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ARTICLE **RACE**

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For the past several months, it seemed that everywhere I turned people were talking about events in Ferguson, Staten Island, and North Charleston — in living rooms, classrooms, anchor rooms — everywhere but in most corporate conference rooms. In fact, I have not heard one corporate leader make the link between what happened in these places and what goes on inside their organizations.

But there is a connection. After all, it's not like the racial bias that underlies these social events doesn't exist inside corporate walls. It does and executives shouldn't be silent about it.

Take Dan, an African-American man and the direct report of one of my former coaching clients, Scott. As the CFO of a well-funded IPO-bound company, Dan had many years of experience and he had the results to show that he had outworked and out-delivered many of his internal and external counterparts. He was well known in their industry for his tenacity, work ethic, and sheer brilliance when it came to numbers. Yet, Scott, his boss and the company's CEO, was getting pressure from investors who were concerned about whether Dan was the right guy for to continue in the CFO role, especially at this critical point for the company. These same investors expressed no concerns about anyone else on the executive team, all white males. Why was Dan being scrutinized in spite of his exceptional track record? And why did his white male counterparts get the benefit of the doubt?

One can chalk this up as an isolated incident as Scott, Dan's boss, was tempted to do. But that would be a mistake. Much like [what happened in Ferguson](#), this is not isolated and it's not just an incident. Scott was disturbed by the pressure he was getting. He knew Dan was the right man to see the company through the IPO and yet, he was hesitant to believe that racial bias was the reason for the push back. But after thinking the situation through, he acknowledged that perhaps this had nothing to do with Dan's competence and more to do with the comfort level of investors. It was perhaps easier for them to place bets on the other people who fit the traditional profile of a public company executive.

For Dan's part, he was not surprised by the reaction. For him, this wasn't the first time he had encountered skepticism about his ability to do the job, despite his track record, his pedigree, and his references. He still remembered his first few days at a top-tier business school when he'd comment in class and a few of his classmates would pat him on the back and say, "Great comment, Dan. You're so articulate." He never saw white students do this to other white students. Still, he wasn't one to let the small stuff get in his way so he'd shrug it off. But now, with the impending IPO, the stakes were much higher.

Dan knew that if he stayed in the CFO spot beyond the IPO, the microscope would be laser focused on him. He was all too familiar with [the propensity for investors to blame minority executives for their company's failure and then replace them with a white male to "save" the situation](#). Dan knew he needed Scott's unbridled support to not only retain his position, but also to succeed post-IPO. And that level of support would require Scott to recognize that while overt racism may not be at play, unconscious bias was in full force.

To better understand what Dan is up against, you have to accept that there is [a prevalent unconscious bias that black males are expected to fail while white males are expected to succeed](#). This [juxtaposition starts at a very young age](#) and persists through to adulthood. By the time an African American male makes it to an executive position, he is seen as an exception and he's applauded for beating the odds. When a white male makes it to an executive position, it's seen as normal and he's

applauded for living up to his potential. Over the span of their careers, these counterparts might have traversed the same experiences, assignments, career decisions, but the biases they face are entirely different, and those biases have resounding effects on how they navigate their careers. This is not to say that white males should downplay what they have going for them. No. Instead, they should acknowledge that just by the sheer fact of their gender and the color of their skin, they got a leg up.

For years, Dan's boss, Scott had done what he was supposed to do in terms of diversity and inclusion efforts at his company, even going as far as sponsoring one of the company's many affinity groups. But this time, Scott had to do even more. First, he had to acknowledge that he was seeing unconscious bias in himself and others. For example, he recognized that over the course of their time working together, Dan was the one that had gone out of his way to make Scott at ease around him rather than the other way around. Second, Scott went out of his way to explicitly and publicly demonstrate support for Dan. He took him to as many investor meetings as he could. He let him take the stage. He made introductions and connections. He pounded his fist on the table that Dan was his chosen CFO and that they were a package deal. This helped gain enough external confidence for Dan to remain CFO. Scott's actions sent a signal to others at the company that their leader truly walked the talk when it came to valuing diversity and inclusion.

Until corporate leaders like Scott can honestly own that this bias exists toward black males and intentionally take action to counter that bias, they will [continue to perpetuate what is a systemic issue](#). This will be uncomfortable, but staying comfortable doesn't drive change. Corporate executives are in a prime position to lead the change needed in the workplace by addressing issues of unconscious bias.

What happened at Harvard Business School* on the heels of the Michael Brown and Eric Garner deaths is a testament to how this change can begin. Students led a [historic vigil](#) for Brown, Garner, and others with 500 members of the HBS community in attendance. The event organizers hoped it would encourage future business leaders to acknowledge the biases and injustices that exist and more importantly use their position of power to address that bias. During the event, HBS students shared their stories of being stopped and searched simply because of the color of their skin. The real power of the vigil was not just in the sharing of these stories but in the listening to them, and acknowledging that these stories were real and mattered not just in society, but in business.

Corporate leaders don't need to necessarily hold vigils but they do need to have similar conversations and do something actively rather than passively. So what exactly can a leader do?

- **Learn** about [unconscious racial bias](#) and the impact it has your own action and that of others. Engage the rest of the executive team on the topic and discuss the ripple effect it has in the organization.
- **Ask** about and **listen** to the stories of black males you work with to better understand how to support them and their individual ambitions. Do this for women, Latinos, and other groups as well.

- **Commit** to sponsoring (not just mentoring) someone who doesn't look like you. [The benefits of having an executive sponsor are undeniable.](#)
- **Leverage** the positional power you have and insist that your organization be as intentional in supporting and rewarding high performers regardless of their background.

Like the students at HBS, every leader who takes action gives hope that in the future, corporate halls and the leaders who walk them will not stay silent on the issue of racial bias, but rather they will lead the discussion toward an expectation that everyone can succeed no matter who they are.

**Editor's note: The author is an alumna of HBS. Also, some names have been changed to protect confidentiality.*

Editor's Note: This article originally referred to "the Michael Brown and Eric Garner shootings." Eric Garner was not shot, so we've since corrected that sentence to read "the Michael Brown and Eric Garner deaths."

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