



# Leading With Compassion and Driving Diversity

## Insights from The Flexible Advisor Podcast

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As our country continues to navigate momentous issues, from racial justice to LGBTQ rights, it's time for business leaders to consider their role in driving change. In our latest episode of the Flexible Advisor Podcast, we were thrilled to welcome Shundrawn Thomas, President of Northern Trust Asset Management, to discuss his advice on how leaders can advance diversity, equity & inclusion (DE&I) in the workplace. Throughout his 16+ years at Northern Trust, Shundrawn has been an inspiration as an authentic leader fully committed to racial and gender equality through both his actions and his words.



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**Episode 24 of The Flexible Advisor podcast features Shundrawn Thomas, President of Northern Trust Asset Management talking about growing equity and diversity in the advisory space.**



### THE IMPORTANCE OF COMPASSIONATE LEADERSHIP

Recent protests and court rulings have shed a new light on injustices in both our country and our industry, making *compassionate leadership* more important than ever. But what exactly does that mean?

To Shundrawn, it means leaning into the true definition of compassion, which is "to suffer with." It goes beyond listening and acknowledging what others are experiencing. You need to show you're actively engaged by initiating a real dialogue with them to truly try to understand their suffering. It requires those in power to have the tough conversations and admit where they've fallen short on racial and gender issues. As Shundrawn describes it, "How leaders communicate matters. People need to know they'll hear the truth even if it's uncomfortable."

By speaking out yourself, with honesty, transparency and humility, it makes the environment emotionally safe for people to share and engage with you. People most directly impacted are often reluctant to speak up out of concern they'll be seen as politically incorrect. Shundrawn believes that when you show up and take that risk of being vulnerable yourself, people will follow in your example.

Shundrawn's recent open letter on LinkedIn – [Breaking the Silence](#) – was his own example of speaking out in an authentic way. In this post, he shares some of the experiences he has encountered as an African-American man in the hopes of giving a voice to the silent pain that many of us are currently experiencing.



## Start at the Top

### ACTIONS TO ADDRESS DE&I AT YOUR FIRM

Initiating a productive dialogue is a key starting point, but from there leaders need to be prepared to back up their words with actions. Take another look at your culture and processes with the following steps in mind:

- **Start at the Top:** For companies that are serious about addressing DE&I, it has to start at the top. Many organizations try to work from the bottom by creating programs that individuals in leadership and decision-making roles may not be a part of. However, for true change to happen, diverse voices need to be involved in strategic decisions. Shundrawn points out that his role on the executive team at Northern Trust gives him a voice on two important functions: allocation of resources and professional development for employees. By having a seat at the table, he's able to help ensure that the processes in place that dictate those activities are equitable.



## Encourage Authenticity

- **Encourage Authenticity:** Shundrawn believes one of the most important things for all employees to do is “show up.” We all bring different perspectives that can be additive and unique in the workplace, though many of us may hold back the best parts of our personality in order to conform to a certain standard. Make it clear to employees that if they're contributing in a positive and constructive way, they've earned the right to speak up. Furthermore, that means encouraging your team to raise their hand when they see something that doesn't align with the company's values. It may seem small, but it can be the accumulation of minor aggressions that hold a company back from making progress.



## Promote Mentorship

- **Promote Mentorship:** Shundrawn recalls one of his earliest finance roles where he was one of the only a few African-Americans on the trading floor. He discusses the impact of senior executives taking him under their wing and helping him navigate the business. The importance of friendly faces and helping hands that make you feel included in an environment where you may feel different on the surface can't be overlooked.



## Make Everyone Responsible

- **Make Everyone Responsible:** In many cases, people may think of attracting and bringing in talent as just an HR function. However, we're all part of the culture and we all have a responsibility to build a diverse and inclusive community in the workplace. If we adopt that mindset, ideally, we can encourage a more diverse pool beyond the traditional applicants.

We recognize that cultural change won't happen overnight, but the important thing is a commitment from leaders to continually strive to do better. Initiate the dialogue, identify a path toward improvement and hold yourself accountable for real, measurable progress.



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