

Leading Change: Lauren Leader-Chivee

Lauren joined the Organizational Effectiveness (OE) Practice as a Strategic Advisor this July. She is based in the New York office.



Lauren Leader-Chivee

In your own words: tell us about your background.

I grew up in Washington, DC. My parents were political scientists and worked in and around government. I was raised in an incredibly diverse and socially-conscious environment. If you live in Washington, you're engaged in the world, because it's all diplomats and political people and civil servants.

I thought I was going to be a professional actor. I started college at a conservatory, but I missed academics, so transferred to Barnard College. During college I landed a job working in HR, and worked 20 hours a week between classes. When I ultimately decided not to be an artist anymore, I had a whole other career that had been running in parallel.

As I advanced in my HR career, I often found that I was one of the only women on the leadership team and would be asked to write policies for issues like maternity leave. I was frustrated at the lack of legally mandated leave in the US, so I started doing political work on women's issues to try and advance that issue.

So how did you find your way to consulting (and now Oliver Wyman)?

Before the 2009 financial crisis, I was leading HR at a boutique consultancy. When the market crashed, I had to fire everybody and then fire myself. So I decided to start working full-time on diversity issues and women's issues, and did that for many years.

The diversity work led me to build a business consulting for Fortune 500 companies on diversity/leadership/talent/innovation issues. And that's ultimately how I got to Oliver Wyman.

I liked the opportunity to build a practice because I'm definitely an entrepreneur at heart. I thought the people here were incredibly smart and lovely and kind. And I wanted to stretch, intellectually. I thought this might be a place I could do

NEWS OF OLIVER WYMAN

that, and it is proving to be true. I'm getting exposure to ideas and possibilities for innovation that I would not have gotten in another place.

Your title is "Strategic Advisor." What does that mean?

My primary job is to build the OE practice in the US market. I came in as an Advisor versus a more traditional role so I can continue to do outside activities, including public speaking on women's issues and running my non-profit, All In Together, which works to advance women's civic and political leadership.

Everything I do is related. In both business and politics, we must do a better job of unleashing the potential of women and underrepresented groups. I am deeply invested in advancing that cause for the country, and just as invested in helping us do better on diversity as a firm so we set an example for our clients.

That raises a question for me: I've always been confused about why people need convincing that it's just a fact that diversity and women's empowerment is beneficial.

How old are you?

32. Why?

Because you have the benefit of having spent most of your life in a world where, certainly in the United States, equality has been the norm.

Sure, but I totally understand that people hold whatever beliefs they do, and discrimination and bias happen on various levels. But at this point, for companies that're interested in profit, the fact is that there's a business case for diversity.

I actually believe the business world has kind of "gotten it" in ways that parts of society have not. The most progressive, most thought-leading, most forward-looking focus on diversity in the US today is happening in American companies. Now, that's not to say that they've solved the problem, but I think you'd be hard-pressed to find a Fortune 500 CEO today who doesn't say diversity matters. Look at how the business world reacted to the travel ban or Charlottesville or DACA. Businesses in the US have come to deeply value diversity in ways America as a whole perhaps has not.

I think that for the most part, you don't have to make the business case to CEOs anymore. But among rank-and-file American workers, there are some very human challenges to fully embracing the idea that diversity is beneficial. I think many Americans struggle with this question: "If you're saying we need women and people of color in these jobs, what does that mean for me as a white man? Does that mean I don't matter anymore? Are you trying to say I'm somehow less valuable? There's only a certain number of seats at the table. Am I supposed to give up mine?" And: "In a country that's supposed to be meritocratic, why am I suddenly supposed to believe that women add value differently than men? We're saying that we're all supposed to be equal--why is this better?" These are deeply human questions I think we need to do a better job of helping people work through.

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NEWS OF OLIVER WYMAN

And then of course there's just basic bias. The idea that bias or racism or sexism doesn't exist in this country is just a complete mythology. We've had institutional racism and institutional sexism for the last 300 years. Until 1978, women in the US couldn't open a bank account without their husband's permission. Into the 1980s, the classified ads for jobs were segregated by gender. And of course, minority Americans are far more likely to be incarcerated—which doesn't equate to the crime statistics. Most of what we take for granted in terms of equal rights and equal access is incredibly new! There have been radical changes within a very short period of time. I think we have not done the hard work that is involved in helping people, on a very human and basic level, understand each other. Changes have happened faster than people have been able to process or absorb.

So it's not that there isn't convincing evidence. The issue is, even with all that evidence, how do people process that, digest it, internalize it, and turn it into empathy and different behavior or action in the places where it matters. And that's very complicated.

We're a global company, but we're based in the United States. Are you applying your US experience outwards, or are you staying focused on the US?

Our OE practice has a very established presence in Europe and the rest of the world, and we're just building it in the US. Of course there are very few US-headquartered companies that are not also global operations. So it's global work, US-centric in the sense of headquarters. There are unique dynamics at play in every country. Because of the size and scale of the US market and of the employee base for most US-headquartered companies, that tends to be the focus.

So let's talk about your family. I know your daughters were adopted?

I'm a single mom with two kids. My oldest, Stella, is 8, and the youngest is 2. Big age gap. The second adoption took a lot longer and was more in-depth than the first one—it took a couple of years to pull that off. They adore each other. They're soulmates.

I think every working parent struggles with the tradeoff of working and not seeing your kids as much as you'd like. But not long ago, I felt nothing but pride when my daughter was playing dress-up and she pretended to get up and go to the office. She took out an imaginary computer and started typing emails, explaining, "I'm going to a meeting. I have a conference call." I'm proud that her example is of a mother who works.



That's powerful! I know a lot of friends who are boggled when they see their daughters obsessed with princesses, even though their moms are working moms.

We are not princess people. I am not a princess-enabler. We do Legos.

NEWS OF OLIVER WYMAN

Any hobbies?

You know, as a working mom with two girls and two full-time jobs, I don't have much time for other hobbies. But I love theater. I'm also very politically active. I host fundraisers to support women members of Congress. And I squeeze in Soul Cycle and yoga as often as I can.

Having met a lot of illustrious and famous people and having been on TV, do you ever get nervous?

Sometimes. But I've been meditating for 20 years, and that has been an enormously stabilizing force as I move in and out of high-pressure, challenging circumstances. I realized the payoff last year. During the election, I was often on television with aggressive men who would attack me on-air. The ability to stay calm and centered and focused under pressure has served me in a lot of different circumstances.

Very early in my career, I realized that people can smell fear. In particular, aggressive, Type-A men: when they smell fear, they go for the kill. I am not a



Prepping for a TV appearance

calm person by nature--it's a lot of work for me. But the same principles apply in all different kinds of high-stress situations: being myself in front of somebody powerful and famous or standing up in front of a room of 1,000 people. I've found it a fascinating learning experience: when you're at ease, it puts other people at ease. Even successful, powerful people are still human and want to connect with someone on a human level.

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