

# Building a World that Works

An Interview with Michael J. Barber, Chief Diversity Officer, GE

**EDITORS' NOTE** *In his role as Chief Diversity Officer for GE, Mike Barber leads GE's inclusion and diversity strategy to drive sustainable change with an added focus on driving leadership accountability and metrics, building an inclusive culture and reinvigorating inclusion and diversity learning and mentoring. Barber joined GE in 1981 and, prior to his current role, he served as GE Officer and President and CEO of GE's Molecular Imaging and Computed Tomography (MICT) business.*



Michael J. Barber

*Additionally, he was the first leader for GE's strategy on global health called Healthymagination. Its charter was to improve the quality, cost and access to care by 15 percent or more on a global basis. During his career, Barber has had a variety of roles in engineering, operations and product management. As the Manager of the Digital X-ray Detector Platform, he led a team that eliminated the need for film in X-ray procedures. Barber holds patents for novel X-ray system designs and has been directly involved with many product advances in the field of diagnostic imaging. Barber was named a Black Enterprise 'Master of Innovation' in 2009. He also serves on the board of Talix Inc., Catalent, and the nonprofit National Action Council for Minorities in Engineering (NACME). In 2014 he was elected as a Fellow of the American Institute of Medical and Biological Engineering (AIMBE) and was named "2018 Person of the Year" by the Rotary Club of Milwaukee. Barber received his BS and honorary doctorate in engineering and serves as a Regent at his alma mater, Milwaukee School of Engineering.*

**COMPANY BRIEF** *GE (ge.com) rises to the challenge of building a world that works. For more than 125 years, GE has invented the future of industry, and today the company's dedicated team, leading technology, and global reach and capabilities help the world work more efficiently, reliably, and safely. GE's people are diverse and dedicated, operating with the highest level of integrity and focus to fulfill GE's mission and deliver for its customers.*

**How do you define the role of Chief Diversity Officer and how important is it for the role to be engaged in business strategy?**

In business, if you want to make something better and have lasting change, there's

likely somebody in the organization who is responsible for overseeing that it is happening and progressing in a consistent way. That is how I look at the role of the Chief Diversity Officer. I don't have all the answers and there's a number of different things required. There are some that can be addressed in the short-term and some that will be part of the longer journey, but I see my role as being the quarterback on the field to get people moving in the same direction to make progress.

Driving meaningful change starts with focused leadership. Beyond my company-wide role, we also named a CDO for each GE business and worked hard to find operating leaders who know how to drive accountability and achieve results while also coming from a variety of functions and backgrounds to enhance our collective perspectives. Each CDO, including myself, reports directly to their CEO and is responsible for working with their CEO and leadership team to create, own, and drive diversity KPIs.

**You have held a number of leadership positions at GE throughout your career. What excited you about the role of Chief Diversity Officer and made you feel it was the right fit?**

The prospect of being the Chief Diversity Officer wasn't something that was on my radar. After spending over 39 years at GE, in engineering, in operations, and in leading a business for the last several years, I had decided it was time

to retire. Then, two things occurred. First, GE was "rewiring" its operating style in a number of areas, becoming more decentralized to better meet our customers' needs. Then, the reckoning for equality and justice that was energized by the terrible murder of George Floyd began gaining momentum.

I was intrigued when Larry Culp, GE Chairman & CEO, was clear that he wanted someone who had an operational background for the CDO role. Larry wanted inclusion and diversity to be embraced, understood, and driven in the same way business leaders approached their other priorities. When he reached out to see if I would be interested in helping him make that transformation in the company, I understood the real opportunity this was to make GE better. I want to make sure that everyone can reach their full potential in the company. If everyone in the room has the same backgrounds and experiences, you won't get the benefit of complementary ideas that build on each other and lead to better answers. It's only when you have people with different experiences, who can work together, be transparent, and be themselves, that we can truly build a world that works. It's something worthwhile that I wanted to be a part of and decided to postpone my retirement.

**Will you provide an overview of GE's diversity and inclusion strategy?**

At GE, we are committed to building a more diverse workforce and a more inclusive workplace by strengthening our focus on accountability, transparency and community. Moving forward, this means expanding our

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diversity strategy to include mitigating bias in our talent processes; growing engagement in our Employee Resource Groups globally; expanding our understanding and collection of our diversity data globally; and further developing and promoting allies and sponsors.

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**How engrained is diversity and inclusion in GE’s culture and values?**

GE celebrated 129 years of innovation this year. From Lewis Latimer, African American Civil War veteran whose patents and other innovations made light bulbs last longer, to Edith Clarke, the first woman to receive a master’s degree in electrical engineering at MIT and who made significant contributions to long-distance power transmission at GE where she became the first woman professionally employed as an electrical engineer in the U.S., GE has been a proving ground for the important role diversity plays in innovation.

We also introduced our GE Leadership Behaviors in March 2020 and were very intentional in embedding diversity and inclusion within them. For example, part of the behavior “Act with Humility” includes “embracing a culture of respect which values inclusive teams and diverse perspectives.” Taking it a step further, each employee’s demonstration of the Leadership Behaviors is one of the two unique ratings they will receive as part of their annual summary process.

**How do you engage your employees in GE’s diversity efforts?**

We are firm believers in the importance of fostering community within our own company and the local communities where our employees, customers, and their families live and work. Internally, we’re proud to have been an early leader in the creation of strong Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) nearly 30 years ago. These groups accelerate development through mentoring, learning, networking, organizing outreach and service activities, and addressing challenges that are important to their members and the company through targeted initiatives. To add support and leadership, last year we named senior executive sponsors for each group.

In addition to our ERGs, we also launched the CDO Council, bringing together our business CDOs and HR diversity leaders to share best practices and drive new levels of connection and accountability across the company. As I mentioned earlier, we also have Chief Diversity Officers named for each GE business. They are tasked to work with their business CEO and their leadership team to ensure diversity is integrated in the business rhythms, not run as a separate initiative. Ongoing learning related to diversity and inclusion is an important area the business CDOs are also leading for the employee populations they support.

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**Is it critical to have metrics in place to track the impact of GE’s diversity and inclusion efforts?**

Yes. The foundation of continuous improvement is looking at the data. This is an essential step to determine root cause and develop action plans that lead to sustainable change. To that end, we transparently shared our diversity data earlier this year. This is the beginning of a journey to improve the depth and breadth of our diversity data and we expect to include a more extensive data set over time. From the data, it’s clear we have work to do and as with any business imperative, accountability is key to achieving progress.

Collectively we are also developing and driving key performance indicators (KPIs) for diversity and inclusion for each GE business. These KPIs are tracked and owned with the same level of operational rigor as our operating KPIs and are no less important.

**How valuable has it been to have the commitment of GE’s board and senior management in its diversity and inclusion efforts?**

It’s been about a year since I started in my role as Chief Diversity Officer and I am encouraged by the sustained level of support from my GE colleagues around the world and the commitment and focus from the company leadership and our board to deliver meaningful results. That continued universal support is essential to ensuring we are able to do what we must to make GE a place where everyone is empowered to do their best work because they feel accepted, respected, and that they belong.

**You joined GE in 1981. What has made GE so special for you and a company where you have wanted to spend your career?**

I believe the work we do at GE is fundamental to a world that works. The future of flight, precision health and the energy transition may seem like daunting challenges, but together with our customers, GE teams rise to those challenges every day. The drive to solve the world’s big challenges has been a part of the culture at GE from the very beginning and the importance and value of each person’s ideas are what matters. Ensuring that happens systemically, every day and in every part of the company, requires effort from all of us, and it’s something I believe we can do to root out inequity. ●

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