Controversy over ‘Blackness’

By Faith Luna Fuller
Herald Contributor

Mental genius Prince wrote a hit song titled, “Controversy,” the lead single and title to his 1981 album. The song addresses oppression about Prince and the public scrutiny of who he was. The public wanted to know about his sexuality, gender, religion and racial background. Essentially, people wanted to label him and put him in the proper category. Prince didn’t fit the stereotype of what society felt a Black man should be: Fans and critics alike were shocked and confused. Like Prince struggled to understand the curiosity surrounding him, I often feel the same. Mainly, because people briefly have made me question myself. Well, they used to. In middle school, I was labeled an “Oreo” – not because I’m mixed race and have fair skin and silky fine hair, but because of how I dress, and who my closest friends were. I’m okay with that. It’s beautiful, intelligent, unapologetically my most authentic self. #blackgirlmagic and my #blackness is a talent who was way ahead of her time, I see that thought process. With that, or speaking without profanities to make up for what’s missing, why do some sectors of society feel so much emphasis on racial stereotypes? What is Blackness? I see ‘Blackness’ in the great actress who graced our city with her presence for decades. Dr. Courtis Fuller, Cincinnati’s former vice mayor and woman who dedicated herself to Civil Rights activism and racial equality, who also see ‘Blackness’ in my father, Courtis Fuller, WLWT-TV Anchor/ Reporter, and awarded-winning journalist and community servant. So when you think someone isn’t Black enough or is too Black, please give pause and education as to what that even means. If nothing else, let’s let go of what I wear, who I’m associated with, what neighborhood I live in, my parents’ social-economic status, or educational advancements, I’ll likely possess that blackprignacm and my Black enough! I can’t be anyone other than the person God created me to be, so I’m going to be unapologetically my most authentic self. My Black is beautiful, intelligent, tenacious, strong, and so much more... And I’m okay with that.

By Dr. Amber Kelly, PhD, MHS, MS
Co-Chair Elect, Co-Public Policy Co-Minister, Administrators Public Policy Council Society for Community Research & Action (APA Div-27) President and Chief Executive Officer Community Engagement Collective

Across the United States and throughout the world, nonprofit and for-profit organizations have shown their support for Black Lives Matter during the COVID-19 pandemic via social media, sending countless emails to supporters and posting announcements on their websites. Although these messages of solidarity show a collective awareness, they do not embody authentic support. Organizations have to move beyond actions that garner public attention. The first step is to assess whether organizations are truly aligning with messaging. It is time to ask the tough questions that have gone unaddressed and contribute to the inequities in our society.

Current injustices, including police brutality against Blacks, are not new, however, some organizations felt compelled to publicly express their support of the Black Lives Matter in fear that their silence would negatively impact their bottom line and standing in the communities they serve. The continuous posting of solidarity statements that do not reflect an organization’s climate is disingenuous and does not help the Black Lives Matter movement’s progression. Here are a few steps organizations can take to move in the right direction.

Diversity in leadership

Shouting support for Black Lives Matters includes showing support for Black leaders within your organization. Does your organization have Black representation within leadership roles? If so, do they feel supported? If not, how does your organization plan to address this lack of support for Black leadership? Is your established leadership willing to build a pipeline and mentor Black leaders to improve their upward mobility and success? Is leadership open to creating new roles? Is there a salary gap between Black and White employees, leaders in particular? Do the current organizational make-up, structures, and culture allow Black leaders to have a meaningful voice within the organization?

Supporting Black

When your organization has the opportunity to employ a contractor, make supporting a Black business a priority. Hire Black-owned organizations to meet your vendor needs. Consider working with Black-owned businesses in the neighborhoods where your organization resides and or considers. When you consider hiring founding names that are Black-owned.

Listening and applying Black voices

Some organizations have offered Black employees opportunities to share their thoughts and ideas, even with feedback with leadership during this time. Beyond listening, there has to be consistent measurable follow up to show that these opportunities were not for optics but toward addressing change. How is feedback applied in your organization’s practices, policies, and procedures? What steps do you take to prevent workplace bullying toward Black employees and address cases that have already occurred? Can you even work climate allow for Black employees to feel comfortable being their authentic selves?

A few months ago, my nonprofit organization, Community Engagement Collective, led the Cincinnati Midwestern Psychological Association Society for Community Research and Action’s first virtual conference. Nineteen conference attendees participated in the daylong conference, shared their research and insights on current affairs, and highlighted their experiences of actively engaging in community work in the Midwest. There was a consensus throughout the conference that addressing the multiple layers within systems that have contributed to our current social climate is critical. As individuals, it may be strategic to choose an area of focus within these systems that best fits our knowledge, skills, and passions to avoid being overwhelmed by the task. For example, you may focus on health disparities, educational achievement gaps, poverty. How do organizational practices, fair housing laws, economic development in communities of color, etc. As a society, we need to dedicate resources to these areas of focus collectively with existing organizations and individuals striving to promote change in addressing systemic racism.

Supporting the Black Lives Matter movement is a collective effort and will require coalitions to collaborate in specific focus areas. Now is the time for organizations to reexamine that genuinly reflect organizations’ support of Black Lives Matter and take stances that will foster stakeholder accountability. Here are a few steps you can take:

1. Write a statement of solidarity, but it is another to live out its meaning.

2. #BlackLivesMatter

Dr. Amber Kelly is a community psychologist and the CEO and Co-Chair, Community Engagement Collective, a nonprofit organization that strives for closer community engagement through innovative research. She is also an adjunct faculty member at National Louis University.