

We Should Race Together with Howard Schultz

By *Simma Lieberman*, *The Inclusionist*



When Howard Schultz announced the “Race Together Campaign,” he was met with criticism by those in denial that there are any issues regarding race in the US, and by social activists who said he “did it wrong.”

Schultz may not have “done his research,” or created a working foundation for baristas and customers to have constructive discussions on race, but unlike a lot of other White people with money and power who have yet to say a word, Schultz, the CEO of Starbucks, listened, acknowledged, and decided to use his money and power to be part of a solution.

Howard Schultz is right. We need the discussion. We need and would all benefit to have the national conversation on race that many in America are too afraid to have or, as Eric Holder, US Attorney General said, we are a “nation of cowards” when it comes to discussing race.

While “Race Together,” was met with derision by more than a few people, for a few days it was a catalyst for conversations about how to have the conversation.

As two more unarmed Black men get shot by police, fraternity members at the University of Oklahoma are videotaped singing racist songs, and a group of men assault Native American kids at a hockey game in Rapid City, South Dakota, too many people shut their eyes, find reasons to blame the victims and everyone else from the same race or ethnicity. There is resistance, hate, fear, and just a lack of information that prevents a structured national conversation.

Often times, in many organizations, when one attempts to discuss hate, racism, or race in general, they are told to “stop bringing up politics.” Therefore, I salute Howard Schultz for “bringing it up” at the highest level, and taking it down to “his people” at Starbucks.

I don’t know Howard Schultz, but I do know that he took the time to sit down, listen, and engage in discussions around race with people who looked, and didn’t look, like him. Clearly, these conversations had a deep effect on him, and he was moved to do something. Instead of a laughing at Schultz, we need to collaborate with him in using his power and position to make change. Ending racism, discrimination and inequality is a national responsibility and we want “no person left behind.”

I’ve facilitated “dialogues,” or “discussions,” for over 20 years on race, racism, and types of privilege, working in the field of diversity and inclusion with corporations, government

agencies, and community groups. I've seen connections made, fear dissipate, and people who have never had a real meaningful conversation with someone different than them develop relationships that led them to collaborate on projects at work, in the community, and in the world. People collaborating, sharing resources and ideas is good for business, people talking together, acknowledging differences and finding new commonalities is good for the community, and people spreading the conversation and stopping fear and hate will change the world. And that's good for every single one of us.

As hard as it may be to face, we live in a country where more than a few people are afraid of other people, because they are a different skin color, religion, or sexual orientation. They have a hard time seeing other people as individuals, and as full human beings. When we hate or fear people, their lives no longer matter, because they are not as human as we are. We question their motives, ignore them, and only see them as stereotypes.

Racism is real: it still exists. There are issues that don't go away on their own, or end, because we have a Black president. We're not post racial, post inequality, nor post fear.

The current trend is to learn about implicit bias, which is key to prevent wrong assumptions and stop behaviors that favor people from one group over another. However, all the training about implicit bias, diversity, etc. won't change the racial status quo without meaningful dialogue and personal interaction with people who are different. It takes listening, hearing, and the willingness to learn from each other.

So, when someone like Howard Schultz commits to using their resources, position, and influence to engage people in conversation about race, racism, and culture change, we need to offer support, direction, and our participation. We can't complain that no one is listening, and then not seize the opportunity to be heard by people who want to listen. When there is opportunity to be heard and make change on the smallest level and on the grandest level, we need seize the time.

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