

Empowering People

An Interview with Rahnold “Rah” Thomas, Managing Director, Accenture

EDITORS’ NOTE *With over 15 years’ experience in digital transformation and cloud optimization, Rahnold “Rah” Thomas is an Accenture Technology managing director, based in the company’s New York City office. In addition to his work delivering for clients, he also serves as the North America diversity lead for Accenture Technology, as well as the national co-lead for the company’s African American Employee Resource Group. He spoke about inclusion and diversity at Women of Silicon Valley 2019, was the featured speaker for Black Entertainment’s Black Men XCEL Conference, and hosted Accenture’s 2019 Celebration of MLK Day at the historic Apollo Theater. Thomas has a bachelor’s degree in information management and technology from Syracuse University.*



Rahnold “Rah” Thomas

How does Accenture engage its people in its diversity efforts?

The engagement factor is critical. Our top leadership, including Ellyn Shook, our Chief Leadership and Human Resources Officer, is personally committed to this – which makes a significant difference. For example, our leaders have been extremely purposeful in engaging our more junior people to be involved in our diversity initiatives. Through our Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) we have regular summits where we discuss feedback and

aim to empower our young talent to dream up and build innovative programs. One of our local ERGs recently started a podcast where they talk about Accenture’s culture, upcoming events and things people might be struggling with. It has been extremely popular and our goal is to figure out how to take something like this national. My view is that we need to be leveraging these mediums of communication more frequently as a means for the next generation to more easily find and use their voices. In other words, leveraging innovative tools that empower our young people to talk freely and transparently to leadership about how to solve problems.

A powerful, unconventional example of engaging our people around diversity, inclusion and equality, is what we did to celebrate MLK day in the U.S. this year. At the historic Apollo Theater in NYC, we opened a dialogue on culture as opposed to opening a dialogue on diversity in corporate America. For a morning, we took over a black-owned venue in Harlem on MLK Boulevard and brought one of the top conscious hip-hop artists to have a “song-versation” with us, touching on very specific topics. At the crux of the black community is the church, so we celebrated some of the religious aspects, as well as the music, the culture and the Apollo itself. But what was astonishing, and especially powerful, is that we didn’t recognize MLK day as a black holiday specifically – we had everyone represented: Black, Latino, LGBTQ, Interfaith, among others. We tried to bring as many people together in the spirit of inclusion. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. fought for equality and human rights, not solely black rights. I am proud that we recognized that as a company and acted on it.

How broadly do you define diversity at Accenture and what is the impact of having a diverse workforce on business outcomes?

To me, diversity is the fundamental recognition that you must strive to understand people who aren’t like you. Companies can have ERGs and other initiatives in place, but it is really individuals being able to accept someone who doesn’t look, act, talk or contribute to society the way they do. At Accenture, we are keenly aware that while more diverse teams are higher performing, you really need to have a supportive culture in place and, by doing so, you’re empowering people. We are looking beyond diversity to focus on equality, belonging and providing a workplace culture that empowers people. We know that people are more productive when they are happy and fulfilled and they are around others who inspire them.

However, it is not enough to simply focus on diversity. Diversity is key, but you must have the culture to support it. Our 2019 Getting to Equal research revealed that a culture of equality – where everyone has the opportunity to advance and thrive – unlocks innovation. More specifically, we uncovered that while diversity factors alone, such as a diverse leadership team and a gender-balanced workforce, significantly impact innovation mindset, a workplace culture of equality is the essential multiplier to help companies maximize innovation. Our research found that the innovation mindset of employees is 11 times greater when diversity is combined with a workplace culture of equality.

How has your personal story shaped your deep interest and advocacy for diversity in business?

Growing up in public housing with a single mother of four children grounded me to understand that there are multiple spectrums of reality and that you can find the good in any situation. This experience has proven to be one of my core strengths in business – I have a talent for being able to find the good qualities in people and how to strengthen those qualities through support, empowerment and technologies. At the beginning of my corporate career, I felt constricted. But I have been very fortunate to have a support system in leaders like Ellyn and our North America CEO, Julie Sweet, who empowered me to realize that what I believed to be my deficiencies, are actually my strongest qualities. I’ve been able to take those things that held me down and leverage them to make me the leader I’ve become today. ●

COMPANY BRIEF *Accenture (accenture.com) is a leading global professional services company providing a broad range of services and solutions in strategy, consulting, digital, technology and operations. Combining unmatched experience and specialized skills across more than 40 industries and all business functions – underpinned by the world’s largest delivery network – Accenture works at the intersection of business and technology to help clients improve their performance and create sustainable value for their stakeholders. With 477,000 people serving clients in more than 120 countries, Accenture drives innovation to improve the way the world works and lives.*

Will you discuss Accenture’s focus on diversity?

We’re really focused on building what we call a “culture of equality” where our people can be who they are and be their best, both professionally and personally. We are consistently applauded for our efforts around transparency as it relates to publishing our workforce demographics, which is a great first step regarding accountability at the top and throughout our organization. But from my perspective, we truly lead because we have consistent dialogue about what we need to do to evolve and progress in the right direction. I believe what sets us apart is the empowerment of our people.