

Race and culture will be at the forefront of the corporate agenda

 [Bylan Fuhr](#)

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Traditionally, trends are a continuation of the growth and changes that societies, industries and markets are experiencing. 2020 accelerated some things and caused a complete upheaval in others. These are the three biggest cultural and leadership trends that I believe will shape businesses in 2021.



Ian Fuhr

Trend #1: Race will be at the forefront of corporate issues and discussions

In many ways, 2020 revealed South Africa for what it is – a country deeply divided by racial polarisation.

For years we've collectively been following a false dichotomy, believing that if we don't talk about race, it doesn't exist. White South Africans, in particular, have feared that mentioning race only serves to exaggerate our differences, and that doing so might label them as racists.

Deeply ingrained paradigms of racial superiority and inferiority have permeated every fabric of our society and created the inequality that we witness every day. This can no longer be ignored. In fact, trying to be colour blind has blind-sided us all.

Racial polarisation will not quietly go away. If we do not address it, the state of hopelessness that many South Africans were experiencing by the end of 2020 will persist.

Instead, if we truly want to heal as a nation, and if we want our businesses to recover and even thrive, 2021 needs to be the year of tough conversations that address racism head on. It must be the year of radically tackling the inequalities of our society and creating opportunities for all.

In short, business leaders must embrace these simple truths:

- Racial polarisation is real
- Productivity and service are undermined by racial tensions
- Talking about race doesn't burden us, it frees us
- We handicap ourselves when we operate in racial silence

Our diversity is beautiful. If we can learn to embrace and respect each other, our diversity can be our super-power.

Trend #2: Cultureneering will take centre-stage

Culture-driven leaders, or Cultureneers, put their people and culture first. This leadership style is based on a true motivation to grow others through a deep and entrenched business culture that puts people first.

The culture-driven leader knows that culture and the bottom line aren't just related – culture is the bottom line.

They work from the bottom up to build a nurturing community culture that has a solid foundation of service and upliftment, providing support, encouragement, equal treatment, effective communication and mentorship to employees, so that they in turn give exceptional service to customers.

They also single-mindedly build a common purpose across the full spectrum of employees, which puts the customer at the centre of everything. They develop the skills of their people and build their self-esteem, thus enhancing their ability to continuously improve their service to others.

The core values that make up a culture-driven leader are:

- A set of moral values that put people first and is entirely focused on customer service
- Trust, respect and community building become the foundation of a culture that everyone can believe in
- Employees have a sense of belonging regardless of their group or background
- Serving others becomes the common purpose and greed, corruption, discrimination and bias are thrown onto the trash heap of history.

Within the South African environment, achieving any of these goals is impossible without also addressing systemic racism in the workplace – which is why these trends work hand in hand.

Trend #3: Culture champions will become a company's most valuable employees

As much as culture starts at the top, it must come alive throughout the organisation, and that takes culture champions: people who love people and are passionate about service. Culture cannot be the purview of the leader alone.

2021 will be the year that we begin settling into hybrid remote workforces after the quick fixes of 2020. Employees will expect more flexibility and teams will move between home offices and corporate offices. As we've seen, many knowledge workers are also making life changes, choosing to move out of cities and working remotely. This means that while culture will remain critical, how businesses build and maintain it will change.

Enter the culture champion. A culture champion should be given a title that makes it clear what their responsibilities are, and their sole focus should be building a culture of service. This isn't a side role; it's the most important role in your business. It brings everything else together and gives your employees purpose. And when most meetings are still virtual and your teams aren't spending each day in each other's company, it's more important than ever.

ABOUT IAN FUHR

Ian Fuhr is the founder of The Hatch Institute.

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