

Advancing Racial Justice In The Legal Industry And Beyond

By **Jonathan Harmon**

This article is part of a Law360 Diversity Snapshot series of essays by five Black law firm leaders on improving diversity in BigLaw. Click [here](#) for a video featuring narrated excerpts.

I learned a lot about leadership when my U.S. Army unit deployed to the Middle East for Operation Desert Storm in 1990. As a first lieutenant and graduate of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, I was trained to lead soldiers into combat.



These lessons stayed with me after I left the military, earned a law degree, joined McGuireWoods LLP and eventually became its chair. And my experience profoundly shaped my thinking on the connection between leadership and inclusion.

A servant leadership style has worked well for me as a military officer, as a trial lawyer and as a law firm leader. We all have strengths, ideas and perspectives that add value to a team; varied leadership styles help invest everyone in a team's mission; holding leaders accountable is necessary to build an inclusive environment; and an inclusive environment is essential for success. It also is the right thing to do.

Law firms must move the needle by raising awareness through dialogue and training, by collaborating with clients on innovative initiatives, and by building and nurturing a diverse talent pipeline. And we must challenge ourselves to do better reaching minority candidates; developing, retaining and promoting them; and providing them leadership opportunities.

Yet, while the legal profession has made strides fostering an inclusive environment, we must commit to tangible actions to advance racial justice and redress social inequity within the industry and beyond. These efforts must be underway, in highly visible ways, right now.

Sometimes, it seems like too much work, but our sense of urgency has never been greater.

In the aftermath of the inhumane killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and too many others, our family members and our broader communities are hurting. How can we talk — really talk — about racial justice now, in real time, in ways that foster long-term solutions? It boils down to leadership, communication and collaboration.

At my firm, we are holding internal town hall discussions on race and inclusion that are broadcast live to the entire firm. Attorneys and other professionals are speaking candidly, movingly and, yes, sometimes painfully, about their own experiences facing racial injustice and how we, as a firm, can openly and honestly move forward.

For example, I recently shared that when I was 14, a cross was burned into the lawn of our neighbors, a Black family. Hate welled up inside me and I wanted to retaliate against the perpetrator. But then my father taught me a lesson I've never forgotten: Don't hate, don't hide, don't be a victim. He knew love is the only antidote to hate — a lesson that resonates today when I have conversations with my four children and my firm about racial injustice.

Collaboration with others in the legal profession, outside our own firms, also is a must. Firms should engage general counsel, academics and others to discuss racial justice and how law firms and companies can work together to effect real change in our communities and in the legal profession.

Law firms should also focus on injustices within the broader legal system. For example, consider creating task forces that focus on equality within the criminal justice system. These efforts should involve stakeholders such as governors, mayors and chiefs of police. These processes will not be quick, but are essential to finding a solution long term.

We cannot be bystanders. Ever. When it comes to advancing meaningful change in our firms, our profession and our society, there is no good time and there is no bad time. There is only this time. Now. Today.

For George Floyd and too many others, tomorrow is not enough.

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