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Perspective on Real Change: What Diversity, Inclusion and Equality Means to Us

Following the tragic deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and countless others due to systemic racism, we did not issue a statement last week. Like many other CEOs, I spent a great deal of time reflecting on our obligations as business leaders and the purpose of a statement. I hope that by sharing my thought process it helps unite us and spurs more dialogue about the quest toward inclusion and equality.

As a leading law firm, we are in a client-centric business, but, in this moment, I was focused exclusively on our people. This was an opportunity to give voice to those feeling voiceless and to challenge those with power.

Our firm was founded on, and our strategic vision recognizes, that integrity, respect, collaboration and inclusion are the values against which our decisions are weighed. For us, these are not just words on a page; celebrating our differences and our uniqueness is at our core. Through training, education, and opportunity, we have cultivated a culture where we strive for a firm where everyone can come to work as their authentic self, and where “covering” is not part of being successful at our firm. Recognizing that true commitment to a more diverse and inclusive environment must come from the top, I co-chair our Diversity & Inclusion Committee, and I’ve spoken publicly on several occasions about the importance of diversity and inclusion in our industry.

But this moment was different. It came amid a global health crisis. It came during an economic crisis. It came when the lines between fact and fiction have never been blurrier. It came when, in a span of weeks, we watched

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Americans killed by those sworn to protect us. This confluence of events created an atmosphere where, the hopeful among us, see the potential for a new normal.

In my mind, another statement from another straight, white man did not feel right for us. I was looking to affirm our convictions and deliver more opportunity, more growth, and more promotions for those traditionally underrepresented in large law firms. Of course, we have been active in the community; we've had a Diversity & Inclusion Committee for nearly 20 years; we've served as mentors for, and encouraged minority attorneys to participate in, the Chicago Committee's Mentorship Academy; we sponsored the DiversityLab and we adopted the Mansfield Rule; and we have for years maintained a core competency system for associate development to mitigate unconscious bias and ensure equal opportunity. We've worked to tackle the inequality in the legal industry since our founding. More was needed, however.

Clearly, I did not want the decision not to make a formal statement to be confused for indifference or worse. But I felt that this moment called for something different, something more. This was the time for communicating to our black colleagues that Black Lives Matter. Period. No qualifications and no responses. That we will use our voices and privilege to fight for equality and justice. That after hundreds of years of discrimination and worse we should all understand the anger and frustration and pain as even in 2020 we still witness a handcuffed black man killed by someone sworn to protect us.

So, instead of a public statement, I explained in stark and unequivocal language to every colleague at our firm, in three town halls, where we stand and what we value. I left no room for doubt.

In sharing these truths with our colleagues, I also put voice to some realities: Some or all of this may sound



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trite coming from a wealthy, straight, white man, blessed with privilege upon privilege. That I will not always get it right, though I will continue to utilize my power and influence to forge a firm that is open, inclusive, diverse, and a place all can be proud to call their professional home.

For some, our decision hit the mark. As one associate texted me:

Thank you, thank you for your sincere words today. It meant more than any firm email or “official” NGE statement ever could. I’ve been talking to various Black staff and professionals at the firm and the sentiments are all the same: we felt so empowered today by your words. And we felt that we were truly seen—not just as fellow coworkers but seen as Black people who are experiencing an enormous amount of anguish right now and you acknowledged us (and likely forced others to as well).

This is someone who has few parallels as an up-and-coming trial lawyer, but I know, for example, carries particularly “fancy” briefcases because, as a black woman, she’s accustomed to being mistaken as a non-lawyer. Many others shared similar reactions. Some were wrapped with tears of pent-up emotion. Some were wrapped with a virtual hug. Some displayed genuine reflection on these unprecedented times.

For some, the decision disappointed them. As one of my partners put it to me:

I remain disappointed that the firm has elected not to make a public-facing statement [along the lines of your comments to the firm]. As I have said to you in both public and private, I know these issues are important to you, and I don’t expect that this decision was made carelessly. However, it just doesn’t make sense to me that we would elect not to make a statement If inclusion is truly a pillar of our firm, why would we hesitate to say so early, often, and loudly, particularly in this moment?



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She was not alone in her view.

I weighed that perspective with the forceful, yet different, reaction of black men and women for giving them voice and acknowledging them and their pain and anguish and the centuries of inequality that preceded us. I saw renewed hope in myriad small discussions springing up throughout the firm - for those just listening; for those appreciating truly what it is like to walk in another's shoes; and for those finally feeling comfortable to share, with remarkable vulnerability, that we are far from equality and justice for all.

I searched to understand the different reactions. We certainly could have issued a statement along with my comments. I am sure it would have been well received by our people, our clients, our prospective clients, our future colleagues, our alumni etc.

But, at this moment, I wondered whether any statement could achieve my goal: giving voice to the pain and anger; empowering my traditionally underrepresented colleagues; reminding my white, male colleagues of our privilege and our obligation to use our power and voices to create meaningful, lasting change; and alienating as few people as possible. I wanted our people to hear my voice, with quiver and force and sorrow, and be able to respond to me directly.

I don't know if I was right or wrong, and I don't know if there is a right and wrong here. I know I was me. Authentically. I was not promoting our firm to clients or recruits. I was not pitching our platform or our culture. I was speaking to those who rightfully are angry and are in pain and to those who must use their power and privilege to advance our society. I was affirming our values and encouraging empathy. That's who we are. Now, you know it, too. I hope it helps even in a small way.



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