



It Is in the Day-to-Day

# Courageous Conversations in Contentious Times

By Kori S. Carew

**A**s I prepared for church on June 12, 2016, I learned that someone had entered an Orlando nightclub the previous night and began killing people simply because they were gay—49 deaths in all, and many more critically injured.

That evening, I struggled to determine my role in my community and what I could do. I found myself frustrated. How does one begin to make a difference when such things happen? I realized that I could not go to work the next day and be silent.

## The Leadership Call

The Tuesday after the Pulse shooting, I went to work—a place that prides itself on being nice and non-confrontational, where people don't get into "political" debates—and issued a call to action to fellow administrative leaders. I spoke about the cost of silence. LGBT employees have experiences that many of us cannot relate to, and this tragedy brought some of those experiences to light. As leaders, we have responsibilities to those we lead, which include acknowledging their humanity. I asked everyone to speak to their teams and emphasize that they recognize that external events impact individuals. That week, we also hosted a program that started with an address from our firm chair in which we honored the victims of the shooting, discussed how to engage in difficult conversations, and provided visibility to the experiences of LGBT employees. Our intranet also featured a letter from the chair to the whole firm. It was with honor and pride that I saw our leadership stand firm in our values of affirming everyone.

## Who Will Speak for Me?

On July 5, Alton Sterling was shot by a police officer in Baton Rouge. The next day, Philando Castile was shot

by police officers in Minneapolis during a traffic stop. On July 7, five police officers were shot during peaceful demonstrations in Dallas. It was humbling to have other members of leadership at my firm reach out to ask how best to talk to their teams and to acknowledge that people were affected by the events. Our goal in responding to the Pulse shooting was to continue a commitment that we started in the prior few years—encouraging people to engage in difficult conversations rather than ignoring the reality of their colleagues under the guise of workplace sensibility. Central to that goal are leaders empowered to address difficult issues, employees able to have a respectful dialogue, and work cultures that create safe spaces for individuals affected intimately by a variety of issues and events.

## Politics in the Workplace/Politics of Inclusion

The reflexive tendency of our work environment—lawyers and rule-followers that we are—is to be wary of anything "political" coming into the workplace. But many of these issues cannot simply be categorized as political. These national tragedies and ongoing divisive debates affect the lives of real people with real stories who do not shed their beings and consciousness when they walk through the doors of our buildings.

The language of inclusion focuses on creating spaces where people can come to work as their whole selves. We have long recognized that workplaces can stifle perceived disfavored traits and aspects of a person's identity. We know that generations of women have been taught that they must "act like men" to succeed. But our talent has pushed back, seeking more from the places where they spend so much of their time. This is where the conundrum arises—when an organization is committed to diversity and inclusion but is silent on the many incidents and discussions that affect diversity.

## The CEO Action Gets It Right

Amidst the calls for increased diversity from corporate legal departments, CEOs and executives have been making important moves to advance diversity and inclusion. More than 175 CEOs and executives have signed the "CEO Action on Diversity & Inclusion," which "aims to rally the business community to advance diversity and



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inclusion within the workplace by working collectively across organizations and sectors.” The CEO Action has three pillars: (1) commitment to creating safe and trusting workplaces where difficult and courageous discussions on diversity and inclusion can take place; (2) implementing implicit bias education; and (3) sharing best practices and failures. Every organization committed to improving diversity should already be doing implicit bias education—more than just once a year as a standalone program—and sharing best practices and failures is a beneficial move for everybody. But the first commitment is the one that I believe will have the biggest impact.

Part of why we struggle with having meaningful dialogue on race, for example, is because we have been told not to have the conversation at all. As a result, we don’t learn to become comfortable with the discomfort that these conversations can cause. It takes courage to admit that one’s perception does not match the reality of others or that one’s experiences are shaped by privilege. It takes courage to speak up against what is popular. It takes courage to take a position in these times when internet anonymity has caused a surge in shaming and attacking. The instinct is to shy away from allowing any of this to invade the workspace—but it does anyway. The CEO Action encourages us to engage.

Meaningful, honest, and truthful dialogue on diversity and inclusion issues leads to increased awareness. Between the implicit bias sessions, employees can find a deeper understanding in safe but difficult conversations. It is in these dialogues that we practice “both/and,” “yes/and,” and exploring that which goes beyond our own experiences. Offering workplace opportunities for education and awareness equips people to have those discussions in their homes and communities, making a difference outside the law firm as well.

### **It Is in the Day-to-Day**

It is in our daily interactions that we will most frequently be tested. When someone makes a sexist joke and we pass on the opportunity to say with grace and kindness why the joke isn’t funny. When we see someone being railroaded on the job but we say nothing because we don’t want to jeopardize our chances of promotion. When

we’re in a leadership meeting and everyone avoids a controversial subject that warrants a discussion, and we stay silent. It may be the unaddressed double standard facing a female associate, or the hiring committee member’s commentary that perhaps the firm is just not hiring the right minority candidates because they don’t seem to be succeeding (but similar concerns are not raised for departures of other groups such as white women). The opportunities to address implicit bias or to have courageous conversations on race and other diversity will come in many forms, and addressing large issues will require practicing addressing the day-to-day issues.

Choosing to speak and address our organizations after national incidents of hate takes courage, and courage takes practice. Inclusion requires that we speak up on issues that affect those in our organization and conflict with our stated values and commitment to diversity, whether that means speaking out against the white-supremacist rallies in Charlottesville, Virginia, the anti-Muslim hate crime in Olathe, Kansas, or the ongoing violence perpetrated against transgender women. Silence in the face of tragedy is deafening and undermines our work to create inclusive environments where diversity thrives. 