

BLACK LIVES MATTER:
MOVING BEYOND D&I

**THE COVID-19 SCAPEGOATING
OF ASIAN AMERICANS**

**MENTAL HEALTH: TAKING
CARE OF OUR TEAMS**

INCLUSION

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*Creating Globally
Inclusive &
Culturally
Competent
Workplaces*

NETFLIX'S

**VERNĀ
MYERS**

**Leading the Charge
on Implementing Inclusive
and Equitable Practices**



Vernā Myers

VP, Inclusion Strategy, Netflix

Vernā Myers is an inclusion strategist, cultural innovator, thought leader, attorney, and social commentator. She is currently Netflix's Vice President, Inclusion Strategy. In this newly created role, she helps devise and implement strategies that integrate cultural diversity, inclusion, and equity into all aspects of Netflix's operations worldwide.

Myers is the author of *Moving Diversity Forward: How to Go From Well-Meaning to Well-Doing* and *What If I Say the Wrong Thing? 25 Habits for Culturally Effective People*. Her inspiring TED talk, "How to Overcome Our Biases? Walk Boldly Toward Them," has been viewed almost 3 million times. Myers has been cited in *The Atlantic*, *Forbes*, the *Harvard Business Review*, and the *TED Radio Hour* on NPR.

She earned her BA from Barnard College and JD from Harvard Law School.

Inclusion: What brought you to do this work? Is there a personal motivation, a story from your childhood or past that inspired you in this direction?

Vernā Myers: My decision to go both into law and into DEI stems from my deep sense of justice. That sense was instilled in me by my

incredibly principled parents and my childhood hero, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. I was only in elementary school when he was slain, but I made up my mind then to do my best to be the embodiment of King's dream and to live out his legacy of justice, equality, freedom, and dignity for everyone, especially my own people. His assassination definitely lit fires of rage in Baltimore where I grew up and around the nation. But from the angry ashes and the fear and shame of America came the opening of new doors of opportunity for a few, and I was one of those few who got to walk through them—new pools, summer jobs, math-enrichment camps, and open enrollment. This allowed me to ride across town out of my district to go my middle school of choice, which led to an awesome high school, then Barnard College, then Harvard Law School and on and on. I am grateful but also indebted to so many who sacrificed for me. I am committed to pushing as hard as I can to make change for others. This time, I hope that the doors of opportunity will expand to the point that Black folks and other marginalized groups get to walk through them.

IN: How has COVID-19 changed your perspective and your work?

VM: It hasn't so much changed my perspective. It has deepened my perspective about systemic inequalities, which I think COVID has laid bare. It's impossible to deny that we live in an unequal society, and what I have learned is that it is almost impossible to imagine the many unique situations people find themselves in depending on their race, religion, region of the world, gender, family obligations, mental health, economic status, and employer. You name it—difference makes a difference in how one experiences the same thing. As someone once said, "We might be in the same storm, but we are in different boats."

IN: Has the onset of COVID-19 and its impact on the economy made it more challenging to implement diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts?

VM: It may have but it shouldn't. We need more, not less, inclusion work at a time of crisis. It's never been a more important time for companies to look at every decision that they're making through an inclusion lens, which is to say all of our decisions about interviewing, hiring, letting people go, promotions, compensation, provision of resources, travel, etcetera. I know some companies have had to make some difficult business decisions that affect their staff, but an equity and inclusion mind-set are imperative in these cases. If you don't have that mind-set, the decisions will inevitably be based on bias, assumptions, comfort, and

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upholding the status quo. This means those who are in lesser positions in regard to status, social capital, and tenure in the company will be disproportionately impacted. Sadly, in most companies this is still people in underrepresented and historically marginalized groups. To make decisions fairly, we should always be keeping in mind the most vulnerable, not the best positioned.

IN: As the reported instances of discrimination against Asian Americans have increased because of COVID-19, is this a concern that you and your organization is addressing? How?

VM: It is terribly painful to see how prejudices rear their ugly heads in times like this, but it is not new. Crisis doesn't create discrimination; it uncovers it. Our Asian employees network hosted a conversation open to the company to share their concerns, feelings, and experiences about xenophobia. Members of our security team also participated, sharing their commitment to keep employees safe and to offer suggestions about the best way to deal with xenophobic acts. It opened all our eyes to the fear and anxiety that our own colleagues were experiencing. Our Inclusion Team followed with a company-wide talk with experts on the history of xenophobia, and how to recognize and interrupt xenophobia no matter where we see it, whether within our own walls or beyond.

IN: What will be some of the biggest issues and challenges in 2021 for a corporate diversity and inclusion leader like yourself?



Myers speaking at Qualcomm in 2017.

VM: I think we all need to use our imagination to think about how in this time of change we can fully integrate the practice of inclusion into the new workplace. I feel like COVID has helped us to uncover our weakness as well as our strengths. It's offered us an opportunity to confront some long-held beliefs about how to work and be productive that weren't necessarily true. For example, this is a time for us to think about how flexible we can be around work, how important it is to upgrade our mental health resources, how necessary inclusive, empathetic, and vulnerable leadership is to employee engagement. Sadly, many companies have learned through COVID that if you don't bias-proof your systems and practices—hiring, exiting, compensation, mentoring, feedback mechanisms, etcetera—underrepresented groups will be disproportionately and negatively impacted when times are difficult, erasing any progress the institution has made. We have seen the benefit of more frequent and transparent communication to minimize anxiety and keep the ship afloat. We have experienced the benefits and limitations of technology. Most companies have also had to acknowledge that we are not all the same; factors like your family situation, health status, tenure, level, cultural identity, and location all make a difference when it comes to how you experience the same workplace. We have been treated to a front row seat of how the “isms” and disparities affect how we live and work. My hope is that this awareness, empathy, and ability to flex will continue well after COVID and usher in a new, more inclusive workplace.

IN: This summer, as a result of Black Lives Matter protests focused on police reform, there has been an increased focus on the need for racial justice and equity in the workplace and in society in general. What is

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your company doing to advance change in your company or the community, or both?

VM: We are continuing our journey as a company to apply an inclusion lens to everything we do, whether it be with regard to our workplace and workforce or how we think about the business, our content, product, and customers. We were already investing in learning about bias, privilege, and allyship and connecting the dots between how what we do internally and externally is impacted and can interrupt systemic racism. The tragic and painful events that have opened more people's eyes to the issue of anti-Black racism in the US, and other parts of the world, have created a shared urgency. Like most companies, we are supporting groups and institutions that are at the forefront of change around these issues and continuing to increase representation of Black talent behind and in front of the camera and in our workplace. But we are also taking the time to think strategically about how we make this “more than a moment” and can be part of the solution around dismantling racial injustice and building a more equitable workplace and society. One important focus for us internally is making sure that we create the conditions for Black employees' success in our own workplace. We have lots of work to do, but we have made progress. We know our superpower is the power of storytelling. We have the ability to tell amazing stories about the complex lived experiences of people all over the world, for people to see their lives reflected and for all of us to see and respect the humanity of one another. **IN**