

Black Lives Matter: an open letter from BCLP London head Segun Osuntokun

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I hope that 2020 will be remembered as the year that uncomfortable but important conversations were propelled into the spotlight.

Events of the last two months have forced leaders to look at what we can – and must – do better.

As the managing partner of the largest office of a major international firm and as a Black man, I feel a responsibility to scrutinise the inclusivity of my own firm. I appreciate being in a painfully small minority in the City carries with it a duty to step forward as a vocal and visible role model. I am not naturally drawn to the limelight and the adage “if you can’t see it, you can’t be it” has weighed heavily in recent weeks. I recognise that the time has come to stand up and demand real, sustainable change.

The focus on racism and racial injustice we have seen since the death of George Floyd is unprecedented and business leaders have a responsibility to make sure this is not just ‘a moment’. We have a responsibility to consider whether and how racism – implicit or explicit – pervades our firms. We have a responsibility to take a long hard look at our own organisations, to face uncomfortable realities and to ask difficult questions. Are we inclusive? Do we provide a level playing field for Black talent? Are we doing enough? I fear if we do not confront the uncomfortable now, we never will.

In the spirit of real, sustainable change, I am proud to have played an active role in the genesis of the UK Race Fairness Commitment. The catalyst behind the commitment was a discussion on a study led by Rare Recruitment into the retention of Black, Asian and minority ethnic lawyers and

their White counterparts. The results were sobering. Great strides have been made to broaden access to the legal profession, but Raph Mokades, the MD of Rare Recruitment, and I agreed more needed to be done to hold firms accountable for providing an inclusive environment and fair access to opportunities for Black professionals.

You can't argue with the numbers. And the numbers paint a troubling picture when it comes to the representation of Black and minority ethnic lawyers. According to the SRA's 2019 diversity data collection, 3 per cent of solicitors and 3 per cent of partners working in law firms are Black. Yet in large firms (those with 50+ partners) just 1 per cent of solicitors and 1 per cent of partners are Black.

Anecdotal data is also troubling. The Bridge Group's research on Socio Economic background and early careers progression in the law found significant evidence of micro-aggressions in the legal profession. These micro-aggressions can lead those perceived as different – including those in ethnic minority groups – to feel inferior or excluded.

The UK Race Fairness Commitment stands out from any other diversity initiative or charter I have seen. First, I want to set the record straight. Much of the narrative around the commitment has focused on the legal industry and the fair treatment of Black and minority ethnic lawyers. To be clear, this commitment extends to the entire workforce of participating firms – it is critical that business services professionals are not overlooked in this endeavour. The commitment it is not limited to the legal industry – I hope many employers across other industries will step up. In short, the UK Race Fairness Commitment aims to hold firms accountable for fair treatment of Black, minority ethnic and White applicants and staff.

The firms that sign up to join the commitment intend to publish a far broader set of diversity data than they have in the past, opening themselves up to scrutiny. While many firms have a compelling story to tell when it comes to diversity, I believe this commitment will help to distinguish those who are prepared to walk the talk and also will also provide greater impetus for change.

I have been encouraged to see many firms make pledges and commitments in recent weeks, but this must be a time for action as well as words. Here at BCLP I know we still have a great deal of work to do, but I am proud that we have one of the most ethnically diverse partnerships in the City, with over 14 per cent of our UK partners identifying as Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic. I am committed to working with my fellow partners to achieve real and lasting change. I call upon other business leaders across the UK and beyond to uphold these pledges and not allow the moment to pass.