



DIVERSITY MATTERS

With recent social justice events and a spotlight on issues of diversity and equity, it is crucial for businesses to examine their workplace practices and create welcoming, inclusive environments. Senior executives inevitably set the tone, so *BUSINESS NORTH CAROLINA* assembled some leading corporate and legal officials from across the state to discuss progress in creating more diverse workplaces and some of the challenges that remain.

PANELISTS



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president and chief executive officer,
Charlotte Regional Business Alliance



William Spruill
co-founder/president,
Global Data Consortium



Wendy John
head of global diversity and inclusion,
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Gregg Lowe
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The event was sponsored by Fidelity, Cree and Moore & Van Allen Law Firm. The transcript was edited for brevity and clarity.

WHY IS DIVERSITY IMPORTANT IN BUSINESS AND WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR INDUSTRY?

JOHN: Diversity is important, and creating inclusive interactions is important to each of us. Sometimes we do the shorthand, and we think of everyone in terms of either one-dimensional frames or in terms of visible differences. The truth is more than 70% of differences are invisible. Everyone wants to be engaged right in the position that they're in and from the perspective that they sit in and to have their own personal lived experience acknowledged.

We really are focused on diversity and inclusion in terms of the customer and because it's a business imperative, but also because it really is the right thing to do in terms of engaging with all individuals across a diverse spectrum. And that starts with our associates as well, in terms of ensuring that they all are able to bring their perspective to bear on the solutions and the services that we're providing to customers.

It's important, and particularly at this point in time, whether it's because of the pandemic or some of the recent events that have brought racial equity to the forefront of our discussions. We're all very vulnerable, whether it's to the coronavirus or to some of the other factors that are influencing our lives. We want to create interactions that are meaningful, that are candid, and we believe that this is about behavior being changed.

At Fidelity, we have this concept of simple starts, which are behavior-based approaches where you start with small behavioral changes that can help you create new, diverse and inclusive interactions in the workplace and also in your customer interactions. Changing up your diet a little bit: Who are you talking to? What are the books and movies and other things that you're watching? Are they all coming from the same sources? Have you spent time with colleagues or individuals that are different from you, have a different lived experience, and really engage [with] them directly?

LABAR: There's a lot of data out there that says this is important. There's a business imperative. There's an economic imperative, but where we are right now, there is a moral imperative. And I think we have to, within the business community, be brave. It's time. It's been time. And within the business community, especially in the South, it's too convenient to push conversations about race and diversity to the side because it's not the polite thing to do.

The business community, again and again, has led in investments that make [the Charlotte region] vibrant, has led not only in expansion and growth of jobs but has really been a catalyst for how the Charlotte region has grown up. Why should we not lead in the conversations around race and inclusion and equity as well? That is something that I'm proud that the [Charlotte Regional Business Alliance] is going to plant a flag in. The business community, together with the public sector, is at the table at the alliance. ... How can we, as a community, collectively come together to create the space so

that we can trust and build the relationships that will continue enabling us to do business here, to do business with each other, and to create opportunities for people who deserve those shots at economic growth and vibrancy?

I get lit up about these things. It's an important regional competitiveness issue, but at the end of the day, this is about people. We have to be there for each other, and we have to lift each other up. The pandemic has certainly uncovered disparities for people from a health crisis standpoint, a socioeconomic standpoint. The layering that we're seeing due to some of the systemic barriers has just put the exclamation points all over this, and it's time.

MCDOWELL: In addition to the moral imperative, which should be the driver for everyone, we are in the talent business. We sell time and intellect. We don't make anything, it doesn't produce anything. We problem-solve. I co-chair our investigations practice, which is a very collaborative problem-solving endeavor. As is most of the work that we do at our firm, I can tell you from personal experience, if you try to build a team to solve a problem and everybody on that team has the exact same experience, you're going to produce the same outcomes over and over again.

Just as a funny anecdote to that point, I had an investigation years ago [where] we had a team that was not as diverse as the overall firm. And they were looking to see if people were talking in code to one another in these particular communications. And they had stared at these communications for an extended period of time, and they could tell that there was something going on, but no one could figure out what was happening. So someone gives me a binder of these communications, and I'm not even really on this case. And they say, 'Can you just take a look at it?' I look at it for 10 minutes. And I said, 'You mean other than the rap music lyrics that are contained in this binder?' It's a funny story because you've got people who are doing their level best. And these are brilliant people with incredible amounts of talent, but their lived experience is very different.

The same thing happens when we're talking about ... cases that involve sexual harassment. If you don't have the lived experience of being a woman, there are questions that might not be obvious. So there's really something to the substance of the work that I don't want to get lost in here.

ROUND TABLE DIVERSITY & INCLUSION

Yes, we want to create environments where everyone feels included. And yes, we want to create environments that mirror the overall population, but the actual outcomes of the work will be so much better if you have people who are bringing those different lived experiences to the table. To me, that's really what matters for our business model beyond the fact that it's just plain the right thing to do.

LOWE: I would add to that when you talked about how there's tons of studies [on how] diversity produces a better result, I think that's absolutely true. Just on the social injustice situation that we've all been experiencing and seeing life play out in front of us, when George Floyd was murdered, it took me a couple of days to find my voice and figure out what I wanted to tell our organization. I wrote a one-page note to the organization giving my thoughts on it, and I got hundreds of emails back from our employees talking about their experiences. It took a situation where intellectually you say, 'It's Minnesota, it's Wisconsin, it's somewhere else,' and realize it's not somewhere else. It's look to the left and look to the right, the people you are working with are experiencing the same thing.

As a leader, you want to jump into action, and we were very much wanting to do something that day. We took a moment to take a deep breath, and we said, 'You know, what we really need to do is listen to our employees who have all of these ... horrible stories about what's happened with them.' So we had a series of about 10 listening sessions. ... We listened to those experiences, and we've come up with recommendations for action we're going to take. I do a video every two weeks for our company, and in two weeks, I'm going to do a video explaining all of the actions we're going to be taking. These are a broad set of things that basically come from the voice of our organization.

The George Floyd murder shocked me. I would say the stories from the people I work with were equally as shocking and horrible and despicable. I think it really demands attention from leaders and demands action from leaders, and we can't get into a mode where it's three weeks from now, it's sort of a forgotten thing. We need to keep this front and center.

SPRUILL: The importance really is around points of view and perspectives. If you don't have different points of view and perspective inside your organization, you're going

to be monochromatic and, as a function of that, you are not going to be as economically profitable. You're not going to get the best possible output. That's a known; that's a math equation. It's very simple for anyone to understand that, and it's pretty much indisputable.

One of the reasons why our business is actually uniquely successful in the global digital identity space is because we actually come at it with different points of view and perspective. The number of CEOs I meet around the world, when we engage with them around partnering, whether I walk into the room or engage via email, they look me up on LinkedIn and they're like, 'How's this guy running this global business?' It's amazing. And when you actually get into a conversation, come into the dialogue with a different point of view, ... it actually opens a lot more doors. In my particular experience, being a person of color running a global business in tech has actually been fantastic because it gives the people I'm dealing with [the opportunity to] see [things] differently, and I'm able to engage differently.

[Social injustice issues] have been ongoing throughout the history of my life. So none of this is necessarily new to me. ... I think I've heard Janet mention this from a perspective of [living] in the South. I experienced systemic issues in tech on the West Coast when ... I was COO of the company that was acquired by a West Coast firm, and I ended up being the most senior African American employee inside that firm. What was really interesting is they would only give me a senior director title. They claimed that they didn't give out [vice president] titles very easily, which I took at face value. But what was more interesting was when I left the company, ... the person who replaced me inside that company, an older white male, they made him a VP within six months. And so you say, 'What are the differences here? What is going on here?' It does call a lot of things into question.

My company, we're profitable. We've been fantastically profitable for a few years now. But we recently raised a strategic round of capital. We took that money and said, 'Well, wait a minute, we're sitting on this money in the bank because we're going to be spending it for some growth initiatives, not immediately, but over time. Why do we have it sitting in this large bank account at Silicon Valley Bank, which is a traditional tech bank based out in California? Why do we have it there when we've got these community banks that could actually put that money to work immediately in the

community to help impact the community?' It costs us nothing to do that. ... Mechanics and Farmers Bank is the second-oldest African American-owned bank in the country and it happens to be based here in the Triangle. ... They're doing North Carolina-based lending in communities that are not reached by traditional banks. ... We moved \$3 million over there within a week.

WHAT ARE YOU DOING AT YOUR ASSOCIATIONS, ORGANIZATIONS AND BUSINESSES TO SUPPORT DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION?

LOWE: I came from Texas Instruments, which is a very strong company in terms of diversity, equity and inclusion. When I joined Cree, we really didn't have a whole lot going on in any of those areas. So we started some employee resource groups. We started with the women's initiative. A group of women got together and formed the initiative, and it's been a huge success. After that, we started a pride group for the LGBTQ community. That has been a roaring success as well. It's really important that people can bring their entire self to work, and I think that particular group is challenged in that regard. The support that they're getting through the pride organization has been fantastic. We're kicking off a couple more groups. Most notably, there's a Black employee initiative group that is going to be started; that's going to kick off within the month.

These employee resource groups are really great forums for discussion, dialogue and action. They eventually turn into resource groups that help with career progression and mentoring programs. It's been a pretty big success for us so far.

MCDOWELL: We have leaned into our affinity groups. It's been a huge benefit to us. We actually began with a lawyers of color affinity group that rolls up to our diversity committee. We also have had the WOMVA — Women of Moore & Van Allen — affinity group for some time.

In the wake of George Floyd and the rest of the Black Lives Matter developments over the summer, ... at the suggestion of two of our associates, we've established a Black lawyers affinity group that is separate and distinct. I think this is an important point for businesses to understand. We have a wonderful, fully engaged, lawyers of color group,

but there are certain issues, particularly in this environment, where Black lawyers or Black professionals need to feel like they are in community with other Black professionals.

One of the things I wanted to make sure that we talked about here is folks are really vulnerable right now. Greg, you talked about the many, many emails that you had received. That's been my experience within our institution, with our lawyers and with our staff as well. We have a very diverse staff. And while we're talking about all these other sort of business components, I think we need to acknowledge how much pain people are experiencing, and when we're talking about what we want to do institutionally from a business perspective to support our folks and to diversify our pool of employees, we need to start by just caring for one another. And some of that caring is just developed in a space where people can safely communicate with one another without fear of negative consequence and be supported and be able to come in and say, 'You know, I just don't feel good about being at work today. I don't feel comfortable, I don't feel myself.' It's been an assault on folks emotionally. That may not be abundantly clear. But I guarantee you that there are people in all of these orga-

nizations that are doing their best to do their jobs who have been crying in their offices, because of the emotional weight of what has been going on this summer.

So, yes, we have affinity groups, but I want to make that point to say it's really about creating safe spaces for folks. Yes, we're doing facilities dialogue, where we're talking about how not to be racist. And we're engaging our folks, our majority folks as well as our minority folks, in those discussions. But I think it's important to acknowledge that there's a push pull for our people of color during this time. They want to support those larger dialogues; they really appreciate that our businesses are doing them. But it's like, 'Ah, this is another place where I have to come to be vulnerable. Can we have a safe space?' On a more human basis, businesses can really serve their employees by acknowledging that pain and creating the space for people to deal with that safely within their institutions.

JOHN: We were many months into sort of a disrupted environment where everyone was subject to some amount of vulnerability, whatever the circumstance, so it created an environment that required managers

and leaders to step up and lean into their leadership role, perhaps in a way different than we have all expected leaders to show up in the past. There's been a blurring of the lines between personal and professional life. We're all here from our personal environments. I think we were perhaps fortunate in a weird way to already have the door of vulnerability already opened to then set the stage for what happened a few months ago where many organizations found themselves thrust into a conversation that I would argue our Black associates were unprepared for in environments where people typically have been discouraged from having conversations around race and equity and having those conversations with others who appear different.

Our employee resource groups have been really critical in those conversations, and it's important to remember those are volunteer organizations. They were tapped to lead some of those conversations. We all probably created those spaces to have those conversations. What we acknowledged was, you're inviting individuals to share trauma that maybe they haven't shared before.

This has been a learning opportunity. I

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ROUND TABLE DIVERSITY & INCLUSION

think we have to be also candid that every-one is in a different position. Some of us have been having the conversation in private spaces for a long time. Others are now starting. It requires a great deal of patience. ... It's challenging because many are frustrated, and it's an emotional time. But we also have to allow those that are newer to the conversation the grace to make mistakes and to come along with us and to learn the language and help.

[Another thing we] think is very important at Fidelity is that while we have our own environment, our own workplace environment, we are part of a broader community. In building on prior relationships that we had with local schools and others, we've also partnered within North Carolina with 100 Black Men, Black Girls Code and Village of Wisdom. ... We have a real commitment to early-stage education and financial literacy.

LABAR: I think internally, the work is being done. But I think our responsibility as the voice of business for the Charlotte region is, more so, how do we leverage what our employers and the business community are doing? ... How can we take those best practices, those learnings and findings and what

you're doing and then make that available and accessible to the smaller companies who don't know where to start or even how to create these programs?

I think through our advocacy efforts, we are going to try to lift up the visibility around these systemic barriers, specifically around employment. We're talking about folding into our advocacy agenda the need to address fair chance hiring, second chance hiring, clean slate reform, and things that both North Carolina and South Carolina can do at the state level. And then how do we apply some of those things even at the local level among some of the municipalities in the Carolinas and the jurisdictions that we represent? There's a lot of work being done among the employers around inclusive hiring and retention of diverse talent. But we need a much bolder employer commitment to do this work.

MCDOWELL: Everything you're saying is right; we're doing much better from a recruiting perspective. We have a majority of female associates at our firm at this point. ... Fourteen percent of our associates are people of color. So the recruiting front demonstrates our commitment to this

work, but it doesn't work if you guys don't hire those people. It doesn't work if you call the same white male lawyer that you've used since God was a baby, and that you play golf with and you expect that person to just staff those matters in a way that would be consistent with your conscience, right? Because what happens in law firms and consultants and accountants, the very places that ultimately lead to board membership on your own companies where now you're desperately looking for board members. Where are they? Well, they all left those companies because you didn't give them work directly.

So if there's one thing that I could ask the business community through your magazine, through this effort, to do it is hire people of color, hire women, hire them directly, make sure they get credit for having been hired, and then keep an eye on them. They're not going to be at the institutions that you're using if they aren't talented. They have what it takes to do the work: Hire those folks. And then you will begin to see not just associates but you'll see partners

or directors or managing directors, or VPs or SVPs [of color]. You'll begin to see that build through our business community. That's what is missing. ... And once we have that diversity at the top, it is so much easier to actually do a better job of recruiting people to begin with.

SPRUILL: I look at it as a barbell approach. ... I think D&I initiatives are great and wonderful. But if we're not actually threading people into the fabric of corporate organizations, it does not matter. It never gets above a certain threshold — that's corporate board level. That's something that I'm getting very vigorous around calling out. ... If you don't have that support at the board level and the C-suite level, you're going to gravitate and leave along the way because you don't have someone who's looking out to say, 'Hey, have I reached into my organization? Am I giving them the mentorship, the guidance, the counseling, the forward momentum? Am I helping them find their next opportunity, even if it's not here? Can I plug them elsewhere into the network so that they continue their career or in a way that makes them influential all the way through?'

Epic Games actually has this amazing

pool of internal talent on the legal side that are people of color. I was stunned to find out about that. They didn't do a deliberate act to necessarily create it, but it happened because, most likely, one or two people were hired and brought others along. And when you look at what Epic Games is engaged with currently in the market and their battle with Apple as a billion-dollar entity, they're doing battle on a global stage. These attorneys are getting the experience of a lifetime. ... This is where the opportunity is on one side of the barbell, and I think it behooves us to get these people involved. But it's got to come at the C-suite level and at the corporate board level.

Then the other side of the barbell is education. I'm amazed at the number of African American computer engineering students who I encountered who will not go to work at a smaller tech startup. Rather, they're going to go to work at IBM or Cisco because, frankly, there's a familial responsibility, and they are programmed to think this is the path to go. ... It's more money than anyone else in my family has made. They there's not that acknowledgement of, I can go to this startup and make the same amount of money. Yeah, the risk is there. But my worst

case scenario is a startup fold. And I have to go get another job. And in today's world, that's a nominal risk if you're a computer engineer. If you're any good, people will grab you within hours of you putting your name out on the street.

I think that if we can't also do a better job of creating these opportunities in the community, just say, 'Come on over here, the water's fine.' Help them understand. Help the younger cast understand that taking risk is not a bad thing at that age. Yep, recognize that you got to pay off your student loans, recognize that you've got to help take care of the family. These are the things that we deal with as Black people. ... You go back home, and you're taking care of some folks along the way. But there are [ways of] creating the paths for that. ... Corporations [can create] student loan forgiveness programs that say, 'You come to work for us, you stay here, we're going to pay off a chunk. You stay another year, we're going to pay off another chunk. And whether that's corporations doing that or the state government doing that, I think that's another way that you can actually create grassroots activity that matters at the end of the day. ■



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EOE



Supporting a culture of diversity and inclusion.

One of Moore & Van Allen's important missions is to support a culture of diversity and inclusion at our firm and in the many communities we serve.

Our commitment to these efforts has proven critical to our ability to recruit and retain talented and committed professionals and provide a comprehensive suite of nationally recognized legal services to our clients.

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