

Retail Practice

‘Creativity would skyrocket’: How diversity could transform fashion

CaSandra Diggs, president of the Council of Fashion Designers of America, shares her views on how the fashion industry can give diverse talent more visibility, voice, and agency.



When CaSandra Diggs first joined the Council of Fashion Designers of America (CFDA) in 2001, little did she know that she would become its first Black president 19 years later. Her entry into fashion was atypical: Diggs first studied criminal justice in college, and then accounting in business school. She also worked as a sales associate at Macy's, navigating school and work as she considered her future. A career in the fashion industry wasn't something she sought out. "It's something that I happened upon," she said. "But once I got there, I enjoyed it and decided to stay."

Diggs rose through the CFDA's ranks, most recently serving as its chief administrative and financial officer. Now, as president, she develops strategies to further the CFDA's purpose of championing and educating its membership and the fashion industry at large.

In February 2021—Black History Month—CFDA, in partnership with PVH Corp., released the *State of Diversity, Equity & Inclusion in Fashion* report, which draws on McKinsey research and analysis to present a framework for making progress toward equitable workplaces in the US fashion industry. Diggs sees the report as a starting point for "delving more deeply into the talent conversation," and she envisions the CFDA undertaking further studies on a variety of related topics, including meritocracy, education's role in upward mobility, and apprenticeship. She recently spoke with McKinsey's Pamela Brown and Stacey Haas about the key findings in the report and the

conversations she's having with industry leaders who want to effect true change. The following is an edited version of their conversation.

McKinsey: One of the messages that came across very clearly in the study is that the fashion industry is not accessible to everyone. What will it take for that to change?

CaSandra Diggs: I know someone who often refers to fashion as "a little island that not everyone can fit on." To some extent, I understand where that person is coming from. It is a small group of people driving a major industry. And we learned from the study how much people feel excluded. So, one of the things we're trying to do differently is make the tent wider and let in more voices that are not your typical voices in fashion.

There's room for everyone. There's opportunity for everyone. We don't have to dismiss people and keep them out; we just need to create more lanes. Fashion is a global industry. It's not just New York and LA—it's St. Louis, Chicago, Italy, Paris, Japan. I would love to see more people and more ideas in the industry. Steel sharpens steel: if you're creative and I'm creative, we can exchange ideas and elevate each other. The level of innovation and creativity would skyrocket.

Awareness is where it starts, with both students and professionals. Half the time, I don't even know all the opportunities that exist in our industry until I hear an announcement that someone has been

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hired. And I think to myself, I know someone else who would have been great for that job! It's time we start making the dialogue more open. When we do our talent searches, we can't keep going to the standard places. For example, HBCUs [historically Black colleges and universities] are wonderful institutions and places to look. We can tap into other institutions and associations to find talent, like the National Association of Black Accountants and the National Black MBA Association.

At CFDA, we launched a multi-initiative program called IMPACT, starting with a talent directory and a job platform. We knew that we were in the middle of a pandemic and that there might be less opportunities for full-time employment, but we thought there could be internships and freelance opportunities—ways for people to get a start in the industry. This job platform is a great way for creative industries to find talent. You can get lost on LinkedIn and Instagram, where there's a plethora of jobs in financial services, automotive, and other industries—so being targeted and specific is very, very important. Our platform is focused on fashion and creative industries.

If you're not aware of the opportunity, that's difficult enough. But if you're aware of the opportunity and can't access it, that's even more torturous and detrimental to you as an entrepreneur and professional. We have to keep on that track [of providing access to opportunities] until we see actual change.

McKinsey: Another strong message from the report is that people of color, even if they've overcome the access and awareness challenges, continue to struggle after they get jobs in the fashion industry. Some of them said they're made to feel like they don't belong. How can CFDA and fashion companies address that?

CaSandra Diggs: Yes, belonging is a challenge as well. Some of the next work we do has to be focused on allyship and sponsorship among those who are in decision-making, leadership positions. Oftentimes, these leaders fall into a pattern of

gatekeeping, which is wanting to be the only one who gets to make decisions. If you look at some of the challenges of diversity, equity, and inclusion, you see a dysfunctional team and toxic culture. The idea that there can only be one person in power usually exists in those spaces.

Our industry needs to address that. We have to figure out a way to educate leaders—train them so that they can “show up” better, be more supportive, and not feel threatened by new people coming in. Some may think, “Well, if I show this person what I know, I may be out of a job.” I think that comes from a place of fear. The more we can show that we can support people, and we can expand and grow the map—as opposed to kicking people out—the more willing leaders will be to become sponsors and allies.

I've been talking to leaders, especially leaders of noncolor, about how to be an ally. It means listening—not just talking, not just giving your opinion, but truly listening to the people in your organization and industry, and what they're sharing with you about their experiences and challenges.

I've also been talking to leaders about focusing on some of the tertiary things that impact talented people of color as they come into these organizations and try to perform at a high level. Mental illness, housing, healthcare—all of these are things that impact professionals. We need to make sure that they have the right resources around those things, too.

The leaders I've talked to are definitely more open and willing to have these conversations than they were a year or two years ago. But there's still a fear. “Cancel culture” worries them. But I don't believe in cancel culture: it's a level of accountability that people are not used to. So, it feels like you're being canceled, but you're just being held accountable. And sometimes you have to sit down and take a time-out, learn a bit, and come back. There's opportunity for redemption and repair.

McKinsey: As you mentioned, business leaders have become more willing to tackle diversity issues

over the past couple of years, and the discussion is always evolving. It's interesting, for example, that CFDA's 2019 report on this topic was on diversity and inclusion, while the 2021 report adds the word "equity." What does equity mean to you?

CaSandra Diggs: When people think about equity, they think it's a zero-sum game: if I need to help you, that means I have to stop helping someone else. Or, someone loses because someone else wins. I don't see equity as that. I see equity as a level of agency. Most people focus on diversity and inclusion, but even when you have visibility and voice, do you have control over the decision-making processes? That for me is what equity is: it's about having agency.

You want some level of control over your destiny and the things you get to work on and participate in. It's not just about [the organization] hearing your voice or seeing your presence. It's being able to effect change within the organization. If you don't have the opportunity to do that, you won't feel like you belong.

McKinsey: The report recommends several actions for fashion companies to take to drive diversity, equity, and inclusion. In your view, where should leaders and organizations start?

CaSandra Diggs: Start internally. Before we reach out to a wider audience, we have to make sure that our internal structures and policies—the things we're doing within our own companies and institutions—reflect what we want to see.

Then we need to activate other groups externally—whether it's Black Lives Matter groups, educational institutions, or government institutions. We need to talk to other industries and not be so insular about

our conversations. We don't have all the answers, and we don't know everything. We should be looking outward when we can, to work with others and try to get those answers. I'd love to see what the next industry collaboration is going to be to solve for diversity, equity, and inclusion.

The George Floyd killing prompted misguided actions by a lot of companies. I don't think they were malicious. I think they really cared, but because they had not laid the groundwork previously, their actions came across as performative. Now's their opportunity: they've posted [on social media], they've put up their black boxes, they've made their statements and proclamations. Now's the time for them to start doing the work, and for us to start paying attention to who posted and seeing what kind of work they've done in the past several months. We need to be checking with them every six to 12 months to see how it's going.

I've been in the fashion industry for 20-plus years, and I've seen it change—some for the better, some for the not so good—but, as a whole, I think we've moved the needle in the right direction. We just have to be patient. I always call patience a superpower. We didn't get here overnight, so I don't think that these problems will be solved overnight. But people need to stay committed. Everyone wants to feel like they belong. Everyone wants a chance at their dream. At the end of the day, everyone wants a seat at the table—and we need to figure out how to get that done.

For more from CaSandra Diggs, see the videos accompanying this article on McKinsey.com.

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