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Is the American business community racist?



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By MaryAnne Howland

The film "Selma" calls us to consider where we stand today and what we are doing as individuals and communities about racial justice.

In the past few months a rainbow of people has taken to protesting in cities throughout the country. Racial injustice brought to light by failures of grand juries to indict white police officers after the deaths of unarmed black men is moving citizens of all backgrounds to action.

The media feature voices of passionate, concerned black, brown and white people, students and, of course politicians. We see the arts community in solidarity with the movement. Athletes and entire sports teams put their careers on the line to speak up.

But where are the voices of the business community?

As a business person, I am deeply disturbed by the silence of my peers. Is the travesty of justice and police corruption, lack of respect and utter disregard for human dignity not our concern? Many of us are already leaders in our communities, working hard to strengthen local and regional economies. Most are good people running responsible businesses. But what does our silence say?

Silence is a signal of acceptance. Silence is seen as an endorsement of the status quo. Silence is not good for business.

More and more businesses owners are turning business into a force for good. We recognize the interconnected and circular nature of our economy. If we take care of our employees, they take care of us. If we pay a living wage, then our community has purchasing power that ultimately benefits our business.

Ensuring just policing and a fair justice system are part of the same value proposition. Many police officers and grand



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Ensuring just policing and a fair justice system are part of the same race proposition. Many police officers and grand juries already act this way. But when they lose sight of these principles, it's bad for residents, bad for the police themselves, and bad for the community.

It gets in the way of the mutual trust and respect we need in order to get along with each other and do business with one another.

It doesn't help our employees bring their best self to work if they live in constant fear that they or their children or partner will be singled out for state-sanctioned violence and an unfair justice system for no reason other than the color of their skin.

I run a small business in Nashville, Tenn. I do everything I can to run a fair and just workplace, one in which everyone is judged according to their contribution and not how they look. I believe my workplace is better off because of this commitment. I serve on the board of a national business organization, the American Sustainable Business Council, which seeks to bring these principles of justice and opportunity to the economy as a whole.

As business owners, we have a special obligation to stand up at times like these. It's time to stop holding our collective breath.

We need to push for the course corrections necessary to stop racial injustice. We must demand change that will help create resilient communities in which everyone can succeed and thrive.

We should call our local, state and federal officials and tell them we want to see solutions. We should engage with others in our communities, such as faith leaders and social service agencies, to push for change. And we should start by letting our employees know that we are committed to making a difference.

We also should support organizations that are working to uplift black and brown men and women. Even better: Employ them, train them and, most important, stand behind them. If the police knew there was a businessman or woman behind the individual they are about to attack, surely they would think twice.

The American business community is the most powerful economic force in the country. We are its leaders. We have power. We can make a difference. So, let's make it.

MaryAnne Howland is President and CEO of Ibis Communications in Nashville, Tenn., and a board member of the American Sustainable Business Council.



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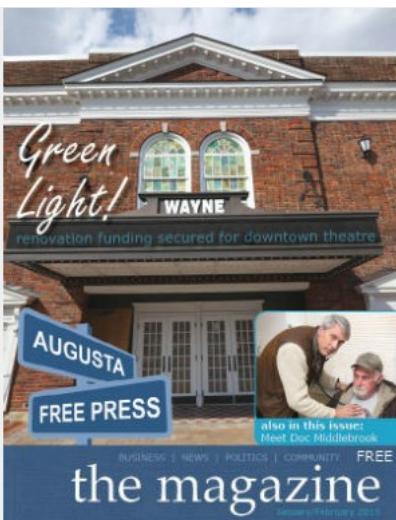
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