



KORN FERRY®

OWNING SUCCESS

Six choices that empower
underrepresented talent
to achieve.

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Introduction

Study after study proves that diverse and inclusive organizations outperform their peers. They are 70% more likely to capture new markets¹, 75% more likely to see ideas become productized² and 35% more likely to have financial returns above industry average³. They are also more likely to be stronger at decision-making, with recent research showing that diverse and inclusive teams make better decisions 87% of the time⁴.

But despite the overwhelming business case for embracing difference at work, women still hold less than 29% of senior leadership positions globally⁵. There are only three black CEOs in the Fortune 500⁶—none of whom are women—and only 6% of management jobs in the UK are held by ethnic minorities⁷.

What is preventing organizations from achieving the levels of diversity that would bring demonstrable benefits to their business?

There are two fundamental issues at play here, and any successful solution will therefore require a two-pronged approach.

The first issue is structural: it is incumbent upon organizations to revisit practices and processes that may be holding underrepresented employees back and preventing them from being the best they can be. This is by no means an easy feat and will often involve undoing barriers and biases that have stood for generations.

The second is behavioral: it is necessary to create a culture of belonging where employees in the organization have a more inclusive mindset, make more inclusive decisions and take more inclusive actions.

It is also true, as our research has proven time and again, that there are actions people from underrepresented groups themselves can take that will increase their chances of overcoming barriers in organizations and empower them to enhance their contribution and advance their careers.

Recognizing the barriers.

While all underrepresented groups face challenges in the workplace, each group has its own unique set of barriers that individuals need to overcome in order to achieve success. For women, for example, the barriers may include conflicting gender norms, lack of sponsors and advocates, a tendency towards lower risk-taking or issues surrounding work-life integration. For African Americans, meanwhile, the barriers are more likely to include conflicting culture norms, lack of receiving candid feedback, an absence of leadership role models and stereotyping.

1. Center for Talent Innovation. (2013). Innovation diversity and market growth. Report.
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7. Chartered Management Institute. (2017). Delivering diversity. Race and ethnicity in the management pipeline.

Living by design and not by default.

Why should it be necessary for people from underrepresented groups to adopt different strategies in order to advance their careers and achieve greater personal success? The answer can be found in a Korn Ferry concept known as The Power of Choice.

Our research shows that people from underrepresented groups will often internalize the negative expectations of others, impacting their confidence and, in some cases, resulting in the gradual withdrawal of effort. This leads to the phenomenon of living by default. However, when individuals understand that they have power over how their career progresses and can make choices about how they react to the barriers they face in and outside of work, they go on to achieve great things. This is what we refer to as living by design.

The concept of The Power of Choice was first identified by Jeffrey P. Howard in the 1960s and has been further developed by his Korn Ferry peers, including Michael C. Hyter who published his evolved research findings in *The Power of Choice: Embracing Efficacy to Drive Your Career*⁸. It has also formed the basis of Korn Ferry's The Power of Choice program, which has for many years empowered individuals from underrepresented groups with the insights, strategies and tools they need to advance their careers.

For the latest iteration of our Power of Choice research, we interviewed people who had participated in the program at any point between five and 25 years ago to discover what effect it had had on their careers. The aim was to test whether the fundamental concepts of the research still held true, given the rapid transformation of recent years in which many traditional norms and best practices have been overturned.

The study's findings were conclusive: program participants reported increased confidence and clarity, and—most importantly—accelerated advancement in their careers. Forty percent of respondents reported they had been promoted, nearly half said the programs had helped them transition into a higher or more desirable position and more than three-quarters said they had become more effective at problem-solving, pushing through challenges and being resilient after failure.

It is clear that being coached to understand The Power of Choice and being given the strategies and tools to implement it, continues to make a tangible difference to an individual's career trajectory and to the organization's ability to retain, advance, and tap into the contributions of traditionally underrepresented talent.

8. C. Hyter, M. (2011). *The Power of Choice: Embracing efficacy to drive your career*. Global Novations.



The six choices.

The most recent Power of Choice findings have not only confirmed the efficacy of the program, but have also enabled us to strengthen and streamline the approach. This has led to the creation of a new, improved approach, which takes the form of Six Choices:

- 1. The awareness choice.**
- 2. The development choice.**
- 3. The contribution choice.**
- 4. The self-determination choice.**
- 5. The relationship choice.**
- 6. The influence choice.**

By examining each of these choices in turn, we can gain a more detailed understanding of The Power of Choice research and how it can be applied effectively by underrepresented employees today.



1.

The awareness choice.

The awareness choice requires individuals to become self-aware, both about what is needed in order to be successful and also about the specific behaviors or strategies that may help or hinder them on their way to achieving their goals. They must take charge of their own careers and move with intent to achieve everything they want.

Creating awareness involves a process of deeper guided reflection for many people. Exploration of personal life experiences and how they influence the way people behave in and out of work is an important first step. For many people, realization of the impact that prior experiences have on beliefs about their own capability and the choices they make is liberating. Individual discovery about the coping strategies they rely on and how some might be self-limiting is a critical step toward practicing more effective approaches to achieving life and career goals.

For example, a Latina participant who recently went through The Power of Choice program found herself lacking the confidence to speak up in meetings, be heard and relate to her peers.

The culture of her organization, while positive overall, was very competitive and in meetings people had to fight to be heard. Through action planning and accountability partner discussions in the awareness stage of The Power of Choice program, she was able to attribute her struggle of speaking up in meetings and feeling like she was disrespecting the group dynamics, to growing up in a culture where the group was more important than the individual—and subsequently identify a strategy to change how she contributed in meetings.

Her strategy was three-fold: 1. Reconcile her cultural upbringing with how she needed to take charge in meetings in order to be heard. 2. To build her financial and strategic acumen so that she could speak confidently and more effectively in the language of her peers. And 3. To socialize her ideas with others prior to meetings to build one-on-one rapport with her peers. By modifying her approach and building an action plan, she completely changed how she interacted in meetings and is now considered a key contributor with leadership potential.

Individuals need to:

- Analyze key points in their personal and professional life that have got them to where they are today, and identify what is working well for them and what is getting in the way.
- Ask themselves questions about the path they want to follow. What do I really want? Why do I want it? What am I willing and unwilling to do in order to get it?
- Acquire the behaviors and strategies needed to achieve identified career goals—or build on existing ones.
- Understand other people's worldviews and ways of operating, as well as the politics and unspoken rules of the organization they are working in, or else risk being severely limited in their impact.

2.

The development choice.

How much control does each of us have over our own development? This critical question is one many are apt to overlook or to address without much thoughtfulness or strategic insight. For individuals who feel unsupported by formal and informal career development channels, or who may even blame those channels for holding them back, the question may not even seem worth asking.

The development choice enables individuals to think more strategically about their development. Specifically, it helps them identify the areas they can exercise personal control over, rather than having to rely on their manager or organization to open the way for them.

This is based on a couple of core principles: one, that development is a technique that can be learned; two, that obstacles to development can be successfully managed if they are openly acknowledged and confronted with commitment and courage.

For example, a Caucasian female we spoke to in the research process explained how The Power of Choice program helped her to be more focused in her development. As a minority in the male-dominated STEM field, her approach to differentiation had, for many years, been to identify as a technical expert. However, this approach could only take her career so far. The work environment she operated in was highly matrixed and she lacked the ability and skills to effectively get work done through others and this was required for her to progress to the next level in her organization.

After going through the program and learning about The Power of Choice Three Confidences model, she realized that she had underestimated the importance of utilizing relational and influential skills for unlocking the ability to get work done through others and increase her effectiveness. Following the program and focusing on these areas, she is now on the high potential track and is one of the top performers in her work group being considered for promotion.

Individuals need to:

- Have a 'capacity-building' mindset, rooted in the belief that everyone can develop the skills or behaviors necessary to achieve at a high level. This is as opposed to a 'fixed capacity' mindset, which, put simply, equates to the old adage 'you either have it or you don't'. Our research has shown that individuals who believe that their life and career outcomes can largely be managed find it much easier to build the confidence needed to succeed.
- Build political and relational confidence rather than focusing solely on technical or intellectual confidence, which are critical only in the early stages of a career. This is particularly important for people from underrepresented groups, who may feel pressured into spending too much time on technical or intellectual confidence in order to prove themselves.





The four stages of contribution model.

Imperative	Stage 1 Contributing dependently	Stage 2 Contributing independently	Stage 3 Contributing through others	Stage 4 Contributing strategically
Performance expectation	Build credibility, learn	Establish and apply expertise	Guide, co-ordinate, develop others	Shape organizational direction
Primary role	Helper, learner	Individual contributor, specialist	Coach, mentor, idea leader, internal consultant, project leader	Sponsor, innovator, business leader
Major stage transition issue	Recognize need for dependence	Accept independence	Accept responsibility (formal or informal) for others' efforts	Holistic view of business, making tough choices
Performance	Support others, build credibility	Individual capability, subject matter expertise	Relationships, networks, and technical breadth	Establish organizational priorities, broad impact and influence

Source: The Four Stages, KFI.

3.

The contribution choice.

The contribution choice explores the level of contribution employees make to organizations and how that impacts an individual's development. It is about identifying barriers that are preventing people from increasing their contribution and finding strategies that will enable them to strengthen their impact. It is closely bound up with the Four Stages of Contribution model, which is based on the research of Drs. Gene Dalton and Paul Thompson and provides a framework for increasing one's organizational impact and influence over time.

Over the course of their careers, employees can move through as many as four stages (see table to the left) and often move back and forth between different stages as they enter new opportunities. Organizational needs and employee goals can affect movement between and within the stages. According to Dalton and Thompson's research, there is a direct correlation between an individual's 'career stage' and their contribution to the organization. Success or failure must be evaluated by the individual with an understanding of their own stage in that unique situation. Over the course of any career, individuals need to understand where they are and what expectations are reasonable given that situation without affecting their confidence.

Organizations need employees at all four stages. It is no good, after all, having people who are able to mentor and coach (Stage 3) unless you also have people who are continually learning and willingly accept supervision (Stage 1). But the fact that employees grow in influence and impact

as they advance through the stages means that high-performing organizations will always encourage individuals to develop behaviors associated with the next stage.

The Four Stages of Contribution model can provide a useful framework for development conversations, especially if managers and employees have different perspectives. Take this recent Power of Choice program participant, who explained to us that her manager had assumed she was happy being a subject matter expert when in reality she had wanted to progress into management for many years. The confusion arose because, while the manager assumed everyone would be direct about their career goals, the employee's Asian upbringing had taught her that good things would happen if she kept her head down. By referring to the Four Stages of Contribution model, the two were able to have an open and honest conversation about the issue, and create a plan to enable the employee to develop into a management role.

Individuals need to:

- Gain a realistic understanding of the stage they are operating in and develop goals that are aligned to that stage.
- Evaluate their performance against appropriate expectations given the stage and situation and explain their successes and failures to themselves in a way that leaves their confidence intact.
- Choose effective behaviors to address any barriers and enable their optimal contribution.

4.

The self-determination choice.

The messages individuals receive throughout their lives can powerfully impact their impressions of who they are and what they are capable of. While they do not have a choice about what people say to them, they do have a choice about what they say to themselves and the extent to which they allow their internal voice to be governed by the messages of others.

For example, an Indian female we spoke to during the research process explained how her parents' expectations that she would give up her job once she had got married were impacting her ability to be successful at work, even though she and her husband were both in favor of her pursuing her career. It was only after personally addressing the root cause of her internal struggle that she was able to break through the barriers that were holding her back.

An individual's internal voice has a profound impact on confidence levels, so it is critical for people to explore these messages and the strategies they can use to reframe them. One common issue related to the internal voice is 'imposter syndrome'. This phenomenon, in which one doubts one's accomplishments and is constantly afraid of being exposed as a fraud, is prevalent among many underrepresented groups, especially women. To overcome it, individuals need to clearly determine to what they attribute their successes or failures.

Individuals need to:

- *Understand the impact societal or external messages have on the choices they make as individuals.*
- *Assess and, if necessary, reframe the messages they have received from their family, community, culture or religion about who they are and what is appropriate for them.*
- *Make definitive choices based on these insights, for example by deciding to undertake a stretch assignment that will challenge them.*





5.

The relationship choice.

Relationships matter. Most professionals recognize the importance of networking, yet, for some, it may seem inauthentic or, at a minimum, overwhelming, and will often be pushed to the end of the to-do list. This is particularly true for those who are unsure how to network effectively or are not confident about doing so, and who perceive that the time would be better spent focusing on their day-to-day work.

Building relationships is in fact a learnable skill that can play a significant role in helping individuals develop and advance their careers. It requires, in part, an ability to appreciate cultural differences and to understand that people with perspectives other than one's own will not always try to form trusting relationships in the same way. It's about authentically getting to know people and creating mutually rewarding relationships.

For example, a recent Power of Choice program participant shared how changing a viewpoint that they'd held for many years and

engaging in relationship building led to the development of a key relationship for them. The participant was an African American male who grew up in a family that was often distrusting of others and viewed people's attempts to connect with them as inauthentic. This translated into a negative view of networking or developing relationships outside of 'getting the work done', impacting his ability to build deeper connections in the workplace to support his career.

Through the program's network analysis activity, he realized he was missing a key relationship that could contribute to his success at work. Someone who could share unwritten rules and how to effectively navigate the organization. He developed a strategy to actively seek out this resource and identify steps to build an authentic and trusting relationship with them. Today, he attributes a key relationship that he developed following the course to a wealth of new knowledge that has enabled him to increasingly meet his career objectives.

Individuals need to:

- *Understand the choices they have over the relationships they build, and how those relationships can impact personal and professional goals.*
- *Strategically examine their network and the types of relationships they currently have. How are those relationships supporting their career and what gaps need to be filled to enable them to achieve their goals? Assess what they are contributing to each critical relationship.*
- *Leverage the additional support professional relationships can provide, for example in the form of sponsorship, mentorship or advocacy.*

6.

The influence choice.

In today's volatile, complex and ambiguous business environment, the ability to influence—both with and without direct authority—is a critical attribute, which becomes increasingly relevant as individuals progress in their careers.

To influence others effectively, at both an individual and a group level, it is critical that one has core influencing strategies and knows when to use them. Establishing credibility and managing one's professional brand are also important.

Managing your personal brand and leveraging that to influence effectively is complex. But especially so for underrepresented talent who often find themselves dealing with conflicting values. Being able to reconcile any barriers with personal values that exist is essential to influencing effectively. Take this example from a recent Hispanic male Power of Choice participant who was struggling to identify with people who were self-promoting in his organization. This was in large part due to having grown up in a culture where it was not the norm to talk about yourself or individual accomplishments.

The combination of his cultural background and negative view towards others using self-promotion to build their brand, had a direct impact on his willingness to share his personal accomplishments. Through The Power of Choice program, he was able to reconcile his personal values and the importance of promoting himself to build his brand. He realized he could stay true to his core values of being humble, while operating in an organizational system that required him to speak about himself and his accomplishments in order to get noticed. After changing his approach and regularly sharing his personal accomplishments to ensure others knew his capabilities, he was identified to lead a highly visible project that gained him additional exposure in the organization—a pivotal career development that he attributes directly to The Power of Choice program.

Individuals need to:

- Recognize that influence is an important and learnable skill.
- Gather ongoing feedback to proactively manage their personal and professional brand.
- Understand and learn how to be flexible and effective at using appropriate influencing strategies given the situation.



Conclusion

Organizations that want to develop or retain a competitive advantage must optimize the contribution of every single member of the workforce, creating a diverse and inclusive environment where all can thrive.

We know that this means addressing both the company-wide structural and behavioral issues that may be preventing people from achieving their full potential. And, our Power of Choice research shows that differentiated development for under-represented groups remains an important part of this mix.

In particular, this means helping employees understand that they have the power to take ownership of their own careers, and equipping them with the specific insights, strategies and tools they need to drive their development forward.

The value of this approach is difficult to overstate. As our research has shown, those individuals who are given The Power of Choice to own their success are more likely to be resilient after failure, become more effective at problem-solving, and move to increasingly influential positions in business.

Proven impact of The Power of Choice.

For over forty years Korn Ferry's The Power of Choice program has helped talent unlock the power and potential in individuals by helping them to understand what choices they have to make to strategically drive their development and advancement.

Each module explores these strategic choices to enable participants to contribute with strategic intent and increase their impact. Individuals become empowered to take responsibility for their personal and professional development, to strengthen their workplace relationships, and ultimately accelerate their own career progression.

Standard programs are available for The Power of Choice for Everyone, The Power of Choice for Women, The Power of Choice for Ethnically-Diverse Talent, The Power of Choice for Black Talent, The Power of Choice for Asian Talent, The Power of Choice for Latinx Talent, The Power of Choice for LGBTQ+ Talent, and The Power of Choice for Men. We also offer a specialized coaching process that supports and reinforces the learning.



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About Korn Ferry

Korn Ferry is a global organizational consulting firm. We work with clients to design their organizational structures, roles and responsibilities. We help them hire the right people and advise them on how to reward, develop and motivate their workforce. And, we help professionals navigate and advance their careers.