

# The role of corporations in promoting racial equity: Moving from intention to impact

This year has seen amplified calls for rectifying longstanding racial inequality, spurring much of the country to action and putting corporations in the limelight as they're increasingly called upon to play a role in fighting systemic racism. **We hear from our corporate partners that they could benefit from more direct expertise to ensure intention yields action - and ultimately impact.** Building upon our series of events related to the corporate sector's role in addressing racial justice, RRA recently convened four impactful advocacy leaders to speak to more than 150 senior business leaders about how advocacy is changing and how businesses can contribute.

## Event Panelists:

### Alphonso David

President, Human Rights Campaign



Alphonso David is the first civil rights lawyer and the first person of color to serve as President of HRC in the organization's nearly 40-year history. Alphonso has significant litigation and management experience in the public, private and not-for-profit sectors. He has been at the forefront of the movement for LGBTQ equality for more than a decade and worked at both the state and national level, including as Counsel and Deputy Secretary and Counsel for Civil Rights to New York Governor Andrew Cuomo.

### Brickson Diamond

CEO, Big Answers; Co-Founder, The Blackhouse Foundation



Brickson Diamond has dedicated his career to the cause of advancing opportunity and access for those who should have it, but do not. He previously served as EVP, Chief Operating Officer of The Executive Leadership Council, Inc. (ELC), a 30+-year-old global membership organization working to build an inclusive business leadership pipeline. Brickson grew membership from 400 to over 800 current and former Black board members, CEOs and senior executives at Fortune 1000/Global 500 companies.

### Fatima Goss Graves

President and CEO, National Women's Law Center



Fatima Goss Graves has spent her career fighting to advance opportunities for women and girls and helped to co-found the TIME'S UP Legal Defense Fund. Prior to becoming President and CEO, Fatima served as the Center's Senior Vice President for Programs, where she led the organization's broad program agenda to advance progress and eliminate barriers in employment, education, health and reproductive rights and lift women and families out of poverty.

### Robert Raben

President and Founder, Raben Group



Robert Raben leads his policy and advocacy firm drawing on nearly 30 years of professional experience as an attorney, senior Hill staffer, and Assistant Attorney General, counseling clients on both the legal subtleties and the political realities of the issues they face. He works to drive public policy in a humane and sensible direction; to bring diversity and equity to the boardrooms and think tanks and corporations of America; and to broaden civil rights.

## Seizing the moment – why is *this time* different?

While the challenges and consequences of racial injustice are by no means new, several forces have converged that are changing the nature of and motivations for corporate engagement:



### **New generations bring different priorities and approaches to advocacy**

- Younger generations have been taught to embody principles of fairness and democracy, and are now holding institutional systems to account – pressuring current leaders and “stepping up” where vacuums exist
- They are inherently intersectional in their understanding of issues, making connections between movements for other types of justice that were previously treated as separate or siloed (e.g. LGBTQ, disability)



### **Social media has amplified the power of personal narratives**

- As with the #metoo movement, we’re seeing how shining public light on previously buried or ignored personal stories can help audiences understand the breadth, depth and ubiquity of a problem
- The unique isolation resulting from COVID-19 lockdown means that the distractions of normal life no longer exist, though we’re still connected online – increasingly difficult for corporations to look away



### **Increasing pressure on companies to respond to stakeholder interests**

- Social media and changing expectations for corporate behavior have dialed up the pressure on companies to respond to issues about which they may have previously been able to stay neutral
- Companies can no longer treat racial justice as a “political” issue – customers, employees, suppliers and powerful influencers are both impacted by this issue and increasingly demanding that businesses use their platform to take a stand



### **Global nature of movement puts special emphasis on global business**

- The global protests spurred by George Floyd’s murder demonstrated that the issue of racial justice is not specific to any one country, with causes and outcomes that transcend borders
- As trans-national entities, global businesses have a unique opportunity to draw attention to the issue as well as advocate for change with both national and international stakeholders

## Taking stock – what’s worked well and where can business improve?

### How companies have made progress in promoting racial justice

- ✓ **Companies increasingly recognize that profitability and equity are not mutually exclusive**
  - Many companies are going beyond the letter of the law to explore how inclusivity and equity can create new value and returns, not just mitigate risk
  - The focus is shifting from “are we compliant?” to “are we embracing what’s possible?”
- ✓ **Effective companies have rooted their approach in their corporate values, asking:**
  - Are our corporate values connected to the lived experience of our stakeholders, most critically including employees and customers?
  - Are our stakeholders contributing to and benefiting from our company’s success?
  - If not, how do we remedy this? And what does this say about our values?

**Companies are speaking out about social issues broadly, backing up words with actions, providing historical context for Corporate America’s role in advocating for equity:**

#### Public statements in support of specific legislation

**Salesforce** and **Unilever** publicly calling for passage of Pregnant Workers Fairness Act

#### Supporting key litigation efforts

**Microsoft** supporting “Dreamer” employees’ legal defense over DACA policy

#### Re-examining business partnerships

**Delta Airlines** eliminated an NRA member discount after the school shooting in Parkland, FL

### Lessons learned from past missteps



#### External response

- ✗ Letting public opinion dictate corporate response, rather than letting corporate values guide strategy
- ✗ Companies taking external positions on social justice issues that do not reflect the actual lived experience of employees or the company culture

**Companies’ internal and external responses are distinct but must work in concert to be effective**

#### Internal response



- ✗ Expecting BIPOC employees to “do the work” of educating colleagues or leading internal racial justice efforts
- ✗ Continued belief that leadership diversity is a supply problem; it’s a demand problem

## Advice to companies seeking to engage in social justice advocacy and change

Today, racial justice is in the spotlight – the next frontier of social justice remains unclear, but the need for corporations to respond is unlikely to disappear. Companies should consider the following steps to ensure they are prepared to respond authentically and impactfully:

- # 1** **Get comfortable with being uncomfortable**
  - This is a long and complicated journey – tangible results require stamina, vulnerability, willingness to listen and learn, and relentless commitment to change
  - Set long-term goals, with interim benchmarks, and have open, honest conversations with critical stakeholders along the way
- # 2** **Ensure your leadership team is aligned around your corporate values, and let those be your “True North”**
  - By the time a crisis hits or issue arises that the company must respond to, it’s too late
  - A company’s values become a guide path for identifying the issues and causes with which the company will be able to meaningfully engage
- # 3** **Clearly define your company’s strategy for supporting social issues – and remember that change starts from within**
  - Stake out a suite of issues that will make a difference to your employees
  - It’s not enough to advocate externally for your chosen cause – focus on the change that can be made within your four walls, for example:
    - Refusing to open new locations in jurisdictions that do not protect LGBTQ rights
    - Providing caregiving services to working parents, or employees caring for elderly family
    - Supporting equitable pay practices
    - Ending relationships with suppliers or partners that do not align with company values
- # 4** **Help others hold you accountable**
  - *Measure:* Benchmark your company’s current practices using external tools such as Human Rights Campaign’s Corporate Equality Index, then continue to measure your KPIs
  - *Reward:* Create incentives for supporting cultural change, and fairly compensate and publicly recognize those who are doing the work
  - *Enforce:* Unenforced values have no meaning; create a culture that encourages speaking up when someone’s behavior contradicts company values
- # 5** **Use your platform - authentically**
  - Companies taking a stand matters, especially when it seems hard or unpopular
  - Make sure that your public positions are supported by private actions – it’s better to say nothing than make a statement that is inconsistent with your values or practices
  - Companies can support change without having to become a “movement organization”

## About Russell Reynolds Associates

RRA's Government Relations and Social Justice Practices are committed to supporting this work through convening leaders in positions of influence and providing resources, information and networks. We will continue this discussion, focusing on the above topics, and detailing practical action steps leaders can take to build proactive, substantive policy agendas. If interested, please reach out to [TR Straub](#), [Jamie Hechinger](#) or [Trevor Hooper](#).



**Jamie Hechinger** leads the firm's global Social Justice and Philanthropy Practice and led the firm's launch of the global Diversity & Inclusion Practice. She specializes in high-profile executive searches across civil and human rights, global health and development, advocacy, education access and conservation.

Prior to joining Russell Reynolds Associates, Jamie served as an Associate Director at Atlantic Media, working across The Atlantic Monthly, National Journal and Government Executive publications. Jamie holds a BA in English from Duke University and completed an executive education program in Leading Professional Service Firms at Harvard Business School.



**Trevor Hooper** is a member of the firm's Nonprofit Sector, where he specializes in the Social Justice Practice. He leverages a deep nonprofit background in program management and partnerships to advise clients on their most pressing leadership challenges, including recruiting top talent for senior teams.

Trevor joined Russell Reynolds Associates from the Haas Center for Public Service at Stanford University, where he was Senior Program Director for Education Partnerships. Previously, Trevor worked for the Mural Music and Arts Project, first as a Strategy Consultant and then as their Interim Executive Director. Trevor holds a BA in urban studies and community organization from Stanford University, where he was captain of the football team.



**T.R. Straub** co-leads the firm's Corporate Affairs and Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Practices. With over a decade of search experience, he focuses on searches in government relations, corporate communications and public affairs and leads DEI consulting engagements. Additionally, TR is a member of the firm's Social Justice Practice, serving progressive and impact-oriented organizations, primarily when advocacy is a core element of the organization's work.

Previously, TR worked with Teach for America, first as a Corps Member in the Baltimore City Public Schools, then as a Recruitment Director, organizing the strategy for college recruitment and awareness campaigns. TR holds a B.A. in leadership studies from the University of Richmond, and an M.A. in teaching and social studies from Johns Hopkins University.

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