



EXPERIENCED PROFESSIONAL:

Lawrence E. Wilson, managing director of The Wilson Organization LLC, connects with clients by way of sharing personal yet powerful stories with them.

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It takes 'TWO' to reduce systemic bias in society

BY ANDY SMITH | Contributing Writer

THE WILSON ORGANIZATION LLC Managing Director Lawrence E. Wilson says he's earned the credibility it takes to consult with business clients on issues around diversity, equity and inclusion.

Partly it comes through a wide range of experience in both corporate and nonprofit realms. But beyond that, Wilson identifies as Black and Native American, and he can relate stories of racism and prejudice firsthand.

"What has helped me communicate with clients is sharing my own experiences with them, painful stories, sometimes poignant stories," Wilson said. "In many cases I was the pioneer, the only Black person in the room."

Wilson, who was born in Mystic, Conn., has a master's degree in business from The Wharton School. His corporate experience included stints with Philip Morris, General Motors and consulting for Miller Brewing Co. and Procter & Gamble. Later, Wilson became president of the American Baptist Foundation, the fundraising division of American Baptist Churches USA in Valley Forge, Pa.

From 2012 to 2017, Wilson worked at Rhode Island College as executive director of economic and leadership development. In 2018 he formed The Wilson Organization with the goal of helping his clients reduce systemic bias and achieve greater diversity and inclusion within their workforces.

Wilson said there is an obvious value to business in having your employee base more closely resemble your customer base. But the issue goes beyond just the bottom line.

"If you want your company to be on the cutting edge of profitability and innovation, you need to be on the

cutting edge of social change ... we as a society are driven by new ideas, optimism [and] hope. We are problem solvers," Wilson said.

His clients are mostly midsized organizations – banks, law firms, colleges, etc. – in Rhode Island, Connecticut and southeastern Massachusetts. Wilson typically coaches senior management, as well as offers seminars and workshops for middle management.

"It has to start with the C-suite," he said. "Unless you get the buy-in from senior management, you aren't going to get anywhere."

Zach Stolz, a partner in the Providence law firm Chisholm Chisholm & Kilpatrick Ltd., said the firm has grown at a rapid pace over the past decade with a diverse client base. CCK wants to have a diverse workforce, including both attorneys and other employees, to represent them.

"We're looking for diverse people to join the team," Stolz said. "You have to really work to bring them in the door."

Wilson and Stolz are co-chairing a diversity committee within CCK that meets once a month to work on diversity and anti-bias programs within the firm. "I'm happy with the committee," Stolz said. "This is something you have to constantly work at. I feel good about where we are."

Stolz said Wilson is a valuable resource since he has experience as a Black man in the corporate world. "He has a lot of practical advice – and some philosophical advice," Stolz said.

Wilson said some corporate leaders contact him because they are responding to a specific incident, such as the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, that illuminates social inequities.

That's natural, Wilson said, but sometimes when public outrage dies down, management enthusiasm will also wane.

Many companies face a Catch-22 when it comes to hiring. If they do not already have meaningful minority representation, people of color are reluctant to apply for jobs. So the company cannot improve its minority demographic and candidates do not apply for jobs.

Wilson has two solutions. One is to create training programs to advance people from lower-level jobs. The other is to expand recruitment strategies to, say, include colleges that graduate a high percentage of students from underrepresented populations.

Like so many companies around the country, Wilson's has faced new challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic. That's particularly true for a company in which in-person relationships are a key part of the business model.

"I miss the personal contact," Wilson said. "To make that connection over Zoom is more difficult. But it can be done, as long as you come from a place of honesty and transparency." ■

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