

Supporting Black Businesses: How One Firm Is Making a Difference

► After a tumultuous year that shined a harsh spotlight on racial injustice, corporations are exploring ways to support black communities. Ade Bakare and Esch McCombie, of McNeese Wallace and Nurick, LLC, have some ideas.

CCBJ: Multiple events and tragedies in 2020 brought heightened attention to the impact of systemic racism on black communities across the country. As a result, industries and corporations stepped up to push for change. What specific approach did McNeese take?

Ade Bakare: I'm a member of McNeese's diversity committee. We sat down as a committee and considered all the events we were witnessing in 2020. And like every organization, we weren't sure what to do or where to start. Most of us were aware that racism exists in this country, but the events of 2020 – the George Floyd killing and the disparate impact of COVID-19 on African American communities – brought systemic racism to everybody's attention.

We wanted to make an impact and do something that would help uplift African American members of our local community as well as leverage our skills and expertise. We know there are deep rooted issues affecting a vast spectrum of sectors of our society, and it would be foolhardy to take on more than we could adequately address. We decided to take a focused approach and direct our energy towards a particular segment of the broader problem where we could make a difference.

Esch McCombie: I believe we realized that, as attorneys, we can play a specific role. We wanted to tailor the scope of the program to focus it locally and try to make some real change in the community using the legal skill sets we have.

What considerations did you take when launching the Legal Equity Advancement Program (LEAP)?

McCombie: It comes back to, what are the needs of a community? When you're putting a program together, it's easy to sit in your office with a group of people and go on about the needs of another group of people. We knew we needed to reach out to the Black community, reach out to Black business owners, entrepreneurs, the African American Chamber of Commerce, and others to hear what they believed the needs of their business community to be.

So, what we did, and I think it turned out to be a great approach, was having some focus groups early on. We spoke with the people creating businesses and those working in the Black community to hear what they felt they needed from a legal services program. And we used that as our foundation.

Bakare: This is our first time administering a pro bono program of this scope and size, and we put a great deal of thought into how to structure our program. Do we try to provide a little bit of assistance to many people? Or do we provide real, substantial assistance to a smaller group of people?

We determined we wanted to provide substantial relief to a smaller group of people, with the idea that it would have a more meaningful, long-term impact. If we invest substantial efforts and resources behind Black entrepreneurs, the skills they gain will allow them to develop their businesses in a way that benefits the community long after they conclude their participation in this program.

How do you envision the initiative in the long term? Are there any plans to expand?

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Bakare: This program currently is focused on Black-owned businesses, but we view it as a pilot program that can be expanded. There are opportunities within LEAP or other initiatives to expand to other minorities or disadvantaged businesses, and to expand the geography. Hopefully, this program is just a jumping off point and we can reach more people in the years to come.

What is your advice to other entities looking to take similar actions?

McCombie: We're just getting to the point where we can start reviewing applications, so it's hard for me to say this program is already successful. But the initial steps have certainly been successful, and that's because it started at the top of our firm. Our management committee led the charge and offered their full support from the beginning. When there were issues where we might be reaching, we didn't hear "No." We heard, "Let's figure out a way to make this work. Let's figure out how to get you the necessary resources." For any program like this, the leadership of the business really needs to buy in and market the program internally and that creates buy-in from the rest of the organization.

Bakare: To echo that point, if you think about how this program originated within our firm, it was one of our associates, Rachel Hadrick, who brought the concept for the program to



my attention. Then, I discussed it with management and our diversity team. And even though the idea came from one of our associates, once management supported it, it just spread throughout the firm. It was all hands on deck from our associates, the paralegals, the partners. Our chief marketing officer developed the marketing efforts. You need a buy-in from the top down through every facet of your organization to successfully put together a program like this.

Due to 2020 events, there is greater racial divide in the country. What role should or could law firms play in leveling the playing field?

Bakare: When you go to law school and you take the bar and become a lawyer, it's not just a job, it's a profession. And law firms should be held to the ideals of that profession, which require us to work towards achieving justice in our society. When you look at it from that perspective, law firms should absolutely be involved in combating systemic racism, both internally and externally, in the communities we serve. And it's with that energy and perspective that we view the events of 2020 as a call to action. And we hope to sustain that effort and perspective beyond 2020.

Why is it imperative for the legal industry and industry in general to step up this effort?

McCombie: McNeese has a long history of working to create diversity within our firm and the legal industry generally. Although 2020 focused our energy on a specific problem – systemic racism – it made us realize that another problem is passive indifference. While McNeese has worked for many years trying to create diversity, this last year really helped us to open our eyes, and get a potentially meaningful program going. And we're hopeful

other businesses, inside and outside of the legal industry, join us in championing these efforts. We can't go back to passive indifference. It creates a stagnant environment in which systemic racism can thrive.

At this point, I think we all realize the problems are there and we can't sit around and just talk about it. People need to stand up and create programs and take steps to make a difference. So we have been thrilled that other businesses have come to us from all over; whether it's a commercial realtor offering to help our awardees find office space, or a business consultant volunteering to help put together business plans. It's been great to see all these other businesses jump on board and we hope that continues in 2021 and beyond. ■



Esch McCombie is a member with McNeese. He practices in their real estate and pipeline & oil/gas infrastructure practice groups. His focus is on land use matters, including obtaining permits and approvals at the municipal, county and state level. On a national level, McCombie conducts zoning and land use due diligence associated with mergers and acquisitions. Reach him at jmccombie@mcneese.com.



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