

Paul Mefford

Global M&E Learning and Talent Development Leader

The Dow Chemical Company

Paul Mefford has seen what a company can achieve when it strives to create a diverse workforce. As Dow's Global M&E Learning and Talent Development Leader, he is optimistic about the present, but admits there is still much work to be done.

"There's a lot of people that say the right things, but in this space, it's all about action," cautioned Mefford. "I'm thankful that I get to work for a company that puts so much time and effort into diversity."

Mefford goes beyond finding the right person for the right job. If that was all he did, Dow's success would be limited. Instead, he uses his purpose to guide him rather than his job description. "My purpose is to unleash the greatness of others. And I do that through service, purpose, and inspiration each day."

According to Mefford, companies fail at their diversity initiatives because they are not deliberate and specific about what they want to achieve. "It's about intentionality," said Mefford. "It's really easy to put things on slides and on paper; it's another thing to actually do it. The challenges that I've faced in my role are there were times when I didn't speak up when I know I should have, out of fear of retribution. I think a lot of people are still afraid to speak up. Having necessary and courageous conversations around race is absolutely critical."

At Dow, such conversations are done through "inclusion moments" at the beginning of meetings, where people share interactions they've had where they learned something about other people or themselves. This openness removes the fear that employees have when

talking about race, gender, or sexual orientation, and it becomes a learning experience for all in the meeting.

"That's how we've begun to shift the culture of our company," Mefford explained. "Originally, it felt like we were happy to check the box. And now, action has taken over."

Now that the reflex is towards inclusion, Mefford works to make sure it permeates throughout the company, and not only in certain pockets. When Mefford walks into meetings and notices that everyone looks like him, he feels it's his duty to engage his colleagues in conversations that get them to see the importance of taking diversity seriously.

"We talked about it in terms of a target, but you got to have support at all levels around it," he said. "It's not just about putting female leadership in place, or minority leadership, it's about putting the right people in the right opportunities, and letting them grow and flourish." Support around diverse hires is key to them succeeding in their position, and not feeling they have to be something that they are not. Mefford offers that support by being a vocal advocate for people of color and women in the company. "I'm more vocal with my mentorship, because there's so much untapped potential that exists."



Another area where Mefford has shifted Dow's priorities is in recruitment. HBCUs used to be a talent pool that they ignored, but that is no longer the case. Mefford realized that the culture shift within Dow would be solidified by ensuring that the new hires coming in fit the culture they are creating. "We had a bias around only recruiting at the top engineering universities within the United States and even abroad," admitted Mefford. "As we were recruiting from the same universities, we were targeting minorities, but our culture still was not changing. So we began to look at HBCUs by heavily investing our time and resources in STEM programs at HBCUs."

What other companies can learn from Mefford and Dow is that achieving a diverse workforce is a journey with no comfortable shortcuts. They are showing that without the desire of leadership to make that change happen, diversity plans do not work, and neither is waiting for the right moment to act.

"You can never get things 100 percent right, but you've got to constantly work on it. You need to make sure you're meeting the needs of the people where they are, through active listening, embracing them, their background, their heritage, and their culture. Not assimilating them, but allowing their strengths to come to life. We're at the beginning stages of that."

As the culture has shifted, Dow's diverse talent pool is beginning to talk about the company differently. Mefford hears those stories through mentorship and advocacy programs within the company, which is how he knows things are changing in the right direction.

"I'm more and more convinced that even if it's not my generation that gets it right, what I'm instilling in my children is amazing in that they don't see skin color as an impediment, but as a strength," said Mefford. "I'm waiting for the generation that grows up when that bias never comes into play, whether consciously or unconsciously."