

JUNE 3, 2020

REPUTATION ADVISORY:

COMMUNICATING IN A TIME OF RACIAL TENSION

The death of George Floyd, a black man in Minneapolis, at the hands of white police officers has triggered the most significant outburst of racial anger in decades. In more than 30 cities across the country, protestors have demonstrated peacefully and called for change. Simultaneously, the peaceful protests have been undermined by a combination of forces that have, in many cases, incited a larger breakdown of social order. As state and local officials determine how best to address social justice concerns and restore order, companies must also look at the impact of this moment on their employees and communities and decide how to best engage both.

Racial incidents that occur outside of the office are carried into our workplaces by employees who are frustrated and fearful for their lives, the lives of loved ones and communities that are most harmed by persistent and unjust treatment. This is compounded by the stress and anxiety of layoffs and uncertainties brought on by COVID-19 – social and economic realities felt more intensely and disproportionately by people of color.

Historically, the response by many enterprises has been to remain silent for fear of saying or doing the wrong thing or out of a conviction that race, or other societal issues, is not an appropriate topic for business leaders. Many employees feel they cannot speak about race in the workplace. But the toll of carrying burdens silently has implications on work performance, morale and a company's culture. It leads to feelings of isolation and resentment.

**THIS IS THE
TIME FOR
COMPANIES
TO REAFFIRM
THEIR
CORPORATE
VALUES AND
DEEPEN A
COMMITMENT
TO DIVERSITY,
EQUITY AND
INCLUSION.**

- + **CEOS MUST SPEAK UP.** While a CEO statement on racial injustice is not, on its own, sufficient to drive a culture of inclusion, it makes a powerful statement that racial inequality is an issue that matters. A statement from the CEO will set the tone and lay the foundation by articulating why the issue is important to address and reinforces company values. Include a call for unity and allyship among colleagues and direct employees to support networks and resources.
- + **CONVENE SMALL GROUP DISCUSSIONS AND ENCOURAGE ONE-ON-ONE CONVERSATIONS.** This is a time to listen to employee concerns and life experiences. HR, D&I specialists, employee resource group (ERG) leaders and external facilitators all have a role in creating safe spaces. How employees decide to talk or tune in will vary by circumstance. HR and D&I leaders can provide tools and resources to managers and employees to help facilitate responsible and productive opportunities to check in with one another. Fear of saying the wrong thing prevents personal interactions at the time when impacted employees crave the interaction most. Equip employees with the tools and opportunities to do so effectively.
- + **REGULAR BUSINESS COMMUNICATIONS, BOTH INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL, NEED TO BE RECALIBRATED FOR BOTH CONTENT AND TONE IN THIS TIME OF CRISIS.** Consider the national sentiment when calibrating your external marketing and communications, including the timing of a new product launch, or a humor-driven marketing campaign, until tensions have subsided. Evaluate all planned social, digital, email and paid content to make sure it still strikes an acceptable tone in light of current events. The increased risk of appearing tone deaf may outweigh any potential marketing benefit. In most cases, it would be more prudent to pause than to take the reputational risk of appearing to be insensitive.

- + **HOST A VIRTUAL TOWN HALL IN A FORMAT THAT WORKS BEST FOR YOUR CULTURE.** Virtual gatherings are likely the best option today to engage workforces that are working remotely and across multiple geographies. One approach is an informal question and answer discussion led by an employee resource group or a senior D&I leader. Organizations can also explore hosting a webinar series on related topics or panel discussions in partnership with employee resource groups that may rely on trained external experts to facilitate.
- + **ENCOURAGE AND EDUCATE EMPLOYEES ON “ALLYSHIP.”** Share guidance from HR/D&I that empowers employees to check in on their fellow colleagues.
- + **CONSIDER PROVIDING A “DAY OF SUPPORT”** by offering a day of paid leave for employees to grieve, support their communities, protest safely or simply educate themselves.
- + **MOVE FROM REACTION TO PROACTIVE ACTION.** Create an internal working group to navigate an environment in which social, workplace and business issues collide. Create an “Action Committee” of core internal stakeholders who can meet proactively and reactively to discuss real-time or pending issues. This cross-functional team should review and discuss social topics and inquiries, employ guidelines to measure impact and perception and routinely engage leaders (including the CEO) on a proposed level of engagement and responses. Determine who will say what, how and through which channels.
- + **COMPANIES THAT HAVE BEEN PHYSICALLY IMPACTED BY LOOTING AND PROPERTY DESTRUCTION SHOULD COMMIT** to working with local officials and community leaders to provide support and strengthen local communities so that they can safely reopen, operate and keep their employees safe.
- + **CREATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR PRO-BONO WORK OR EMPLOYEE DONATIONS.** Support opportunities or offer time for employees to devote their energy to pro bono or volunteer activities in support of racial justice. Consider donating funds or creating an employee-match program to organizations addressing racial issues.
- + **ADVOCATE FOR POLICY CHANGES.** Align with your public affairs and government relations teams to engage with federal, state and local officials to promote systemic change. Make the company’s position on policies and actions that impacts communities public, through op-eds or blog posts.

DEMONSTRATE INTERNALLY THE VALUES YOU ARE ADVOCATING FOR OUTSIDE OF YOUR FOUR WALLS.

This is the time for companies to focus on racial equity in the workplace, even as they mitigate the challenge of re-opening in the aftermath of COVID closures and shutdowns. Any organization that speaks out should prepare for scrutiny around their own shortcomings. Companies must go beyond words from well-intended leaders and address systemic biases that persist within the organization, impacting the recruitment, retention and advancement of diverse talent throughout the enterprise.

**For More Information,
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