



# KULI KULI

## CASE STUDY



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## COMPANY HISTORY

Lisa Curtis, Valerie Popelka, Jordan Moncharmont, and Anne Tsuei founded Kuli Kuli in 2014. After learning about its miraculous health benefits, Curtis recognized an opportunity to help women in West Africa use more moringa locally and earn a sustainable livelihood by selling a portion of each harvest to the US. Today, Kuli Kuli's [moringa powder, bars, smoothie mixes, shots, and teas](#) are made in the US with moringa sourced directly from women's cooperatives and small family farmers around the world.

Kuli Kuli became a B Corp in 2015. In just five years, the company is the world's leading moringa brand with the highest quality moringa on the market, and has grown into a multi-million dollar social enterprise that sells moringa products in thousands of stores and supports small moringa farming communities around the world. It has generated over \$4 million for small farmers around the world.



## CORPORATE VALUES

From its inception, Lisa Curtis, CEO, explains that she always believed that diversity is important from school to workplaces, and that diversity impacts creativity and productivity. "Moringa comes from West Africa, South America and Southeast Asia. I really wanted our company to reflect people who come from those places. They know the product, understand its benefits and could relate to customers and suppliers. They could also bring different perspectives that help to innovate new products for a western market," said Curtis.

As with most start-ups, hiring is a challenge and money is the first hurdle to overcome. In its early stage, Kuli Kuli could not afford to pay the kind of salaries that could attract most workers. The founders, a team of dedicated entrepreneurs, were forced to turn to their network of souls committed to the mission who could afford to dive in to the hard work it takes to build a viable business. With a mindset of inclusion, the company did what it could right away, and implemented a stipend-based internship program that had mild success in bringing diversity into the organization. However, interns are temporary, and they wanted and needed intransient workers.

After 5 years of growth to revenues above \$5M, the company was able to pay higher, more competitive wages, and hired a Howard University graduate to become Operations Director. Howard University, located in Washington, DC, is one of the nation's most prestigious historically black universities. "A person of color in leadership made it easier to attract diverse candidates. We reached out to HBCUs and Latino groups and made a broader effort than just posting on Idealist. We went from majority white to majority non-white in six months. Our newest hire was born in Gambia and we're excited to have more people on our team that bring a cultural understanding of the regions we source from," said Curtis.

The company is committed to board diversity. Its five-person board is currently 40% female and 20% non-white. "It starts from the top. Most big initiatives wither without leadership support. It is critical that leadership is vested in diversity beyond the CEO to ensure it is woven into the DNA of its business strategy," said Curtis.

The company has also established community partnerships, volunteering to work with Alameda Food Bank and Planting Justice.



## COMMITMENT GOING FORWARD

Last year, the company faced a challenge when due to "burn out", three of its people – all white - left at the same time. "We had high retention before and it felt like a real wake up call." But leadership also saw it as an opportunity to fulfill a commitment to its original goal to reflect people who look like their suppliers and customers, important to connectivity to the marketplace.





## AN OPPORTUNITY

Creating a culture of inclusion is important to attract and retain candidates. Businesses know that their investment in human capital is vital to the bottom line. It is costly to have to find, recruit and train new people. Further, turnover negatively impacts morale, and disrupts operations and productivity.

Kuli Kuli recognized that their human capital challenge was an opportunity, and is one of the first companies to sign up to become an OSC2 JEDI Pilot Company in March 2019. With buy-in from the company's leadership team, a commitment to culture shift met no resistance from the full team at Kuli Kuli. They began working with the Avarna Group to focus on one of the three JEDI commitment areas: Culture -- and identified two major actions with internal and external implications. First and foremost, they committed to growing their team culture to be as inclusive and welcoming of an environment as possible. Second, they committed to changing the way that they recruit and interview candidates to better enable them to hire a more diverse workforce. The team focused on discovery of what was working well and what could be improved upon.

Weekly culture meetings helped them to create an Action Plan. The internal work began with a full-team workshop to craft a JEDI mission statement that reflected Kuli Kuli's values. The first step was to take a critical look at their recruitment efforts, hiring process and internal team culture to create an environment where diversity thrives. This led to the re-design of their recruitment and hiring processes. Using the Avarna Hiring Toolkit, they revised their job descriptions and hiring rubric and identified places where they conducted outreach in order to better attract a diversity of candidates. The JEDI mission statement is included in the job description, and anti-discrimination policy has been added to the employee handbook. JEDI branding and communications is being incorporated into their marketing strategy.



## POISED FOR GROWTH

In 7 months, Kuli Kuli's diversity has increased 67%. Specifically, with four new hires for a Production Planner, Logistics Manager, Digital Marketing Manager and Operations Director from March 2019 to October 2019, Kuli Kuli went from being 30% non-white, 80% female and 10% LGBT to being 50% non-white, 70% female and 20% LGBT.

Changing the culture was not a cake walk. Kuli Kuli admits that there is a challenging tightrope to walk of wanting to hire more diverse candidates while not discriminating against non-diverse candidates. The willingness of the entire Kuli Kuli team to have hard conversations and truly dig in on this complex work was critical to its success. They found that the Hiring Toolkit was an essential tool. Having a quantifiable hiring rubric helped a lot, as well as an important resource such as the list of diversity-focused websites to recruit from at: <https://aloria.tech/jobportals>.

As an organization, Kuli Kuli setup a Culture Committee to implement the action items that resulted from the JEDI workshop and conversations. "Our culture team is focused on making sure we create a fun and inclusive work space for all members of the Kuli Kuli team to thrive. We're now re-designing our office place and planning internal team events to celebrate different holidays and better connect our office community. We do regular Lunch&Learns, hold happy hours and community service days designed to bring our team together," said Curtis.



## LOOKING FORWARD

Curtis' suggestion to other companies who want to do JEDI work is to identify the aspects that are most actionable for your company and the right moments to engage.

"For Kuli Kuli, we had just completed a fundraiser and were about to hire a lot of new people. We decided it was an ideal time to focus on recruitment and retention. It was time to focus on creating an inclusive team culture, to be more thoughtful and deliberate about how we are building our team. It wasn't a terrible work environment. It was in a good place. But now, our team culture is in an even better place, aligned, and a lot more productive," said Curtis.

