



Race & Inclusion—And Your Credit Union

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By Ron Schmidt

I grew up in an era when schools, soda fountains and movie theaters were racially segregated. While Jim Crow laws are not in play today, 60 years later, issues of race and inclusion continue to confront us. A piece by Elizabeth Olson in the New York Times profiled "150 executives committed to fostering diversity and inclusion." Tim Ryan, the chair of PricewaterhouseCoopers, stated: "...We need a new initiative to foster more open discussion about race and gender in the workplace...helping employees feel they are valued and included has been a more difficult process."

AT&T chairman-CEO Randall Stephenson turned heads last year when he urged employees to move beyond platitudes about tolerance to more challenging conversations about race in an effort to better understand one another as human beings. He said: "Tolerance is for cowards" and wants to build a "social contract" with employees.

Close to Home

The slayings in July of 2016 of five Dallas law enforcement officials by a sniper had a particularly jarring effect on him as it happened just blocks from AT&T's headquarters. Stephenson hoped to bring some context to the importance of addressing tough questions about race and racial tension in America.

His intent was to empower employees to have those conversations. "I'm not suggesting we have fixed racial tension," Stephenson said. "But within our circle at AT&T it is wide open – and not just about race.



There are folks in the LGBT community, Latino groups – we're having those conversations and it's amazing what's been transpiring.”

What's going on today in our workplace and what's our credit union history as it relates to race and inclusion? If these issues are present with the country's largest companies they most likely exist in our industry. I'm reminded by a dear friend, an 80-year-old African-American pioneer in our movement, who told me how she had to fight the regulators from closing smaller African-American church credit unions here in Ohio because they were “a nuisance.”

How to Go About Change?

How do we go about change? It's very difficult especially for more “seasoned veterans.” From the words of Jack Burden in Robert Penn Warren's Pulitzer award-winning novel *All the King's Men*, “... What we students of history always learn is that the human being is a very complicated contraption and that they are not good or bad but are good and bad and the good comes out of the bad and the bad out of the good...”

Yes, human beings are complicated, the good and bad are part of our humanity. How you deal with this will have a direct consequence on your success. The board of Uber fired their top guys because of issues of diversity and inclusion.

What Steps Can You Take?

What statement are you making with your employees and members and board? Will you turn your back, or begin to engage one another? What are you doing and when? What small steps can you make to transform the humanity in your community?

In his commencement address to the class of 2017 at Case Western Reserve University, Fred Gray, an African-American lawyer from Alabama who represented Rosa Parks in 1955 because she wouldn't sit in the back of the bus, gave one simple message, “Do the right thing.” Now it's up to you.

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