

The Real Cost Of Exclusion

May the Business Case for Inclusion Rest in Peace

Bill Hertan
Managing Director, TRI Partners, Inc.

Having worked in the Diversity and Inclusion field for more than 20 years, I am still struck by conversations that start with “What’s the business case for diversity or inclusion?” Over the years I have worked with many organizations to quantify in very pragmatic ways the positive impacts of having an inclusive workplace, customer/guest base, vendor pool, product line and team composition.

The recent LA Clippers scenario, I hope, will put this discussion to rest, once and for all. Yes, I am an optimist but you have to be in this line of work.

The year is 2014. The leader of a large organization whose position profoundly impacts its staff, players and fans makes some very offensive statements regarding race. Did I mention its 2014? Has this business owner looked at the racial composition of his team, the other teams, or the fans who support his business?

It is not up to me (or any of us) to know the intent of Mr. Sterling’s comments; whether they were taken out of context; if this was a one-time situation. We could speculate about this for days. The point is: It doesn’t matter. Mr. Sterling has said it is his voice; his words. And yes, even in 2014, some are surprised to hear such offensive statements made. While this and many other offensive comments are still made by many other leaders – this is beside the point of my writing.

The point is the impact. While I wish we were a society driven by “doing the right thing,” often that is not the case. We are often driven by economic gain, or the potential of those gains. That reality is neither good nor bad. It simply IS.

What Mr. Sterling said, and its impact points out is that the ramifications of being exclusionary, in language or actions, are enormous. This highly visible and blatant language situation focuses on exclusion and disrespect based on race. For those who have been thinking, “Haven’t we moved past this, yet?” We Haven’t. And the “business case” for exclusion is evident. Ultimately, the exclusionary language used by this business owner will likely result in the loss of his business. Sponsors immediately pulled out – directing their financial resources to organizations more aligned with their values. Fans are loyal – they are going to support the players. They’ll figure out a way to do that while letting the owner know their feelings.

At the same time, many of us around the country and around the world are reminded that our words can have a profound impact – sometimes positive, sometimes not. The negative PR, the amount of time and energy wasted on having to deal with the firestorm of shock, pent up (now visible) frustrations and the outright anger have all taken their toll – financial, emotional, psychic tolls all of which impact the bottom line.

We say we've come a long way toward inclusion –we have. But we have a much longer journey ahead. This incident focuses on race. What about age, religion, sexual orientation, disabilities, veteran status or the multitude of ways in which we are different from one another? What's the cost of excluding some, but not others? I would contend the cost is too high regardless of the focus of exclusion. And the benefits of inclusion: increased productivity, innovation, new recruiting and revenue streams and loyalty from all constituents. The Business Case: Done. May it **Rest in Peace**.

Now, let's move on to the **important work** of making inclusion our reality and exclusion a part of our history.