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Changing our course: A call to create an industry of inclusion and diversity

We cannot stand silent and allow this moment to simply be one more that passes. Nor is it enough to use our voices only until the initial outrage to subside. We must use this moment as a catalyst for change.

By **Kevin Trokey** | June 11, 2020
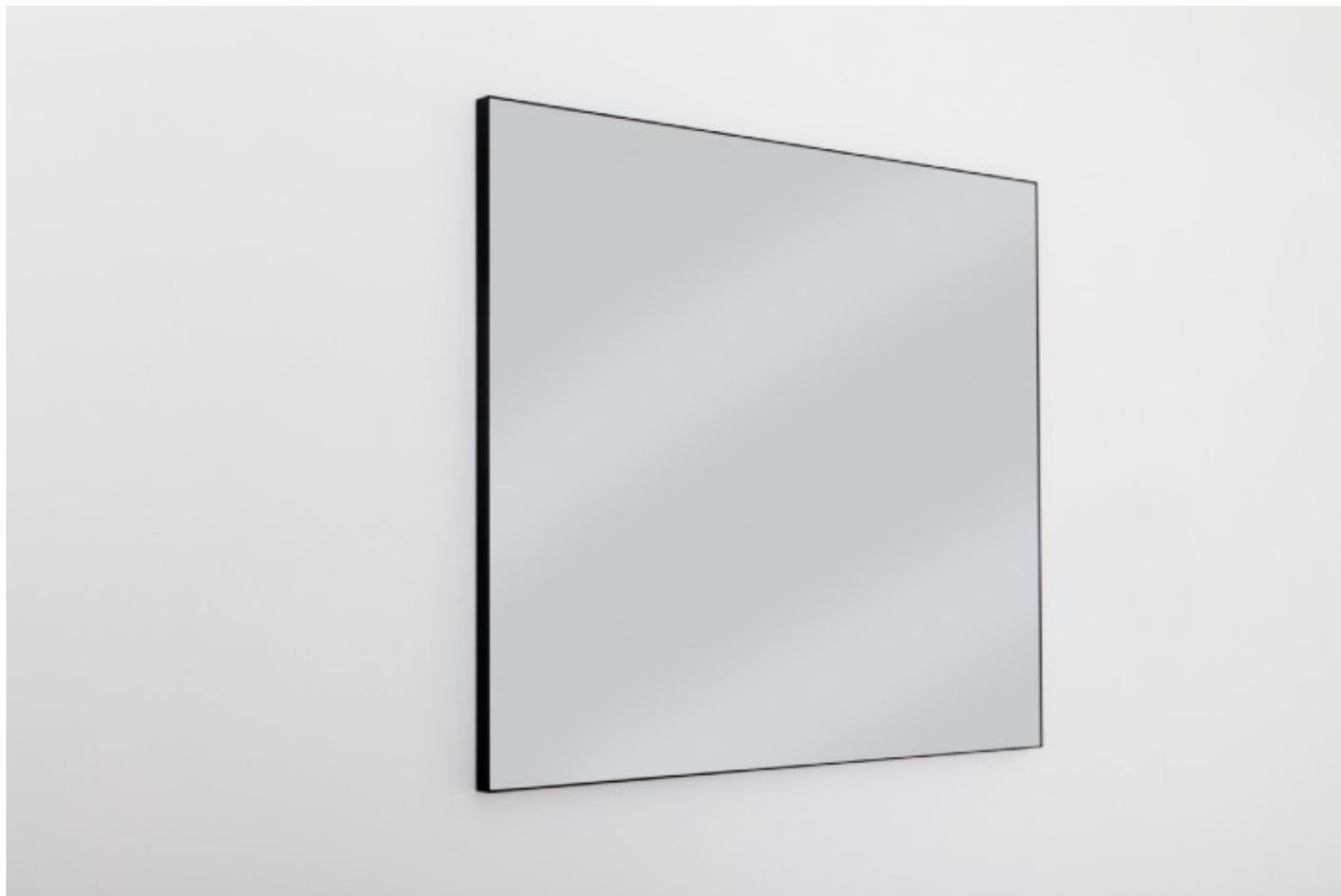
As a company, we have a "no-politics" policy when it comes to social media and other industry-facing platforms. But we currently find ourselves at a time when we need to question everything.

I'm talking about the racial crisis we're facing as a country. Here's where my inner conflict arises: Is this a crisis we recognize and own as a country, or do too many of us feel as though it's a crisis that belongs to someone else? Or, as I believe to be the case, are we experiencing the same crisis but in significantly

different ways?

To be even more specific, when I say racial crisis, I'm talking about the injustice faced by the black community.

I've been challenged

My son did some intern work for us a couple of years ago and became familiar with the industry and the role our company plays. Like so many 23-year-olds, he has an acute awareness of social issues.

Not being one to hold back, he challenged me on this recently. He texted me and said, "as an all-white company that has an impact in an industry with one of the highest inequality rates, I would appreciate it if you would do your part to spread the word and support a movement and a cause that is important to me and our collective future."

Wow. How do you respond to that? Honestly, my initial reaction was to remind him of our no-politics policy. It took me about two seconds to envision his response. It took maybe an additional 0.5 seconds to recognize he's right. This isn't about politics. It's about what's right and fair.

Full disclosure

I'm a bit embarrassed to admit this recognition about what's right and fair didn't make my anxiety about addressing the issue subside. But we all know doing what's right often isn't easy, just like doing what's easy often isn't right. The easy thing would have been to support the cause and movement in silence. But that also wouldn't have been right. So I accepted my son's challenge.

Even as I sat down and started writing this, I wondered if I have any ground on which to stand and share my thoughts. Who in the world am I to voice an opinion on something that isn't about me? Or is it? Isn't it about all of us? I realize it should be, but is it really?

Please give me a sign

As I pondered those very questions, I went outside for a walk to think about it. The next block over from my office is our city hall. There was a small group of young adults (men and women, black and white) standing on the corner protesting peacefully. One of the young white women was holding a sign that simply said, "White silence is compliance." I literally had a sign telling me what I needed to do.

Related: Banishing bias in the workplace–and in benefits (https://www.benefitspro.com/2019/07/16/banishing-bias-in-the-workplace-and-in-benefits/)

We all have limits to the reach of our voice; I decided I needed to use mine to reach whoever may be willing to pay attention. I knew my son was right. I needed to challenge our industry as a whole to do its part in addressing this movement; this cause as we're seeing it today. We cannot stand silent and allow this moment to simply be one more that passes. Nor is it enough to use our voices only until the initial outrage to subside. We must use this moment as a catalyst for change.

Look in the mirror

Our industry is often described as male, pale, and stale. As much as I hate to admit it, I fit the profile. I am male, white, and 53 (doing my best to avoid staleness, though).

There are many great female professionals in our industry, and I can point to countless millennials and Gen Zers who are making significant contributions. To be fair, there should be more of both, in increasingly impactful roles, but that's another topic for another time.

The issue we need to focus on now as an industry is our embarrassing lack of racial diversity. If you attend any industry event, ours included, you won't find many black professionals or other racial minorities.

Remove the privilege blinders

Over the past few years, I have frequently heard the term "privilege" in a context I'd never heard before. There is white privilege, male privilege, and the privilege of sexual orientation, to name a few. All are real.

We are an industry of great privilege, and many compound privileges wrapped into one. I may be misusing the term at this point, but that all leads to new levels of privilege. In the insurance industry, we tend to have economic privilege, and because of our connection to leaders and decision-makers, we also have the privilege of influence.

More industry perspective: This is much bigger than me (https://www.benefitspro.com/2018/01/01/this-is-much-bigger-than-me/)

In complete transparency, I worry my message, as well-intended as it is, will be twisted and interpreted as something it isn't. But then I thought about my position and realized this is a concern that couldn't originate from any place other than privilege.

I seek to learn

As much as I'd like to say I can relate to what it's like to be black in this country, or even in this industry, I just can't. I try, but I am limited in this ability.

As I watch the news and read the stories, I'm struck with many thoughts and feelings:

- I have never considered myself a racist in any way, but it's time to challenge the nuances of what that may mean. Where does silent and passive opposition to the overt racism of others really leave me?
- I hurt but can't even begin to conceive of the hurt felt by the black community.
- I'm afraid but realize I have no idea what real fear is. I don't have to live moment-to-moment, fearing those I should trust the most.
- I'm sad and realize that pales in comparison to what others are feeling.
- I'm embarrassed for many reasons: For being part of a society where this still happens and for my lack of effort to try and drive change. I then question if it's fair to be embarrassed when I realize this emotion is only about me. Then one of my teammates pointed out that this is a step towards personal growth, so I accept it.
- I am outraged but have to challenge to what degree that's genuine, considering I had to question even writing this.
- I am also determined to do what I can to understand more, to change, and to help drive change, even if I can never understand the plight of others in absolute terms.
- And, I've cried. I've cried for specific victims; I've cried for the black community; I've cried for our country. Of course, most have been tears of sorrow, but recently, there has been an occasional tear of hope and optimism. We all need more of the latter.

Something I know we can, and must, do

The great privilege we have in this industry comes with equally great responsibility. The responsibility to use our economic privilege as well as our privilege of influence to help make a difference.

I am committing here to become more enlightened about this issue. It will take time and personal conversations to get to a meaningful understanding, the type of understanding necessary to truly turn the tide of racism. However, I know there are things we can all do now that can have a much more immediate impact.

We all need to be vested and invested in doing what's right, even if it isn't easy. However, there are a couple of relatively easy things we can do that also happen to be right.

We must do our part to become allies of the movement and cause and work to correct this historical and humanitarian travesty.

If you're like me, you may be questioning how much your efforts can make a difference. Sure, your effort alone may not move the needle, but there's no doubt we can as an industry.

It has taken untold individual actions and inaction to create racism. Likewise, it will take untold actions to change our course. It may be idealistic and unrealistic to think racism will ever go away completely, but every person who can experience life without it makes the effort worthwhile.

Start by immediately finding a worthwhile social organization that understands how to make an immediate and positive impact on the black community and donate what you can, both time and money.

Let's focus our collective efforts to become an industry of inclusion and diversity that reflects the diversity of the thousands of businesses and their employees we serve every day.

I challenge every professional in our industry to:

- Stop and reflect on the privilege the industry has provided and pay it forward.
- Educate yourself on the issues and share your new knowledge with others in the industry.
- Express your concern to your community; silence is painful.
- Use your voice to amplify the message of the black community in the industry.
- Make our industry a safe environment for everyone. Eliminate micro-aggressions, provide the resources needed to be inclusive, and create an environment where everyone is celebrated and feels welcomed.
- Promote our industry to black professionals and do what you can to create the same opportunities you enjoy yourself.

If you're curious about social organizations to consider feel free to reach out and ask us what we are doing ourselves. Also, please feel free to reach out and share your ideas on how we can more effectively do our part to address this issue. We don't have all the answers, but we are eager learners.

Perspective helps

In business, you are always looking for an unfair advantage. I love that idea when it comes to business. However, nobody should be put at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to life.

The evening before I wrote this, I sat with my son and watched and discussed videos (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CFevoA8GKR0) about an amazing woman named Jane Elliott (https://janeelliott.com/). As happens so often during conversations with my son, I learned a lesson and gained a new perspective.

I know it's probably impossible for me, and likely most of you reading this, to have a true appreciation for what it means to live as a black person in a white person's world. However, I know you have an appreciation for just how unfair that is at a very real level.

Also: Building diversity and inclusion: A modern guide (https://www.benefitspro.com/2020/02/11/building-diversity-and-inclusion-a-modern-guide/)

With one simple request of her audience, Jane Elliott made this painfully clear. I'll make that request of you: Of those of you who are white, if you would be happy to be treated in the same way black members of our society are treated, raise your hand.

If you aren't raising your hand, read this last line one more time to be sure you understood the request. I'm guessing there still aren't many who have raised their hand. As Jane pointed out, the lack of raised hands means we understand what's happening. You know you don't want this treatment for you. So, why are we so willing to accept it and allow it to happen for others?

Her point is worth repeating. How can we accept and allow others to be treated in a way that not a single one of us would ever want for ourselves? Sobering, isn't it?

Now raise your hand if you agree now is the time. Raise your hand if you are willing to invest your time, money, and personal growth to help right this tragic wrong.

Our industry makes a positive difference for many every day; let's focus that ability where it is most needed today.

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