

How Values-Based Communication Can Promote Racial Justice and Equality

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These are turbulent times. Battered from the pandemic's economic hardship, and following the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020, citizens of all races, ages and other demographics have taken to the streets to protest racial injustice and police violence. In this context, individuals and businesses have been faced with a decision of enormous bearing: to speak up or to remain silent; to take action or remain on the sidelines.

Every business communications handbook will tell you that in times of uncertainty, direct, timely and transparent messaging is more important than ever. But what does that mean for corporate America, small and large? In times of social unrest, when many private citizens feel compelled to break their silence, are companies complicit for failing to raise their voices? And if they choose to speak up, how can they do so in an impactful and authentic manner – and make sure that their words are translated into meaningful action?

Declarations of Corporate Solidarity

Amidst the public unrest, corporate America has been quick to support the protests for more racial justice and fundamental societal change. Ben & Jerry's, the popular ice cream manufacturer – now owned by international CPG behemoth Unilever – was among the first to release a passionate statement titled "Silence Is Not An Option." In its press release, the company condemns white supremacy and proposes four concrete actions to effectuate change (Washington Post, June 3, 2020) – which is in line with the company's history of making bold, political statements, and their enduring support of organizations fighting racial injustice.

Other companies were quick to follow suit – and were

met with dire criticism. The beauty conglomerate L'Oréal issued a post on Instagram that read "Speaking Out Is Worth It," a wordplay on their famous tagline, and stated their commitment to the NAACP. The internet was quick to point out that the company fired Munroe Bergdorf – a transgender model who is also a person of color – in 2017 for speaking out against racism. Facebook CEO Zuckerberg posted that at Facebook, "We stand with the Black community" – and again, the online community reminded Zuckerberg that Black employees accounted for 4% of Facebook's workforce. Other examples include fashion retailer H&M, which pledged a \$500,000 donation to the NAACP, and Youtube, which declared to direct \$1 million to "address social injustice." Both companies – and many more, including Amazon, were criticized for jumping on the bandwagon, and for using empty words without proposing or taking real action. They were lacking the track record of speaking up and stepping into the line of fire that *Ben & Jerry's* had cultivated over decades.

Unfortunately, often the larger conversation around race in our society resembles a dance, where people – and organizations – initially want to join and connect, but eventually leave. Staying is a sign of commitment; leaving breaks trust. Communities want to see how much you can take before you leave: Do organizations keep listening and stay in the fight, even after they experience a setback? That demonstrates how serious they are. Persistence builds trust.

Persistence will also help us go beyond merely being aware of racism to acquiring a deep understanding of it. Once we become enlightened about the problems of the world, we still require practice, teaching, learning and more practice over much time before claiming to be

talented, knowledgeable or competent. This is true for anything we wish to be good at, and it is true of race relations.

When Corporate Solidarity Backfires

The concept of *performative allyship* (Gray, 2018) can shed some light on why companies appear opportunistic when presenting themselves as solidary corporate allies. Performative allyship has been associated with declaring solidarity with a marginalized group without taking real – and sometimes painful – actions to change the status quo. Performative allies throw around keywords such as “woke” (aware of racial and societal injustice) for marketing purposes (Constant-Desportes, 2018) and expect a “*virtual pat on the back for being a good person or on the right side*” (Phillips, 2020). Performative allyship is more of an “*occasional public performance instead of a continuous, well-informed labor*” (Selcer, 2018). And giving money in particular, says Stevenson, is one way to indicate allyship, while keeping a safe distance.

Performative allies lack a consistent dedication to the very issues of social justice that they are now aligning themselves with – and it does not take profound investigative skills to detect those inconsistencies. If a company declares solidarity with the current protests and pledges to support diversity, take a look at the “About Us” section of its website. If you see little or no diversity in the workforce, that tells you a lot about the company’s values. If a company values diversity and the strength it brings to its business, its website will declare it proudly and sincerely.

This explains why many companies’ messaging efforts in the wake of the recent protests fell short, and even created significant backlash (this is not an entirely new phenomenon, of course: going back further, [the Pepsi advertising scandal with Kendall Jenner](https://www.prweek.com/article/1429761/pepsi-says-sorry-removes-kendall-jenner-ad-web) (https://www.prweek.com/article/1429761/pepsi-says-sorry-removes-kendall-jenner-ad-web) comes to mind; Victor, 2017). Their communication (even though very likely well-intended) appeared to be opportunistic, as it was not rooted in or connected to their corporate values, and hence not reflected in their broader organizational behavior – such as their hiring and promotion practices – and there was no commitment to a corporate action plan to challenge, and possibly change the status quo.

Values-Based Communication and

Engaged Allyship

Controversial – and in particular, politically charged – corporate statements are rare for most companies, and usually not something that any PR advisor that would like to be hired back would recommend, as it might alienate customers. Another point, however, could be made: a growing number of consumers, especially the social-media savvy Millennials, [care deeply about social issues and value authenticity](https://www.ft.com/content/09271178-6f29-11e8-92d3-6c13e5c92914) (https://www.ft.com/content/09271178-6f29-11e8-92d3-6c13e5c92914), according to a Pew Research study. **The more closely your corporate messaging aligns with your core values and your corporate actions, and the more authentically you manage to get these values across to your diverse constituencies (i.e., employees, customers, suppliers, policy makers and other interest groups, and other owners), the more they can connect with your company on an deeper, more meaningful level.** What is more: With the rise of integrated, multi-channel marketing, avoiding inconsistencies in one’s corporate messaging becomes key in such a setting: If we communicate differently across channels, and most importantly, if our actions fail to reflect our words, we lose reliability and trustworthiness.

Staying true to one’s values means drawing a line between what we consider right, or good, and wrong, or bad behaviors – and consequently, alienating those who espouse what lies beyond our imaginary line. Those losses are unfortunate – but they are also generally short lived. Think back to when people burned their *Nike* shoes after the company stood in solidarity with Colin Kaepernick for taking a knee. At same time – since “*social issues and a brand’s bottom line go hand in hand for millennials,*” a key target group for *Nike* – the company’s share price rose (Hale, 2019)

Engaged Allyship means walking the talk, and this requires a company to go beyond making sure that their workforce numerically reflects their dedication to diversity. An engaged corporate ally makes sure that their employees are not only diverse, but also dedicated to diversity competence and racial literacy, which means that they understand the need for and actively advocate for changes to reduce disparities. An engaged ally makes a conscious effort to include a larger, more diverse group of stakeholders in their chain of revenue by ensuring that corporate purchasing benefits a number of diverse communities, rather than a single

vendor. An engaged ally recognizes where the organization fell short in the past and actively works towards encouraging behaviors that promote racial equality and justice. In the next section, we explain some of these actions in more detail.

A Call for Self-Reflection

Companies that choose to voice their opinion about any controversial issue – the case in point being the current protests on racial injustice – and desire to promote greater diversity and inclusion in their organization may benefit from self-reflection on the following issues:

1. Owning Your Truth

“Owning your truth” means moving beyond storytelling, on to truth-telling. While stories are important means to convey hope and provide inspiration, they should always be closely aligned with the truth. This requires any organization to reflect on its own past – and present – with regards to the issue at hand. Many German family businesses spent considerable time and emotions reflecting on their family’s interactions and involvement with the Nazi regime after WW2 – leading to deep introspection and oftentimes a radical change of behavior and outlook. Any company has the capacity to look at its own behavior, past and present, to critically evaluate its own present narrative, to go back in its own history and identify where mistakes have been made to set a solid, truthful foundation for the future. Being proactive about excavating the organization’s history also enables the organization to “come clean” on its own terms and to control the communication, rather than being confronted with the truth from the outside.

Ask yourself: What is our track record and past positioning with regard to the issue at hand? Have we taken actions in the past – or failed to do so – that are at odds with our message? Do the values that we promote and uphold encourage and foster the very behaviors among our leadership, our employees, suppliers, customers that we want to see? What narrative about ourselves are we promoting, and how reflective is that narrative of our authentic self?

2. Human Capital Diversity

Workforce diversity is often reduced to a percentage of minority employees that companies aspire to hire, employ or promote – but true diversity goes beyond such a reflection in numbers.

Human capital diversity is not just about the percentage

of Black and Brown employees – it is also about diversity competence and racial literacy. Having Black and Brown employees who are not literate about and will not advocate on the politics of race will do nothing to challenge the disparities that corporations are trying to change. So even if you have diversity, do you have the sense of literacy on how to navigate a host of issues, such as communication, or what to do after you experience a setback?

Ask yourself: Does our workforce reflect a level of diversity we deem desirable? Do we have a diverse leadership team? Do we adequately leverage the diversity present among our employees? Where in our hiring and promotion practices do we evaluate our talent’s diversity and racial literacy, and what tools do we use for that purpose? Do we actively foster diversity competence among our workforce?

3. Supply Chain Diversity

If a company tells you that they care about small, local businesses, but this sense of caring is not reflected in their procurement and how they spend their money, that makes that declaration of care rather meaningless, says Perryman. Unilever offers a good example for “walking the talk,” by publicly committing to increasing their spending with diverse suppliers.

This means taking a broader view of the supply chain. Corporations at every level need to understand that every purchasing decision can make a difference in the life cycle and growth of a diverse business. For African American-owned businesses the impact is greater. In every company, procurement teams buy supplies, goods, services at all levels – these are all opportunities to welcome minority vendors into your corporate value system, and help those businesses access the playing field, creating opportunities for an improved workforce and business community. Every time a corporation limits sourcing access, and growth, it cripples the economy of a community.

Ask yourself: Do we provide opportunities for a variety of companies along our multi-level supply chain? Do we source materials from multiple sellers to benefit different communities? Do we pay attention to include companies in our revenue chain that benefit minority communities?

4. Coordinating Diversity Efforts

Values-based organizations ensure that their values are reflected in their decision-making and their choices.

More specifically, if promoting diversity is one of those values, they make a concerted effort to put inclusiveness and diversity at the core of their corporate behavior. This goes beyond inviting everyone to compete, says Perryman: if the playing ground is not level, the mere invitation to participate is hardly fair. A more concerted effort to ensure diversity is lived and promoted throughout the organization is to appoint somebody to coordinate these efforts – and acknowledging that where the person is placed in the organizational hierarchy is reflective of the importance attributed to the role.

In the late 70's, many companies hired "Economic Opportunity Officers," reporting directly to the CEO, who represents the values of the corporation. Over the past 25 years, that role was diminished and moved to a department outside the executive suite. This is just one of many functional steps that should have been maintained as executive suite oversight and improvement of the supply chain.

Ask yourself: Do our corporate communication and actions effectively espouse the values we want to be recognized for and associated with by our key constituencies? Do we currently adequately anchor diversity on the organizational level?

5. Alleviating Racial Stress and Acknowledging Systemic Racism

Decades of psychological research show that racial interactions are stressful for all parties involved, but particularly so for persons of color. In order to relieve the stress level among employees in a diverse workforce, leaders need to be trained to manage their employees' stress and be taught how to manage the stress related to talking about racial injustice. This includes talking about the different perceptions of racism that individuals hold, from rejecting to embracing the notion of systemic racism. Excavating and discussing business examples of systemic racism can help find a common foundation upon which to build the organization's own, truthful narrative of racial and social justice.

"The lion's story will never be known as long as the hunter is the one to tell it." (West African proverb)

Ask yourself: Do we provide a platform for all of our employees to openly talk about racial stress and racial injustice? What do we do to help manage racial stress? How accessible are resources to support employees who experience racism in the organization?

Building Racial Literacy

Racial literacy is the ability to identify and resolve racially stressful social interactions. Social interactions involving people of different color are generally stressful (to both people of color and white people) because of the perceived sense of threat that a racial encounter invokes. The threat could be internal (e.g., you struggle with thoughts of what might happen in the presence of a person different from yourself), or it could be external (e.g., you feel that you have been slighted or insulted because of your difference).

While we often talk about work-related or family-related stress, racial stress often goes unnoticed, although it has been associated with a host of severe health risks among people of color, such as high blood pressure, sleep disorder, breast cancer, and lower life expectancy. Although we lack systematic empirical research, one could conceive that racial stress also causes significant disruptions in the workplace.

Strategies that have proven useful to reduce racial stress in school and other educational settings typically involve stress management and relaxation. In stressful situations, the human brain tends to go quickly into lockdown mode. Therefore, the aim of any exercise should be to reduce stress quickly, ideally within sixty seconds. The more you can relax, the more you can access what you know and not fall into the "orientation lock" trap. When you feel less overwhelmed, your decision-making opportunities become much clearer.

Organizations can enhance racial literacy by offering training in racial conflict management. The important thing to keep in mind is that racial literacy is a skill, and like any other skill, it requires practice to gain competence. Like a muscle that cannot be built overnight, racial literacy should not be approached in a

“once and done” fashion. Ideally, it should occur throughout the year and become a natural part of the organization’s training repertoire.

This also raises the important question as to where and how organizations assess racial literacy. To use Peter Drucker’s words, “What gets measured, gets managed.” – organizations need to establish ways to measure employees’ perceived racial stress and their levels of racial literacy.

A long-term (year-round) approach also helps with overcoming temporary setbacks or mistakes. With time and practice, employees of all colors will grow increasingly confident in dealing with racial conflicts in the workplace and beyond.

A Path Forward

This has been a challenging year in terms of communication for corporate America. The public in general, and consumers in particular, have become a powerful force in shaping corporate reputations over the last decade. In an attempt to appear responsive to social trends, many corporations have adjusted to this new reality by quickly responding to whatever is trending on social media and beyond. Oftentimes, these efforts backfire: they are perceived as opportunistic lip service, ultimately harming the company’s reputation rather than benefitting it.

However, and in the spirit of Winston Churchill, it would be a shame to let a good crisis go to waste, and not learn from it. To make your business’s communication effective going forward, authenticity is key – and authenticity means that your words and actions flow from your foundation of values. If we manage to stay true to our core values, we can avoid inconsistencies in our messaging. **To put it simply: authentic, values-based communication aligns who we are, what we say, and what we do.** Having a strong value foundation and enforcing it by bringing the values to life requires us to continuously monitor corporate behavior as well as any representatives’ actions to see if they reflect our values.

And should your values – or your history – not be reflective of who you want your organization to be, view

it as an opportunity to engage your workforce and other stakeholders to effect change. **And take this to heart: Don’t market who you want to be, until you’ve become who you want to be.**

So, if racial inequality is an issue where you, as an organization, feel comfortable speaking up and acting upon, make sure to “hear the lion,” so you can start to engage racial differences constructively and help create lasting change in business and society.

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