

[NYAPRS Enews] How Your Organization Can Recognize Juneteenth

Nyaprs <nyaprs-bounces@kilakwa.net>

on behalf of

Harvey Rosenthal <harveyr@nyaprs.org>

Thu 6/16/2022 2:34 PM

To:

- nyaprs@kilakwa.net <nyaprs@kilakwa.net>

*NYAPRS Note: The following comes to you from the NYAPRS Cultural Competence Committee.*

## **How Your Organization Can Recognize Juneteenth**

by Ella F. Washington and Jasmine Sanders Harvard Business Review

Juneteenth is not just Black history, it is American history. Over the past year, in the wake of countrywide Black Lives Matter protests, many U.S. organizations have taken to acknowledging Juneteenth, or June 19 (**Public Holiday Date Monday June 20**), the anniversary of the day in 1865 when the last group of enslaved Black Americans were freed by Union troops. Some have offered a paid company holiday for all employees; others, an extra floating holiday to use on Juneteenth or another day, an event to celebrate Juneteenth with Black ERG groups, or learning sessions for all staff.

For DEI scholars and practitioners, it's heartening to see this recognition and high energy around a historic moment previously only recognized by those in the minority. However, many Black and other POC employees are rightfully asking, why now? We believe companies can approach Juneteenth in a way that significantly enhances their diversity, equity, and inclusion work. This anniversary is a tangible opportunity to amplify understanding of the unique experience of Black Americans and serve as a catalyst for conversations about intersectionality.

### **History of Juneteenth**

First, let's clarify the [history](#). Although President Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation ending slavery in the Confederacy in 1863, many southerners sought to evade the executive order by moving enslaved people to Texas, the most Western of the slaveholding states. However, Union troops pursued them, arriving in Galveston in the summer of 1865 and finally freeing more than 250,000 Black Americans. Enslaved people were then formally emancipated and slavery officially abolished by the 13th Amendment in December 1865.

Juneteenth, also known as "Jubilee Day", is sometimes referred to as America's actual Independence Day, since July 4, 1776 symbolizes liberty and justice for only *some* Americans, not all. This sentiment is deftly captured in Frederick Douglass' [1852 speech "The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro,"](#) in which he wrote, "This Fourth July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn."

Of course, the fight for equity and justice for Black Americans continues to wage on even today. And that's why it's so important that organizations have begun to recognize June 19 as another pivotal date in U.S. history.

In June of 2021, Congress passed legislation to establish [Juneteenth National Independence Day](#) as a U.S. federal holiday, and every state but South Dakota recognizes it as a state or ceremonial holiday. In our recent U.S. workforce survey, just 41% of American workers knew about Juneteenth prior to 2020; the racial reckoning of last year pushed that percentage to 71% as of May 2021. For Black Americans, the shift was from 67% to 93%. (Awareness of the [destruction of Black Wall Street during the 1921 Tulsa Massacre](#) has also increased dramatically since its 100th anniversary this past May.)

Make no mistake, this is progress. For two centuries, our educational systems greatly neglected the Black American experience. A [2015 study](#) by the National Museum of African American History and Culture and Oberg Research revealed that U.S. history teachers spend only 8 to 9% of lesson time on Black history, and [research suggests](#) that what is taught centers on the trauma of slavery, the struggles of the Civil Rights movement, and mass incarceration, instead of more positive features like the Harlem Renaissance, the Great Migration, and the myriad achievements and contributions of the Black community. As Black women raised in North Carolina and Alabama respectively, we both grew up hearing about Juneteenth from our family and social circles, but it was never mentioned in our classes nor celebrated as a holiday. While many school districts are working to present a more accurate, representative, and robust account of U.S. history now – recognizing June 19 and the Tulsa Race Massacre, as well as acknowledging systemic racism — their efforts are often met with resistance, as evidenced by recent heated debates over the teaching of [critical race theory \(CRT\)](#).

That's why it's so important for employers to acknowledge and honor Juneteenth and other cultural holidays celebrated by those not in the majority.

### **Organizational Opportunity**

When celebrating Juneteenth this year and going forward, we recommend taking four steps to make it a DEI-enhancing experience for your organization.

#### **1. Make it personal.**

Many of us have spent the last year hearing advice on how to educate yourself about DEI topics such as racial injustice in the workplace. While this is a foundational step that everyone should take, it's time to move beyond general awareness to personal action. Leaders should reflect and share how their personal and family histories, experiences, values, and identities connect to these events.

For example, if you are just understanding the importance of Juneteenth, take it as an opportunity to be vulnerable and share what you've learned with your group. Then go a step further by inviting conversation with your teams. You might be surprised how much employees engage, either relieved they aren't the only ones who hadn't previously recognized the holiday or eager to share the knowledge they do have.

#### **2. Expand the message.**

Juneteenth is not only a celebration of freedom, but also one of opportunity, equity and access. That must not be lost. According to the Center for Talent Innovation, Black professionals occupy [just 3.2% of senior leadership roles](#) at large U.S. companies and just 0.8% of all Fortune 500 CEO positions.

June 19 events also present an opportunity for companies to reckon and wrestle with their own DEI goals with an eye to access and advancement for professionals of color. It's

a time to think harder about supporting and recruiting through historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), tribal colleges and universities (TCUs), and Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs) as well as racial identity-based [professional organizations](#). It's also a time for current (probably white) leadership to examine how they can become more active allies and accomplices for colleagues of color. And it's a time to not only "talk the talk, but walk the walk" by funding resources and initiatives that expand promotion and leadership opportunities for Black and brown employees.

### **3. Enhance the meaning.**

While acknowledging Juneteenth as a paid company holiday is certainly a step in the right direction, it is not enough. Much like Martin Luther King's Day of Service, Juneteenth should be honored as a "day on, not a day off."

To make Juneteenth and other cultural holidays meaningful in the workplace, we challenge organizations and employees to utilize this time off to advance their knowledge and deepen their awareness. Companies might suggest or sponsor visits to one of the more than [160 Black/African-American museums, sites and cultural centers](#) across the nation, distribute [critical texts](#) that detail the United States' legacy of systemic racism and oppression, or encourage participation in local [Juneteenth celebrations](#) and patronage of [Black businesses](#) in your cities/communities. Companies' shift from passive to active commemoration of Juneteenth and other cultural holidays signals purpose and relevance rather than hollow recognition.

### **4. Honor intersectionality.**

When you highlight the holidays of one group, others can feel left out: "There's no month/day for my identity group so I don't get a chance to be celebrated."

Resist the urge to downplay the experience of one group because others have experienced different injustices. Instead, encourage using the power of empathy to acknowledge what this marginalized particular group – enslaved Black Americans – went through, what their liberation meant for the country, and what that kind of progress means for us all.

There is room for everyone at the DEI table, and when we advocate for change, it inherently raises all the boats creating a more inclusive environment for all. At the same time, we should recognize that people have multiple identities, not just based on race and gender but also sexual orientation and even backgrounds and interests, such as being a veteran, immigrant, artist, or fitness enthusiast. For example, June is also Pride month in the U.S. which is the celebration of the LGBTQIA+ community. Any DEI event should celebrate the fact that we all bring many different perspectives to our workplaces. Be thoughtful about celebrating Juneteenth (or Pride or any other day relevant to a non-majority group) in a way that allows people to still feel like they can be their authentic and complex selves.

Because many employees can become frustrated by one-off or "token" DEI celebrations, we also, of course, encourage companies and teams to follow all the advice above year-round, not just on certain days. The work of DEI never stops. But the more we recognize holidays like Juneteenth as unifying opportunities, the further we can travel on this necessary journey.

<https://hbr.org/2021/06/how-your-organization-can-recognize-juneteenth>

