

# Addressing Racism Starts with Having Hard, Respectful Conversations

By Kathy Gurchiek

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**T**here is a renewed focus on racial disparities in society and the workplace since George Floyd was killed while in police custody. His death ignited protests around the world over how people of color are treated in the U.S. and elsewhere.

A panel of experts examined race relations in the workplace and fostering more inclusive workplaces during a webinar June 18 co-sponsored by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) and the Association of Corporate Counsel (ACC). The webcast was moderated by Veta Richardson, president and CEO of the ACC.

The conversations that organizations need to have with their employees must start by demonstrating empathy and respect in word and deed, said John Page, general counsel and chief diversity officer at Golden State Foods in Irvine, Calif.

He was among four panelists participating in "A New Understanding of Workplace Diversity and Inclusion ([www.shrm.org/LearningAndCareer/learning/webcasts/Pages/0620shrmacc.aspx](http://www.shrm.org/LearningAndCareer/learning/webcasts/Pages/0620shrmacc.aspx))," the first of a two-part presentation by SHRM and the ACC.

The partnership ([www.shrm.org/about-shrm/press-room/press-releases/pages/-shrm-acc-announce-alliance-to-drive-positive-change-in-the-workplace.aspx](http://www.shrm.org/about-shrm/press-room/press-releases/pages/-shrm-acc-announce-alliance-to-drive-positive-change-in-the-workplace.aspx)) brings together chief human resources officers (CHROs) and chief legal officers to examine workplace policies and support more inclusive workplaces. The second webcast is scheduled for June 25 and will review new SHRM research on workplace bias.

Overcoming Workplace Bias ([www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/Pages/overcoming-workplace-bias.aspx](http://www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/Pages/overcoming-workplace-bias.aspx))

The conversations, Page said, should convey "that we appreciate the pain folks are going through, the difficulty, the discomfort, and being honest and authentic about it." At the C-suite level, leaders should start with listening, learning and focusing on the problem, and understanding "there will be folks who are uncomfortable [having these conversations]" and who view these discussions—consciously or unconsciously—as a challenge to the status quo, he added.

Page quoted Booker T. Washington, founder and first president of Tuskegee University, a private, historically black university in Tuskegee, Ala., who said, "There are two ways of exerting one's strength: One is pushing down, one is pushing up."

"So those in this country who feel they are losing power," Page said, "... ask yourself, how are you exerting that strength?"

He recommended organizations start the conversation by agreeing on shared values to find common ground: "Do you believe in freedom? Do you believe in the pursuit of happiness? Do you believe they should be taken away? And I think that's where the conversation began at Golden State Foods."

Continued intentionality in diversity and inclusion is a significant part of what is missing in corporate America, said panelist April Miller Boise, general counsel at Eaton Corp., founded in the U.S. and headquartered in Dublin, Ireland.

Feedback

"We have to be really intentional about the teams we are putting together and the actions we are taking to bring diversity to our organizations."

### SHRM RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT

Overcoming Workplace Bias ([www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/Pages/overcoming-workplace-bias.aspx](http://www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/Pages/overcoming-workplace-bias.aspx))

The idea around affirmative action "was to be intentional in our actions around diversity and inclusion," but it has developed a negative connotation, sometimes associated with giving people opportunities they don't deserve, Boise said. Managers often say they want to hire the best candidate for a job, she added, but think there's only one qualified candidate per role.

"There are a number of qualified candidates for every opportunity. We need to be really thoughtful as we think about those candidates. How are they adding to the experience we really need to see in our organization?"

The definition of diversity has been greatly expanded, Boise said.

"I'm definitely in favor of having a big tent [that includes many people]. Unfortunately, what has happened is this expanded definition of diversity has meant we are not focused on how we are retaining, promoting and ensuring the advancement of black people. I think black people have been left behind in this diversity movement."

Including women on boards of directors is important, Boise offered as an example, "but it's not the only definition of equity."

Panelist Michelle Nettles, chief people and culture officer at Milwaukee-based ManpowerGroup, noted that her company had "a rich conversation" around the importance of including the words "racist" and "racism" in a statement from the chairman and CEO that referenced recent events that point to systemic racism. Protesters in Milwaukee marched for days in support of Floyd and calling for an end to racial injustice.

Manpower's CEO also is president of the local chamber of commerce. In that role, Nettles said, he began communitywide conversations about the inequities in Milwaukee and started conversations with partners around the world about the company's role as a corporate citizen in addressing systemic racism.

The company is focusing on active listening, calling out racism and upskilling people of color so they can acquire the skills needed to earn a living wage, she said. Its partnerships also include one that registers voters and educates them on the importance of voting to implement change.

Panelist Steve Pemberton, CHRO at Workhuman, which is headquartered in Framingham, Mass., wrote "Answering the Question, What Can I Do?" (<https://www.workhuman.com/resources/globoforce-blog/answering-the-question-what-can-i-do>)" as a companion piece to his CEO's statement on the protests, in which the CEO asked people to channel their outrage into action. Pemberton, who is black, said he wrote his article after many of his white colleagues, friends and family members asked him what they could and should do.

He recommends reading Frederick Douglass' speech "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?"

(<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4h2927t.html>) In it, Douglass, a black abolitionist who escaped slavery, points out the inconsistencies

of America and the clash of equality espoused in the Constitution and the reality of slavery.

Pemberton also urged white people to "remember a time when you were forgotten, overlooked or on the receiving end of a harm that somebody tried to justify." Doing so, he said, "gives you a window into the challenge we face every single day in some way, shape or form."

In announcing the SHRM-ACC alliance, SHRM President and Chief Executive Officer Johnny C. Taylor, Jr., SHRM-SCP, noted that racism is still rampant in U.S. workplaces.

"Organizations need to put more resources into their inclusion and diversity efforts, and it is not the job of the chief diversity officer alone. CHROs and general counsels have an important role to play," he said.

This presentation, "A New Understanding of Workplace Diversity and Inclusion, (https://event.on24.com/eventRegistration/EventLobbyServlet?target=reg20.jsp&referrer=&eventid=2425475&sessionid=1&key=86F229A028FB55B7E4229A3AD5375EAB&regTag=&sourcepage=register)" is now available for on-demand viewing.

Other resources referenced during the panel discussion:

- The 1619 Project from The New York Times (https://urldefense.proofpoint.com/v2/url?u=https-3A\_\_www.nytimes.com\_interactive\_2019\_08\_14\_magazine\_1619-2Damerica-2Dslavery.html&d=DwMFAg&c=nQOnw6HHAeKBNxj23OXhOw&r=QOZ2JruuQuXR89sAeWP9xOLXXyOoZuu57hnHM752zUA&m=5pwulZk2vtUxIHnJ-3C5sV81w\_mpv0j1sclhRy38Ftc&s=kBsTfGSDfHB7HvYPry8GYlInqO4mrPoRM9L7PNHAlm0&e=)
- Tolerance.org (https://urldefense.proofpoint.com/v2/url?u=https-3A\_\_www.tolerance.org\_&d=DwMFAg&c=nQOnw6HHAeKBNxj23OXhOw&r=QOZ2JruuQuXR89sAeWP9xOLXXyOoZuu57hnHM752zUA&m=5pwulZk2vtUxIHnJ-3C5sV81w\_mpv0j1sclhRy38Ftc&s=QUISMcaQFVxpqtJ3YP5QD\_8htxStJk45VoDT3o3dPUo&e=), a website offered by the Southern Poverty Law Center dedicated to helping teachers and schools educate children and youth to be active participants in a diverse democracy.

Feedback

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