

WRITTEN BY JESSICA GOLD

PERSPECTIVES

# THE ESSENCE OF BLACK WOMEN LEADERS



ESSENCE LEARNING

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As a Gen Z Black woman who just graduated from college amidst the chaos of 2020, I've had many questions this year. More specifically, I've had a lot of questions about the kinds of companies and work environments would be best for me. I was fortunate enough to find a position at Essence Learning, which, in addition to helping individuals and organizations create inclusive and equitable workplace environments, has surrounded me with supportive, hardworking, and passionate Black women. This kind of community in a professional environment is entirely new to me. I didn't have a Black teacher until I was a junior in college, and in most formal and professional settings, I was one of a few, if not the only, Black woman. So, with a treasure trove of Black women to learn from, I decided to interview them. If Essence Learning seems to do everything right with regards to inclusion, what does it take to make the essence of Essence Learning more widely available in professional environments?



## THE BLACK WOMEN LEADERS OF ESSENCE LEARNING

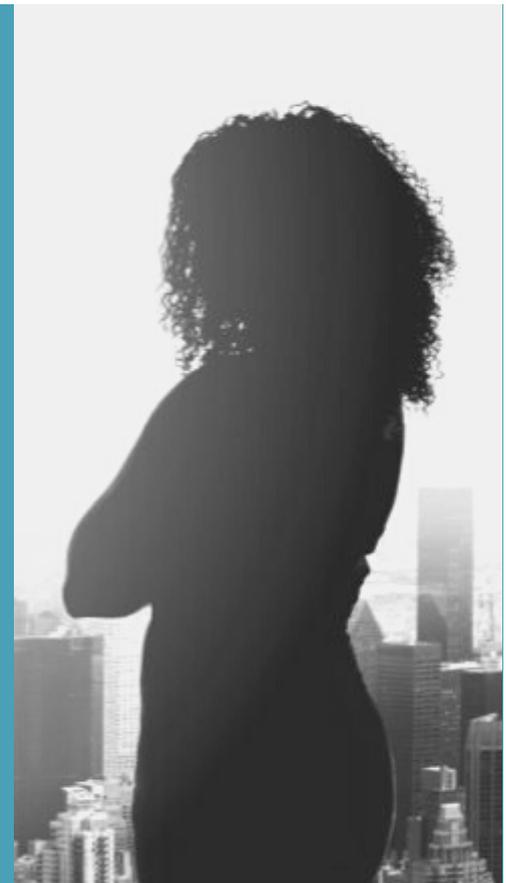
For a week, I video chatted with 6 of the Black women who make up our workplace. We span two cities, four generations, and experience in countless industries. I always started by asking about what generation they identified with and their previous work experiences. Their thoughts about their previous workplaces ranged from glowing to quite dim. Most of us had our first Black female boss in Valerie Wilson, the founder, and CEO of Essence Learning. She founded Essence Learning in 2018, after having long careers in retail and finance. Valerie is in good company as an entrepreneur, with rates of Black women owned businesses growing by 50% in 2019.

Still, even though Black women make up most of the Black workforce (53% to be exact), in corporate spaces, we get a fraction of the promotions despite asking at the same rate as men. Of course, this only becomes more egregious the higher that you get on an org chart. Only 1.4% of C-Suite roles are Black women, and there are currently no Black women CEOs for Fortune 500 companies. Our Marketing Director, Tiffanie, who has been at the executive level before, explained that this happens when "space is not made for us" at the senior level. She expands that in rooms where white men are in charge, they have something in common with white women and Black men, but not Black women. This can make it hard for them to let us in. Research shows that she's right. Many managers fall into the trap of looking for someone that is a clone of themselves. Of course, ignoring race and gender, this is an issue because any team needs various people to play different parts. However, the challenge of implicit bias makes this especially difficult for people of color to fit the bill.

When we do make it to leadership positions, we strive to make a difference. A study on the state of Black women in corporate America showed that more than any other group, we value the opportunity to influence a workplace's culture and be role models for people like us. My co-workers communicated the same sentiment. Kanetra, our Program Director and eLearning Consultant, explains that it is crucial for older generations to "teach [younger generations] how to get in and deal with the problems we face" so that they more effectively bring their passion and creativity into the workplace. She says that innovation and openness to new ideas are necessary for a workplace that is beneficial to employees of all ages. Valerie also emphasized the importance of being a mentor. "We didn't have that kind of support," she says, "it was hard to be a mentee because you don't feel like you can be vulnerable. So, we have to give back now so that younger people have a better experience." This focus on supporting younger employees is essential to creating workplaces where younger people and people of color feel included.

## WHAT MAKES A GOOD LEADER?

My youngest interviewee, our Digital Marketing Specialist Tierra, told me she considers a good leader to be one that "takes accountability, supports newcomers and their interests, and [is] open to new ideas." It's also important for leaders to be "forward-thinking... and strength-finding," says Data Analyst Jeanie. She describes leaders as being "the quarterback that calls the audibles" and directs the team. Good leaders know how to assess everyone's skills on a team and use that knowledge to produce desired results. The choices that leaders make affect the culture of the entire office. Charisse, Human Resources Director for Essence Learning, expands, saying that everyone holds some responsibility for culture, but it must start with the senior leadership like presidents and CEOs.



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These values that emphasize encouragement, care, and invention are methods for transitioning from just diversity to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Diversity is normal for younger generations; we were born into a world that, for some older people, seemed far away. Especially for those who remember a time of segregation and/or integration, our current society is an entirely new one. Regardless of age, race, or gender, "people work harder for you when they know that you care," says Tiffanie. Commitment to cultivating talent has been proven to impact organization performance positively and is reflected beautifully at Essence Learning. My time at Essence Learning has been enhanced by support in learn new skills and encouragement to submit input and ideas freely. When you create an environment that meets people where they are, develops trust, and emphasizes continuous learning, as Valerie says is her goal, you empower people to do great work.

Knowledge of how to navigate existing predispositions and demographic differences is another vital skill for existing leaders. A study conducted by Deloitte in multiple countries found that Cognizance of Bias and Cultural Intelligence are two of the six most important inclusive leadership characteristics.

There has been a recent push for recognizing inequality and generational differences in the workplace. Charisse shared that younger generations "are more open to a liberal society, and [value] acceptance," but there is still "so much division, hate, and racism even within generations." Everyone I interviewed agreed that even within generations, race and culture play a big part in how people interact with the world. Jeanie talked about how identity building "starts at home," so people of color may not have all of the same generational differences as white people. "We live in the history of past generations," asserts Kanetra. She goes on to explain that generational differences are significant, but they are not clearly defined enough, so we end up focusing on weaknesses rather than maximizing strengths. This often causes intimidating and judgmental environments, prompting some, like Tierra, to create a sort of "professional identity" as a buffer. Of course, in the ideal inclusive environment, people can show up as their whole selves without fear of being evaluated on anything but their work. At Essence Learning, the Black women leaders who run the show appreciate employees as full people and not just workers.

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## BLACK WOMEN DESERVE OPPORTUNITES TO LEAD

Being both Black and female in the workplace gives you a unique understanding of what it means to be genuinely supported. Often, we feel like we must be infallible to avoid negative stereotypes and be considered for praise and promotion. Thus, as leaders, most Black women strive to be better and make our workplaces and the world better. We dedicate ourselves to pulling others up with us and being positive forces for change.

This year has been monumental for diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, and we must keep this same energy as we advance. In addition to promoting good leaders committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion, we must address inequity in the recruitment and hiring processes and amplify the voices of those who have been most marginalized by current systems. If we can keep the fire lit, boardrooms will better reflect our increasingly diverse society. Employees will enjoy work environments that allow them to focus on the work they were hired to do rather than inequities in treatment. As I begin my career, I am more convinced than ever that Black women are uniquely positioned to exemplify the kind of leadership necessary to get us there.

Valerie's commitment to continuous learning and development shows me what it looks like to make a wide range of strengths in one team work together. Charisse's dedication to promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion teach me to be patient because progress is slow but worth the wait. Tiffanie's philosophy of mutual respect and care demonstrates that grace and encouragement are necessary for willingness to improve. Kanetra's commitment to innovation and forward-thinking push me to look for opportunities rather than harp on difficulties. Jeanie's flexibility and understanding remind me to take things one step at a time. Tierra's openness and ingenuity remind me to be bold and share my ideas.

Because of Essence Learning, I have hope that with the increase in diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, future generations will find inclusive workplace environments. We have come a long way, and the future is bright, but we have a long road ahead. Work environments will flourish when leadership can identify and leverage the strengths in diverse talent pools. Essence Learning is there, and we are ready and willing to help your organization get there too.



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