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## The Role of the Business Community in Creating a More Equitable Richmond

BRIAN ANDERSON

*President & CEO, ChamberRVA*



Our nation is experiencing a movement. Another awakening like other times in our checkered history. As Americans, we have not lived up to our ideals that all men and women are created equal and would by design enjoy equitable opportunities. The ideal or vision for a nation built on the ideals of freedom and liberty are honorable ideals. However, we have failed in our execution of building an equitable society where all people have an equal shot at achieving the American Dream. Obviously, hard work and perseverance are important to this argument, but these virtues are not relevant when systemic barriers impede many from succeeding.

As a nation, we have benefitted from the safety nets established during the New Deal. These “nets” may have limited hardships facing our most marginalized citizens, but they have done little to offer the true opportunities that America boasts of offering. Zip codes, skin color, availability of well-funded and supported schools, and affordable housing and transportation options have routinely limited the opportunities that were supposedly available to all. Communities are built by and for people. Therefore, communities are unique to their residents. And within all communities, large and small, differences abound.

All communities possess three important institutions that contribute (or don't) to the collective success of the community: The public sector, the philanthropic sector, and the private/business sector. As a Chamber of Commerce professional, I have spent 14 years leading critical community initiatives on behalf of the business / private sector. As a Chamber, we also work with and partner with the philanthropic and public sectors regularly in addressing important community issues.

And given the robust action in raising the bar for a more equitable society, the business community has an obligation to join the movement for a more equitable America. We have the means and the obligation to do more. Many companies have been leading on equity issues for many years. Policies of hiring, compensating and promoting people of color in a more equitable way have been increasing across the corporate landscape for many years. But all companies and businesses have not joined in or have not done so at an appropriate rate. Intended or unintended biases still exist. We still acknowledge and celebrate the first person of color or woman to lead this or be elected to that much more often than we should for 2021.

But tragedies over the last few years have ultimately created and sustained a movement that all should embrace. Not just because of the pain that is associated, or the anguish felt by our marginalized friends and colleagues; we can and should appreciate this moment in time because of the power for change that it offers. We can pause, emote, discuss, and feel the movement. Or better yet, truly imagine a world where all people are appreciated and celebrated for exactly who they are. No bias, no prejudice, no judgement. We are truly created to be equal people with equal rights and privileges available to all.

As a relative newcomer to Richmond but a native of the South, I was aware of the racial history of Richmond. Although aware, I was not prepared for how pervasive the racial history impacted everyday life. As a business leader, I think we can and should take the lead on the imperatives to create a more just, equitable and inclusive

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society. Research has shown that diverse companies perform better than less diverse companies. Businesses, by their composition of associates, can socialize norms quicker than society at large. We are affected and influenced by our customers. Most businesses want to serve as many customers as possible. It is in our self-interest to equitably resemble the markets we serve, and the associates we employ. To maximize our economic interests, we must be intentional about diverse hiring, promoting, compensating, and marketing.

**“Where there is no vision, the people perish.”**  
*Solomon in Proverbs 29:18*

Following the tragic murder of George Floyd, the Board of Directors of ChamberRVA, the regional Chamber of Commerce for Greater Richmond, chose to act. We chose to accelerate our actions to lead on building a more equitable region. We created a task force composed of enthusiastic and passionate leaders who could have the hard conversations, who could check their own bias, and who could strategically build a framework for action that would allow the business community to lean in and advance needed reforms.

They took time to have the hard conversations, to listen, and developed strategies that could make a difference in building a more equitable region.

This task force reviewed the work of similar organizations in the United States who were having similar conversations. They analyzed the different areas of society where barriers persisted, and opportunities did not. They offered best practices that their companies were implementing. They took time to have the hard conversations, to listen, and developed strategies that could make a difference in building a more equitable region. The taskforce developed a framework that focuses on three primary strategic imperatives for the business community, which we believe will create a more equitable Richmond region. We believe the business community needs to:

1. Adopt more equitable policies and processes and make a commitment to embed diversity, equity and inclusion into their organizations.
2. Develop initiatives that elevate students of color to create more pathways to viable careers and economic mobility.
3. Remove barriers in the supplier ecosystem so that more Black and brown businesses have access and greater capacity.

The Chamber is committed to leading the business community in the ongoing work of dismantling systemic racism to create greater economic opportunity, helping business leaders build their knowledge and capacity in the work of racial equity and inclusion and supporting best practices and actions to amplify our collective impact in advancing racial equity in the region. Thus, we will help lead the business community in these important strategic imperatives.

### Adopt Equitable Policies and Processes

Our larger companies have the resources, and many have adopted stronger DE&I best practices. Most small and medium sized companies do not have the resources, financial or human, to implement DE&I best practices. As a regional business organization, we will develop and share policies and procedures for these companies. We hope

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to model the same as a small organization in our board representation, our hiring, and our leadership representation. Our goal is to ensure that all businesses have the tools to be a more equitable workplace.

We have started this work by developing and implementing a “Shared Values Series” in the late summer of 2020. This series began the hard conversations needed by the leaders of our region. We brought in national, regional, and local thought leaders to discuss varying topics on race, social justice, and economic mobility. We will develop and implement a similar series in the late summer of 2021.

### Develop Initiatives that Elevate Students of Color

Education is often a primary determinant of a person’s economic trajectory. Education as an institution is not equitable. Zip codes and property values routinely determine the resources available for educating our children. A majority of Black and brown children live in more economically challenged school districts and do not receive the same quality education as white children. We will work across the Richmond region, identifying the neighborhoods and schools that are economically challenged and intervene with policies and programs that minimize or eliminate inequity. Our goal is to eliminate systemic inadequacies in our schools and school systems such that all students have access to a high-quality education regardless of zip code.

Zip codes and property values routinely determine the resources available for educating our children.

We started this work in assessing dual enrollment participation for our Black and brown students. And determining the capacity for career and technical education pathways as well across the various school divisions. We will work with businesses in our high demand career industries to provide internships and apprenticeship opportunities for our Black and brown students and externships for our educators.

### Removing Barriers in the Supplier Ecosystem

We have taken the first steps of partnering with eleven large employers to understand the landscape of this work. Through a survey, we have collected valuable data about industry types, dollar amount of annual purchasing, and percentage of minority participation. Working with the Metropolitan Business League and the Jackson Ward Collective, we will also survey minority owned businesses on industry type, financial capacity available by business, areas of operation, etc. With the data from both surveys, we hope to connect suppliers and purchasers more directly through contracts won and feedback provided to those suppliers who are not selected. We hope this direct interaction will help drive more business development, more hiring of Black and brown employees, and more wealth creation by Black and brown owned businesses.

### Conclusion

The entire Chamber team is passionate about this work and we want to be the change that is needed in our organization, our region and our nation. There are similar Chamber led initiatives in many cities and regions across the U.S.; Tulsa, OK, Greenville, SC, and Charlotte, NC, but no city or region has succeeded. There is more work to be done and the business community can play a key role in advancing racial equity if we are intentional about transforming our policies, practices and actions. When we are successful in leading our region forward, in building systems of opportunity that will displace very entrenched barriers, we will achieve the ultimate vision for Richmond. We will have become a region of opportunity for all, not the few. We will have systematically lifted all people up and affirmed that all men and all women of all races are truly free and equal. Then, and only then, can we all pursue and achieve the American dream.

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### **Brian Anderson**

Brian Anderson is a native of Florence, SC, and a graduate of Francis Marion University with a BS in Economics. He lives in Midlothian, Virginia, with his wife, Heather. They have two adult children, Douglas and Sarah Whitney and a daughter-in-law, Abby.

Before becoming a Chamber of Commercial professional, Brian served four years in the U.S. Army as a Military Intelligence Officer, eighteen years in the beverage industry with both Coca-Cola and Anheuser-Busch. He also served as the elected Chairman of the Whitfield County Board of Commissioners from 2005-2008.

Anderson began his Chamber career at the Greater Dalton Chamber of Commerce in 2008 and served 7 years in that capacity. He served as the President & CEO of the Greater Columbus GA Chamber of Commerce from 2015-2019. He earned his Institute of Organizational Management certification from the U.S. Chamber in 2012.

In September 2019, Anderson was appointed as President & CEO of ChamberRVA, a regional Chamber of Commerce, representing the Greater Richmond VA region.