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## The Business Sector, the Flag and Beyond

“... We want everybody to feel comfortable shopping at Walmart. We want everyone to feel comfortable working at Walmart.”

So stated Walmart CEO Doug McMillon in an interview with CNN Money during which he explained his company's decision to stop selling Confederate flag merchandise. Notwithstanding the historical pressure on Walmart regarding wage and benefit issues, here it is argued that Walmart got this one right. And not only Walmart.

In the aftermath of the tragic shooting deaths of nine African-Americans at historic Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, numerous businesses have stopped selling the Confederate flag and issued statements in support of its removal from the Statehouse grounds. The alleged killer, a 21-year-old white male who reportedly confessed to the killings as well as his intent to "start a race war," was said to have Confederate emblems on a license plate and appeared to be shown on a website waving the Confederate flag.

Sears, eBay and Amazon all issued statements that they would no longer carry Confederate flag merchandise. And locally, South Carolina businesses, large and small, announced support of the flag's removal. Pete Selleck, chairman and president of Michelin North America stated, "Michelin agrees that the flag must be immediately removed. We are ready to support our elected officials as they take the necessary steps to do so." And the Wall Street Journal reported that Chad Walldorf, co-founder of the Sticky Fingers barbecue chain and chair of the state Board of Economic Advisors stated, "there was very widespread consensus in the business

community to get the flag down."

While numerous businesses noted that their motive for supporting the flag's removal was that "it's the right thing to do," it is worth revisiting Walmart's statement. Indeed one could substitute the name of any business in place of Walmart and expect that the statement would ring true. Paraphrasing, "we want everybody to feel comfortable shopping at our stores... we want everyone to feel comfortable working at our company." Going further, "we want every business to feel comfortable operating in our state." Economic development, job growth and the ability to attract top talent are compelling reasons for businesses to be concerned with divisiveness in South Carolina.

Immediately after the tragedy and before Gov. Haley's call for the flag's removal, Georgia Gov. Nathan Deal's chief spokesman Brian Robinson tweeted, "Attn CEOs looking in South: There's no Confederate flag debate in #GA..." While arguably inappropriate in tenor and timing, it may well have foreshadowed the type of competitive positioning Georgia might take when competing with South Carolina for economic development opportunities.

Many hope, and even expect, that 'the right thing to do' would be enough incentive for businesses to weigh in on potentially controversial issues. But considering that activist groups have been pushing for decades to have the flag removed from the Statehouse grounds, it appears that businesses are frequently reluctant to take a position without a critical mass of support or the ability to explain it to their stakeholders in dollars and cents terms. So, let's look at some ways

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that businesses can help reduce divisiveness, all of which are beneficial to the bottom line.

**Create a safe environment for all your employees.**

Fairness and equality in your own company is job one.

Far too often companies allow rogue managers to perpetuate abusive behaviors across demographic lines. Discrimination and harassment around race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, etc. often goes unreported or worse, is tolerated. "He didn't really mean it that way;" "Don't take it personally;" "You need to have thicker skin;" are examples of responses sometimes used by organizational leaders who don't want to hold their buddies or high performers accountable for inappropriate behaviors. Such tolerance can result in a toxic organizational culture and leave the company vulnerable to expensive litigation, turnover of valuable talent, and unproductive, disengaged employees.

**Establish policies and practices that support a broadly diverse workforce.**

There is no question that 'isms' continue to plague our society. However, even when there is no specific ill-will from one person to another, there can be systemic issues in the culture of an organization that unintentionally favors one group over others. A simple yet common example is when current hiring managers focus their recruiting efforts on their alma maters, fraternities, and clubs. Such patterns of behavior can limit the company's access to exceptional talent that doesn't travel in those circles. Broadening recruiting efforts to new schools, associations, and networks opens doors to underrepresented groups and untapped talent.

Likewise, longstanding benefit plans sometimes grow outdated. Maternity plans designed to afford 'mothers time off' must be updated to support single dads or gay couples who adopt, etc. Organizations that are early adapters to new workforce realities will be well positioned to attract and retain the best talent.

**Invest in community building programs that support a pipeline of talent.**

Although some organizations view community-building programs as altruistic only, others have found creative ways to improve the community while also fueling future business success. Many bright and capable children in underserved communities lack support, opportunity and inspiration. However, leading edge companies see these kids as our future workforce and recognize the value in investing in them today to create the pipeline of talent that will be needed tomorrow. An example of such a program that evolved from the Riley Institute's Diversity Leaders Initiative is called, "Dream Connectors." Led by executives from Michelin, BMW and Greenville Health System, this program sends executives into classrooms and also brings middle schoolers onto business campuses. The idea is to expose these teenagers to career opportunities, make connections to what they're learning in school today, and inspire them to pursue their dreams working inside South Carolina-based companies. Pipeline programs like this can establish businesses as 'employers-of-choice' and reduce the cost of future recruiting efforts.

In summary, the business sector has a vital role to play in reducing divisiveness in South Carolina. Rather than going back to 'business as usual,' now is the time to do the work that will make this state an even better place to live and work.

## Help Heal the Heartbreak

"The time  
is always right  
to do what  
is right."

-Reverend  
Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.



[www.charlestonstrong.org](http://www.charlestonstrong.org)

Join us in supporting the Mother Emanuel Hope Fund by purchasing a T-shirt designed by Nexsen Pruet patent draftsman Eric James. The artwork features nine rays of sunlight shining down on the church, each representing one of the Charleston shooting victims. 100 percent of the proceeds will benefit the fund.

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