions were more favorable and better aligned after the paired coaching session. The statements below are from the women of color’s point of view. Managers’ statements were worded slightly differently, for example, “I explain how my direct report uniquely adds value to the organization.”

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About Korn Ferry

At Korn Ferry, we design, build, attract and ignite talent. Since our inception, clients have trusted us to help recruit world-class leadership. Today, we are a single source for leadership and talent consulting services to empower businesses and leaders to reach their goals. Our solutions range from executive recruitment and leadership development programs, to enterprise learning, succession planning and recruitment process outsourcing (RPO).

About The Korn Ferry Institute

The Korn Ferry Institute, our research and analytics arm, was established to share intelligence and expert points of view on talent and leadership. Through studies, books and a quarterly magazine, Briefings, we aim to increase understanding of how strategic talent decisions contribute to competitive advantage, growth and success.

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