



Culture of Contribution

By Dr Mike Ashby



THE **BREAKTHROUGH.CO**

EXEC SUMMARY

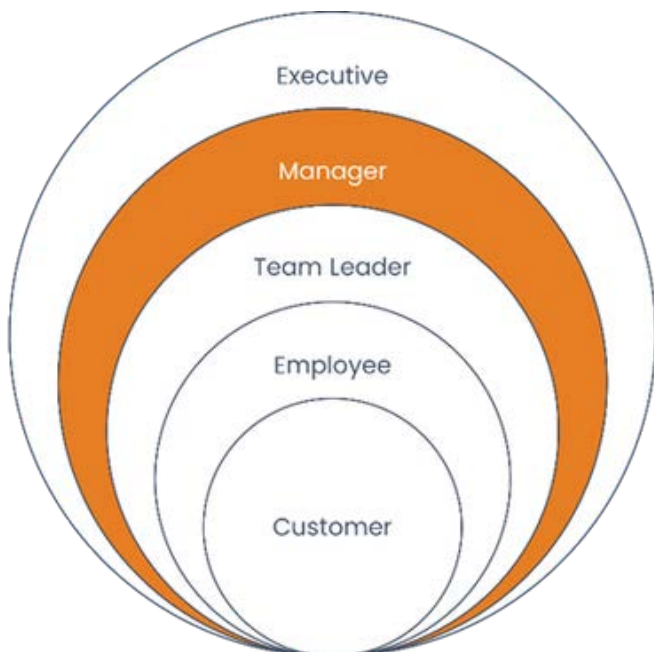
This article looks at the value of contribution as an organizing concept for a high-performance culture. We're all familiar with the idea of engagement but contribution is at another level. It's more centered on the mutually beneficial relationship between employee and organization - a more human workplace.

INSIDE THE ORGANIZATION

The concept of contribution operates at every level in the organization, starting with the individual.

Individuals

We want people in our organization who are wired to contribute. Contribution is more than engagement: people can feel engaged without making a contribution. Everyone contributing to the peak of their ability moves the organization faster towards its goals - it approaches genuine high performance.



Managers

In our view, a manager's primary job is to enable their people to make a bigger and better contribution. And while managers are looking for a greater contribution from their team, their team members are looking to their managers for a contribution from the organization and their leaders.

Alec Horniman of the Darden School of Business poses three questions every individual has of their manager:

- Can I trust you?
- Do you care about me?
- Are you committed to quality?

Contribution from team members can make them feel vulnerable so high performance needs managers to ensure psychological safety.

Leaders

Everything about managers empowering contribution from their teams and making a personal contribution applies to leaders and the leadership team.

The way to develop a culture of contribution is to introduce the concept of contribution consistently and regularly as part of your policies and processes.

Contribution is a choice.

BEYOND THE ORGANIZATION

The idea of contribution creates opportunities to change the narrative about the organization's place in the market, wider society and the environment.

The most important thing a high performance leader does is lead the organization in adapting to the new realities of its environment. To survive in the long term, you have to be relevant.

Customer

Consider the customer dimension to contribution of "Are you making their lives easier? Is your offering everything you say it is?"

Society

The last few years have seen massive disruptions to the past certainties of work, community and social life.

Diversity, equity and inclusion are defining issues in our time. To stay relevant, organizations have to work out how to make a contribution to the social well-being of their communities and societies.

This might be hiring and promotion practices, embracing diversity, and strengthening anti-discrimination practices.

McKinsey research quantifies the impact of the racial wealth gap (see chart of p. 14).

Contribution is not always comfortable.

Consider where you might look for opportunity to make a positive contribution.

Environment

How does your organization contribute to the well-being of the planet? At this level, the word implies more than compliance or contract. A contribution is not just voluntary; it also carries a cost.

This is a space for innovation in the organization you lead that genuinely engages the next generation of managers (and customers).



Today's biggest problems are not solvable in our lifetime, but we can contribute our energy and our effort to the process of making the world a better place.

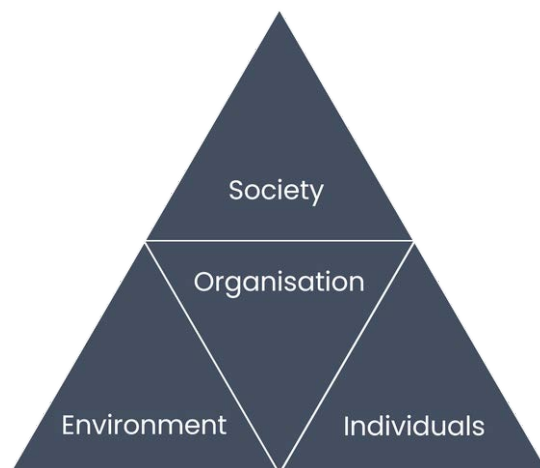
Senior executive in our program

The fact we can't solve them today is no reason not to contribute.

In the wake of these epoch-making events, the opportunity for us as leaders to consider how we can make a contribution to the people in our organizations, our communities, and our planet.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The idea of contribution is a powerful vehicle for change. From time to time, you will find yourself in a place of fear or discomfort. And at that point, your contribution will call for the highest form of leadership: courage.



INTRODUCTION

66%

said work defines their purpose

(McKinsey)

15%

agreed they are living their purpose at work

65%

US based employees reflecting on purpose after COVID

50%

rethinking the kind of work they do

(Microsoft)

3x

Millennials more likely to be re-evaluating

INTRODUCTION

Through many years of running management training and leadership development programs, we've learned that the concept of contribution casts a different light on how leaders, manager and team members think about themselves and their role – their purpose for being at work.

This article looks at the value of contribution as an organizing concept for a high-performance culture. We're all familiar with the idea of engagement but contribution is at another level. It's more centered on the mutually beneficial relationship between employee and organization.

Purpose and contribution go beyond the walls of the organization. While the economic challenges of day-to-day life are still top priority for most people, other issues have made their way to the surface, such as the purpose of work, how our society functions and the future of our planet.

The question for a high performance organization is we make a contribution to those issues so that employees, especially our top performers, can feel a sense of affinity and belonging.

ORIGINS OF CONTRIBUTION

Our interest in the concept of contribution started in a board meeting about improving operational performance in a manufacturing plant.

Of the many things that could be done better, three things stood out as the critical few that would create greatest impact:

1. **clearer communication**
2. **better teamwork**
3. **a more open learning mindset**

On reflection, those all revolve around collaboration, which in turn requires people to contribute.

When everybody contributes to the peak of their ability, the organization goes faster.

A mechanical engineering client recently delivered their fastest ever modification for a standard product.

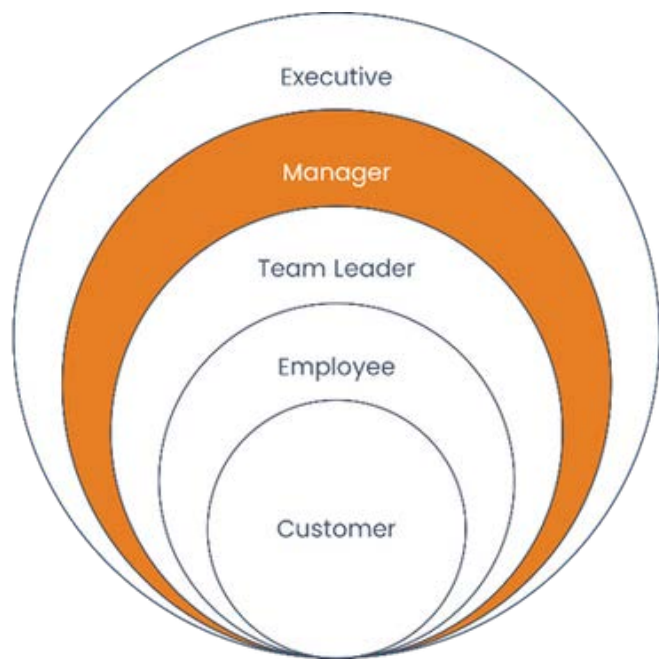


I'm asking the right questions – we're getting a lot more ideas because they realize they have a voice, they can change things rather than have to accept things the way they've always been. We've given them permission, and now they're comfortable with participation.

Mechanical engineering client

In other words, people are contributing their ideas and their energy to a challenge, and the outcome is better results, not just feeling better.

The concept of contribution operates at every level in the organization, starting with the individual.



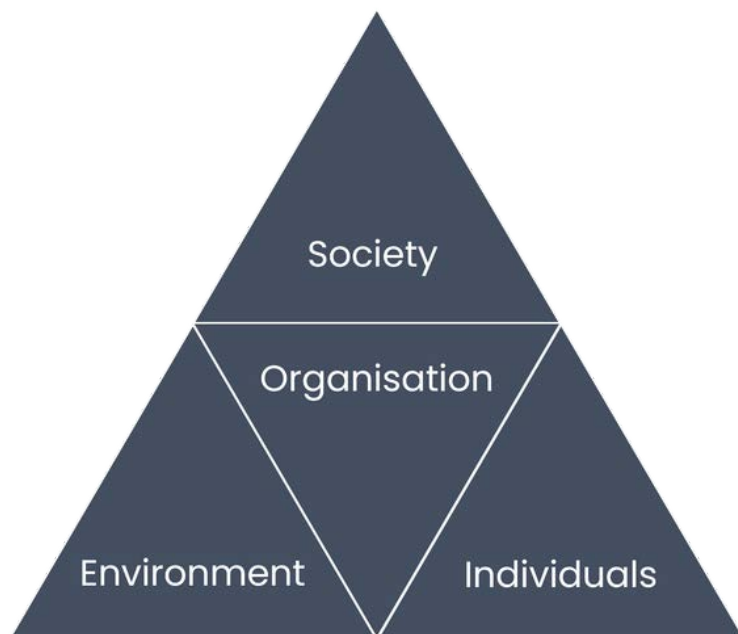
But at that level many people don't think about it or express it in those terms. We've found that contribution only energizes people when it is articulated, and that happens when the organization, via leadership and management, authorizes and invites it.

In a high performance leadership culture, responsibility for making contribution flourish sits with the manager, specifically at the middle of the organization.

And to get the full benefit of a culture of contribution, it has to be enabled and supported by the leaders of the organization.

This has never been more important. The scale of change in the 2020s is unprecedented for our society. The long term effects of lockdowns, greater awareness of racism and growing acceptance of climate change are unknown but they could result in a different concept of leadership, inviting leaders to rethink the relevance of their organizations to their communities, their societies and their planet.

This is not to diminish the importance of commercial success. However, if we have 'return to shareholders' as our first priority, then attracting and keeping the best talent is going to be the key to maximizing returns, and if creating a culture of contribution beyond the walls of the organization assists with that, it's completely consistent with advancing the interest of the shareholders.



CONTRIBUTION INSIDE THE ORGANIZATION

INDIVIDUAL

We want people in our organization who are wired to contribute. In a work setting, contribution is not just a piece of work or a task (outputs) as part of a job definition.

Contribution also includes less tangible but equally important outcomes such as:

- Expressing well-considered views to a team discussion
- Demonstrating a willingness to follow and act in support of the strategic direction
- Taking responsibility for initiatives and opportunities outside a narrow interpretation of their “job”
- Being a guardian of the culture and bringing energy to the workplace

Contribution is more than engagement: people can feel engaged without making a contribution. They can love their work without connecting to the organization.

Sarah O'Connor writes in the Financial Times about people who love their work but hate their jobs. The work is what people do: they might be engaged by the intellectual challenge of their tasks or the significance of the work. The job is where their work fits in the organization, what the organization does, its purpose and its culture.



A bad manager can turn a good job bad overnight.

Sarah O'Connor

Our role as leaders is to help people enjoy not only their work but also their job as it relates to the organization, to go beyond engagement in their work and on to a sense of connection with the enterprise.

We pay a great deal of attention to engagement and collaboration, but a sense of togetherness and a feeling of engagement are not end goals in themselves. They are a prerequisite to enabling a more significant contribution from individuals and teams, which is what drives better results.

Everyone contributing to the peak of their ability moves the organization faster towards its goals.

However, that contribution still has to be unlocked.

Contribution can energize and connect to purpose.

Contribution is also more than “the job I’m paid to do” because it’s voluntary and discretionary. It has a moral and attitudinal dimension in the sense that it’s the right thing to do, there’s an element of improvement.

For those people who wish to contribute, they do so because virtue is its own reward – they like to contribute, and because contribution is voluntary and self-selected. It also enables self-expression which energizes people in their work, making them feel more connected to their purpose and the purpose of the organization.

Contribution is a choice.

The concept of contribution promotes appreciation from colleagues at every level because it moves the conversation from the specifics of jobs and outputs and on to roles and outcomes. A contribution discussion is at a high enough level to create commonality among and across teams, resulting in greater recognition and understanding, which in turn makes communication channels wider and deeper.

Contribution from individuals:

- enables self expression and energizes
- connects them to their purpose and the organization's purpose
- promotes shared understanding and better communication in teams

Consider another example from the engineering shop. The manager runs The Breakthrough Co development program for his team of supervisors and team leaders.

He’s a reluctant speaker and was apprehensive about the first group meeting so he had a set of questions prepared. He didn’t get past the first one. People wanted to contribute – the team leader from the drafting team talked for 10 minutes straight with everyone’s full and undivided attention.

Afterwards there was the kind of conversation in the room about process and collaboration that had never happened before. The manager said he almost felt left out. Having been invited to contribute, the drafting team leader has kept up the conversation, seeking out his manager and his colleagues for feedback and with new ideas.

The drafting team, having been a block for years, is transformed.

Reflect for a moment: what is your greatest contribution to your organization? Is your answer straight out of your job description or is it something more? How do you feel as you consider your contribution – what happens to your energy and sense of value?

Consider the contributions from your team members – what does it tell you about their real value to the organization?



MANAGER

Our perspective moves out from the individual to their manager. In our view, a manager's primary job is to enable their people to make a bigger and better contribution. That's the point of all the essentials of management like clarifying expectations, removing barriers, providing resources, coaching, feedback, and so on.

If we look at our people through the lens of how we can help them make a bigger contribution, it clarifies the value they bring to the organization right now, because that is the start point for their development.

Note that contribution and achievement are not the same things.

While achievements should always be a contribution, contribution is not limited to achievements.

Managers and team members have expectations of each other.

While managers are looking for a greater contribution from their team, their team members are looking for a contribution from the organization and specifically their managers. What they want to see is the organization's leaders and their own managers demonstrate clarity of direction, empathy for individuals, and integrity.

But what does that mean in practical terms?

At an executive residential program, Alec Horniman of the Darden School of Business posed the three questions every individual has of their manager:

- Can I trust you?
- Do you care about me?
- Are you committed to quality?

Those questions are even more salient today.

Contribution from team members can make them feel vulnerable.

Making a contribution for a team member can be an act of making themselves vulnerable if it means saying something that they think their managers don't want to hear. The safest option is to stay silent, and most managers cannot hear what is in the silence other than a confirmation that all is well.

High performance needs managers to ensure psychological safety.

That means that it's up to the managers to ensure psychological safety, the shared belief that a team is safe for interpersonal risk taking. That belief is essential to high performance. Ordinary teams stick to conventional ideas and avoid controversy because they fear the reaction they'll get. High performing teams openly and honestly voice their ideas and opinions, which leads to greater diversity of views and more innovation. But that can only happen in an environment of trust.



Trust is the currency of change

Alec Horniman

How would you answer Horniman's three questions:

- Am I trustworthy – can my team trust me?
- How would they know I care about them as people?
- How would they see I'm committed to quality?

LEADER

The last layer of contribution inside the the organization is the leader.

Everything we've said so far about managers empowering contribution from their teams and making a personal contribution applies to leaders in their functional role and as members of the leadership team.

- Succession – developing your own successor who can replace you when it's your time to make a contribution elsewhere
- Share some of your good stuff so that your team members get the opportunity to stand in the limelight and make a bigger contribution
- Reach into the organization – be visible to people on the front lines, hear their perspective on life in front of the customer/supplier/staff
- Be genuinely interested in learning about their contribution – you won't learn anything if all you're doing is positioning yourself to look empathetic

As a leadership team, the way to develop a culture of contribution is to introduce the concept consistently and regularly.

Here's some questions you might consider making part of your policies and processes.

Assess contribution in your recruitment process:

- What is the biggest contribution you have made to your last company and why? Provide an example?
- How do you contribute to a team?
- Over and above the job description, how do you think you would make a contribution to this company?
- What contribution do you want from us?

Preface your annual planning session with your team:

- As a team, how do we contribute to our company's strategic objectives?
- How can we improve our contribution this year?

Adapt your individual performance review process:

- Where do you feel you've made your biggest contribution to the team?
- Where do you wish to contribute more? What stops you?

Beyond these specific points, using contribution as a framework links to a leader's daily business of coaching, resourcing, setting direction and ensuring the work environment is both challenging and safe.

Developing a culture of contribution becomes a leadership habit.

Consider introducing contribution in:

- your recruitment process
- your team's annual planning sessions
- individual performance reviews

Consider the suggestions for introducing contribution in your policies and processes. How would they improve current practices?



CONTRIBUTION BEYOND THE ORGANIZATION

A high performance leadership team thinks not only about how to run the company, but also about the organization's place in the market, the industry and wider society. There are opportunities to change the narrative in each of those domains, and the idea of contribution is one way of thinking about that.

This is not about politics or culture. The most important thing a high performance leader does is lead the organization in adapting to the new realities of its environment. To survive in the long term, you have to be relevant.

Here's the thing: you may disagree about how the world around you is changing, and therefore how you should adapt. But you would be ill-advised to imagine that it is not changing and that you do not need to alter course.

You will leave this organization one day. You have a duty to leave it with a bright future, not just a glorious past.

CUSTOMERS

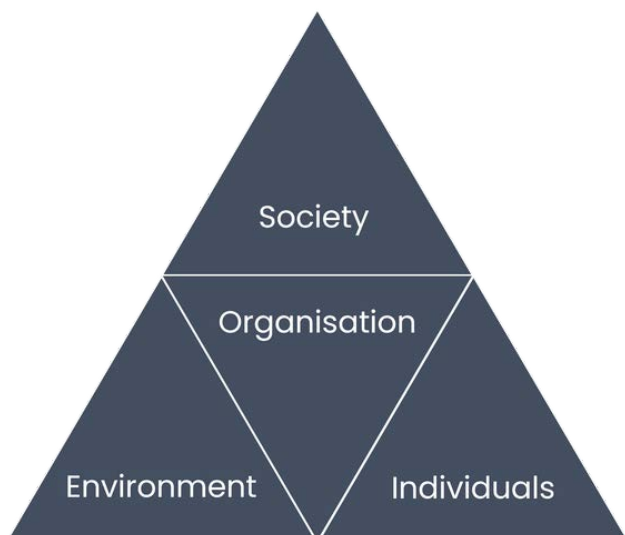
The customer is the first layer outside the organization. Consider the customer dimension to contribution of "Are you making their lives easier? Is your offering everything you say it is?"

Are you making customers lives easier?

Contribution also applies to your service and support – do your interactions and service requirements create work for your customer? Are you consciously or unconsciously locking them in through complexity: do you make it too hard for customers to get what they want or leave you to go to another provider? Are you charging fees for services that carry no cost to you (junk fees)?

Even if you're not imposing time or effort costs, are your terms and conditions fair or are they loaded in your favor? Do they have to be?

Beyond taking away negative friction, how could you make a bigger contribution to your customer – information, advice, process improvements, training?



SOCIETY

The last few years have seen massive disruptions to the past certainties of work, community and social life. Attitudes to race, sexuality, wealth distribution, culture, political affiliation and climate change are like fault lines in western society.

Regardless on which side of the line you stand personally, diversity, equity and inclusion become defining issues in our time and for many organizations.

To stay relevant, organizations have to work out how to make a contribution to the social well-being of their communities and societies.

There's a large number of current and prospective employees and customers who want to see action over and above postures in social media.

39%

people turned down / didn't pursue a job because of a perceived lack of inclusiveness

([McKinsey survey](#))

We miss out on 40% of potential applicants if we cannot demonstrate inclusiveness, and that number is likely to grow as younger generations enter the workforce.

In a policy sense, this might look like hiring and promotion practices, embracing diversity, strengthening anti-discrimination practices (all well-established practices that are becoming the default setting).

At a personal level, it's simple.

Here in New Zealand, a violent extremist gave us the opportunity to look at ourselves when he killed 50 Muslim Kiwis.



We've got to change the way we treat people who are different from us.

Factory owner in Christchurch

Contribution is not always comfortable.

The best contributions may be the least comfortable because they may involve personal hardship (sacrifice).

As a straight white male, I have to face the fact that I have been privileged. [McKinsey research](#) from 2019 shows that white men make up 36% of entry-level professionals and 68% of C-suite occupants. The figures for white women are 31 and 19%. For men of color, the figures at the start are 16% dropping to 9%. For women of color, 17% drops to 4% - and for black men and women, the figures are a quarter of that. Look at the graphic on page 14 for a powerful picture of McKinsey's research.

Consider where you might look for opportunity to make a positive contribution. For example, where you have a choice to hire or promote between a straight white male and a non-straight white male who may be a little less qualified, choose the latter. Observable evidence suggests the former will have plenty of opportunities to advance.

You could go with the default setting of 'we hire on merit alone'. But then your contribution will be to extend the convention created and sustained by straight white males.

Deciding not to make a contribution is a contribution to the status quo.

ENVIRONMENT

How does your organization contribute to the well-being of the planet? At this level, the word implies more than compliance or contract.

A contribution is not just voluntary; it also carries a cost.

What are we prepared to forego to ensure the long-term health of the planet? Have you thought about how much you really need, and can that be translated to your personal choices like packaging, paper, plastic, non-renewable energy sources and non-recyclables of all kinds?

It applies even more to the organization you lead. This is a space for innovation that genuinely engages the next generation of managers (and customers). Is higher productivity a priority over making our contribution to a healthier physical environment?

The world changes in seismic shifts like COVID, single incidents like a killing on a Minneapolis street, but change at work is every bit as meaningful to you as an individual because change is local too.

Consider asking people at your next team meeting what their biggest contribution was yesterday or last week. Would it be a better indicator of what they saw as being of greatest importance, as opposed to what was on their work plan?

Today's biggest problems are not solvable in our lifetime, but we can contribute our energy and our effort to the process of making the world a better place.

Senior executive in our program

The fact we can't solve them today is no reason not to contribute.

Leave aside the moral imperative. Recent research also points to consumers having a heightened awareness of how businesses interact with stakeholders, local communities, and society more broadly. The top concerns were around hygienic packaging and how companies keep their employees safe, but sustainable solutions and environment-friendly products are also on the list. People care more now about company behavior.

The only level omitted here is the investor. That is because the narrative for the last generation or so has been focused on the contribution businesses can make to investors, and businesses have done an admirable job judging by the unequal accumulation of wealth.

In the wake of these epoch-making events, the opportunity for us as leaders to consider how we can make a contribution to the people in our organizations, our communities, and our planet.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The idea of contribution is a powerful vehicle for change in the hands of individuals, managers and leaders in an organization. From time to time, you will find yourself in a place of fear or discomfort. And at that point, your contribution will call for the highest form of leadership: courage.

DISCOVER HOW EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT CAN TRANSFORM YOUR BUSINESS

Ready to learn more?

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ABOUT THE BREAKTHROUGH CO

The Breakthrough Co specializes in delivering leadership development for operational managers.

We help you create a more human workplace through management training that sticks.

Our approach leads to permanent and significant behavior change among learners – and their leaders. Let the middle of your organization drive enduring culture change. Without a single workshop.



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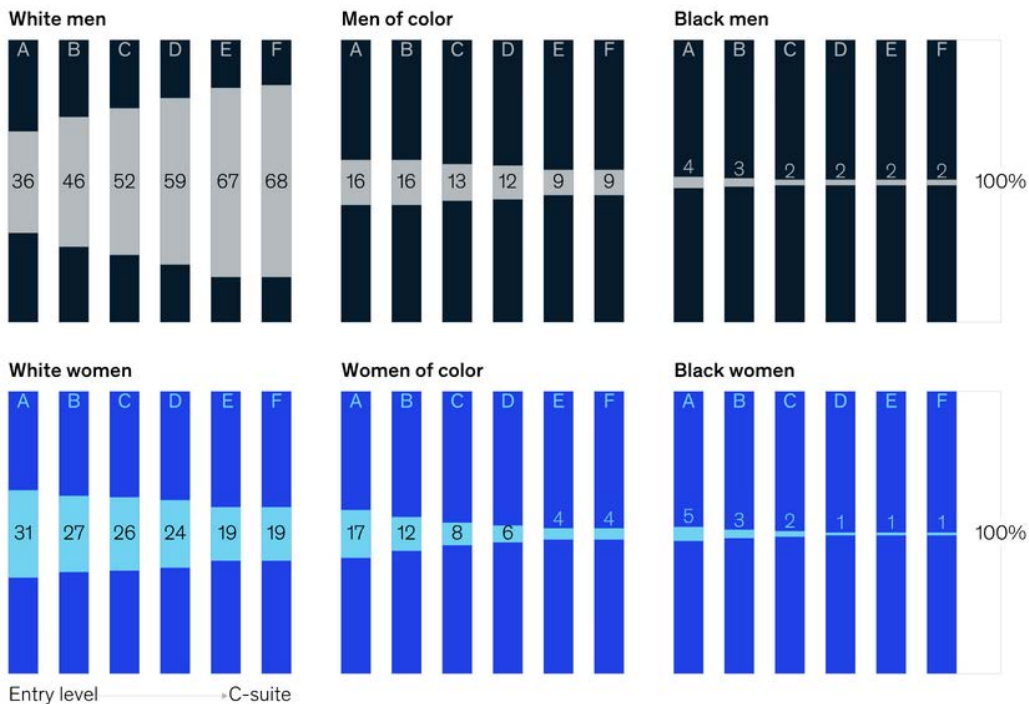
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“Understanding Organizational Barriers to a More Inclusive Workplace”, a survey published in McKinsey & Company Our Insights, June 23, 2020

The pipeline to highly compensated executive roles sheds professionals of color, especially Black professionals, at every level.

Share of professionals by role category, %¹

A Entry-level professional, B manager, C senior manager/director, D vice president, E senior vice president, F C-suite professional



¹From study of 279 North America–focused companies. Figures may not sum to 100%, because of rounding.
Source: *Women in the Workplace 2018*, joint report by LeanIn.Org and McKinsey, October 2018, [womenintheworkplace.com](#)