

How to be an Activist - Getting from No to Now



By Donna Dorsey

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When I reflect on what it means for an enterprise to have a shared purpose, I think about what it means to be personally purposeful. Literally. There are some who are so full of purpose that it fires an unstoppable sense of urgency. Often, these people are true “activists.” If you want to know what that looks like, Google the name Clara Day. She was one of the original organizers of the Coalition of Labor Union Women in the ‘70s. Her legacy lives on in the annual award that carries her name. She made things happen. As soon as she helped her organization formulate an action plan, she was ready to move. I suspect that whenever she was told “no,”

what she heard was “now.” Even so, for all her passion, she advanced with a keen sense of empathy. That was her secret. Where some people saw differences, she saw a common cause and rallied diverse groups to come together in solidarity. As a woman of color, she fought for both civil rights and the Equal Rights Amendment. Clara Day put the “active” in activist.

I should know. Clara Day was my grandmother.

She was a living lesson in empowerment – in seeing obstacles as opportunities. When I was just a little girl, she took me to an ERA rally. I was 10 years old. She wanted me to understand that I deserved more. That all women did. She traveled all over the world, fueled by fearless insistence on workplace equity for all people. She was eager to share what she learned with her family and, to be honest, with everyone she met. I try to honor her legacy and channel her keen sense of justice every day. I also work to cultivate empathy.

Today, in my role as Chief People, Culture and Diversity Officer for Navistar, I have plenty of opportunities to apply these lessons. My team advocates for the well-being and equity of more than 11,000 human beings. This includes union workers and C-suite executives, accountants and parts distributors, administrative assistants and engineers who hold patents for game-changing innovations. And for every individual and discipline represented in our vast and diverse enterprise, the common denominator is that they carry deep needs and hopes, concerns and aspirations. Whether we are serving the plant manager or an eager new intern, we know everyone has parents, children, family, friends and fur babies who depend on them. They matter. So, when I encourage people to work with a collective sense of purpose, when I declare that working together is the fastest way to make things better for all of us, and when I urge them to advocate for each other’s rights, the voice I hear is my grandmother’s.

I hope I bring both passion and compassion to my job, but frankly, that’s not enough. Any activist will tell you that organization is key to purposeful action. One way to think about my job is to visualize those big directory signs you find at the airport, or a shopping mall, or maybe a museum. There’s usually a red arrow that says, “You are here,” placed on a floorplan map. Then, underneath, there’s a color-coded legend that lists all the things you might need and where to find them. Food? A bookstore? Gift shop? The nearest restroom? It’s all spelled out in the directory. And that’s what my team of HR professionals does – we organize action around people’s needs, based on where they are. Benefits information? Training to advance your career? Well-being support? We try to make it easy for our people to find what they need, wherever they are at the moments that matter in their job or life cycle. We make an effort to focus on *what matters* to each group and each individual. And, taking a page from my grandmother, we are vigilant about making sure their experience is unhindered by bias or prejudice.

Thankfully, this mission-critical mandate aligns squarely with our Navistar purpose: *Reimagining how to deliver what matters*. What matters to our stakeholders depends not only on their discipline, or location, or paygrade, but on what is going on in their personal lives and the bigger world around them. So, how is a proactive HR team supposed to know what matters?

I am a big believer in surveys, in analyzing available data, and in seeking insights that inform policy. But I also want to hear directly from stakeholders. That's the genius behind working with Employee Resource Groups (ERGs). They are the vanguard that carries the banners of diversity, equity, and inclusion. They play an invaluable role in raising the consciousness of the entire enterprise. Given the tragedies and social disruptions that have filled the headlines this past year, we need a diverse chorus of voices to cut through what could otherwise become just another corporate echo chamber. In fact, because each ERG has an executive sponsor, there's an opportunity for reverse mentoring that makes our leadership team more conscientious, more aware, and stronger.

At Navistar, we are realizing that our culture is created every day, with every interaction, with every individual. If we are doing our job correctly, this sense of shared purpose will permeate the organization and become manifest in the work each person does, at every touchpoint. And when that happens, the rest of our stakeholders will see it in action. Dealers will see that we are living our purpose by contributing to their profitability. Customers will experience the product innovation that comes from reimagining what matters. Supplier partners will understand that the way they treat people matters to us because it is a condition of our business relationship. And the community at large will come to see that bias and prejudice are hurdles that will not be allowed to stand.

I sometimes wonder what that feisty activist, Clara Day, would say about our purpose statement. I know she'd like the "reimagining" part, because that's what she did every time she demanded a better world for marginalized people. And I know she'd appreciate "what matters," because she was shrewd enough to understand that when each person has a voice in what matters, it's incredibly empowering. But because my grandmother was so purposeful – so full of purpose – I think she would seize on the "deliver" part of the message. For her, it was never enough to have a star to steer by – you had to step on the accelerator and shift into high gear.

I wish I could tell her that I heard her, and that she inspires me to act with purpose every day. I hope that one day in the future, I am lucky enough to have grandchildren of my own and that I can be present for them in the same way my grandmother was present for me. I hope, when those yet-to-be-born grandchildren remember me, they are challenged to imagine a better way, a better world. I have no idea what that world will look like. But I hope they have the will, the urgency, and grandma's sense of empathy to deliver what matters. In truth, that's my hope for everyone.