

OPINION FROM THE WINDOW SEAT

The evolution of race relations in travel

By Arnie Weissmann   | Apr 26, 2021

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Albert Einstein said that analogies spark progress because they help us see how things connect, rather than seeing only how things are different.

Tyronne Stoudemire, global vice president of diversity, equity and inclusion for Hyatt, has a good way of putting America's race relations in perspective, via analogy. In tracing the roots of how we got to where we are today, he begins by talking about a board game, Monopoly, which we all know can last a very long time.

Imagine, Stoudemire says, you're playing Monopoly. For the first 250 years, about the length of time slavery was legal in the U.S., whenever anyone passed "Go," they collected \$200.

Anyone, that is, except you. And by the time you're allowed to collect \$200, all the properties have hotels on them. You have no property and very little money. Soon, you're in debt, bankrupt or jail.

That perspective helps explain the enduring vestiges of "white privilege." Despite the abolition of slavery more than 150 years ago, the effects of the economic and societal head start that white Americans had lingers in ways that are systemic, societal and cultural.

And personal. Travel Weekly's research last fall on diversity and inclusion in the travel industry uncovered a gap in perception between how Black and white travel professionals view the industry, with 61% of white professionals viewing it as diverse and inclusive but the same percentage of Black professionals believing it is not.

To add an experiential component to those statistical findings, Travel Weekly asked Stoudemire to moderate a discussion among Black professionals to share some of their experiences in the industry.



Tyronne Stoudemire

As Stoudemire's title suggests, corporations tend to connect efforts to address related concerns into "diversity, equity and inclusion" programs. The approaches to these initiatives have evolved over the past 40 years, and Stoudemire dissected their intentions and results.

From 1964 to 1988, laws were passed related to discrimination in the workplace. Corporations focused on both compliance and a belief that the way to address the issue was, Stoudemire said, "Give me two Blacks, two Asians, two Latinos, a few good white men, and we'll be OK."

But that caused polarization, he continued. "Studies show when one person is hired -- Black, a woman, Latino or Asian -- they have tendency to try to prove themselves and oftentimes come across as defensive. When it's two, they can be combative, because they feel there's only room for one. You don't get inclusion until you have critical mass. And, of course, no one wants to be hired only because of their race, gender or orientation."

“ Equity is meeting us where we are.”

– Tyrone Stoudemire, global VP, diversity, equity and inclusion, Hyatt ↪

The next phase, from 1988 to 1996, was more about sensitivity training, Stoudemire said. "We wanted to build awareness that white men need to know how to work with women and people of color. The training was often labeled 'Tolerance and Sensitivity.' But who wants to be 'tolerated?'" It created polarization, he believes, as well as a sense of guilt among white men that often led to them to minimize the problem by thinking, "I'm not biased. I have a Black friend." Such rationalization distracted from broader issues.

From 1996 to the present, Stoudemire said, "it's about the business case. Show me the money! If you can tell me how diversity is good for my business and help me grow it, I'm all in."

And the phase we're entering next seeks to sustain and expand on progress made so far. To do this, companies must measure and take seriously the quality of employees' experience within an organization. That level -- the experience -- is individual, but with commonalities, as reflected in the roundtable discussion. Each participant in the discussion cites specific examples, both positive and negative, that hold lessons for industry employers.

Much of what Stoudemire talked about specifically addressed diversity and inclusion. But what of equity? Certainly, equal pay for equal work is central, but it goes beyond that, he said. To explain the nuances of equity, he again turned to analogy: "Imagine I wanted to

give everyone at work a bicycle and distributed identical 10-speed bikes. But that bike may be too tall for some, too short for others and one of us may have a disability and can't even get on the bike. So, I was fair: I provided everybody the same bike. But equity is different. Equity is meeting us where we are."

When using analogies or not, Stoudemire's perspective modifies Einstein's only slightly: It helps us see how people connect, rather than seeing only how we're different.

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