

When it Comes to Diversity and Change, a Bit of Advice: “Put on Your Big Girl (or Boy) Pants”

By Gemma Burgess

This article is the first in a series that will share perspectives on:

- The current state of DE&I within the CRE industry
- How to best accelerate change
- Being one’s authentic self in the workplace
- How to be an effective ally
- Advice for colleagues and the industry

As a young professional working within Board search, I was once sold a dream: “Move into the commercial real estate industry where everyone can find their niche and, therefore, the people they will enjoy working with.”

Initially, I was not disappointed. Certainly, there were other young people and a vibrant scene in London prior to 2007’s Global Financial Crisis. There was plenty of event programming, property tours, conferences and parties. However, it didn’t take very long for the realization to hit that despite such diversity on the scene, the older white men who were industry leaders in my prior professional life had simply been replaced with younger versions of the same. Consequently, adding gender diversity to the industry became a personal and professional crusade and has been for more than the last decade.

Flash forward to the Spring of 2019, when I found myself at the Real Estate Executive Council (REEC) Annual Conference in Boston. As one of the only white attendees, I made a commitment to myself to help the industry I love embrace diversity more holistically than with respect to gender, which up to then had been the standard definition. While white women “in the room” was a start it was never going to be enough.

Upon returning to New York, I contacted Tammy Jones, then a REEC Board Member and today the Chairperson, and we spent two hours discussing everything from the excellent conference programming to the industry at large. We discussed the changes underway that felt real with respect to gender diversity and the drivers. We concluded that while the excellent REEC event was both necessary and thought-provoking, in order to truly accelerate change, the conversation would need to evolve, moving beyond the REEC membership audience and to the entire industry. To do this, REEC needed to open its doors—and get this message across—to the older, white guys and gals!

While chatting with Tammy that evening over dinner in a small, Italian restaurant in Manhattan, after a glass of wine I summoned the courage to ask her something that fundamentally changed the way I have worked ever since. I explained that as woman, I had never had a problem calling any women in the industry and asking for female candidate recommendations. I shared my struggle to find the right words when seeking help identifying ethnically diverse candidates. Tammy's response: "Gemma, put on your big girl pants and make those calls. Call every Black person you know within the industry and ask for help. We know how to find one another."

I took Tammy's advice and made those calls and continued making them. During Black History Month, I will be making more as several of the REEC Members and Board Members

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— Tammy Jones, co-founder and CEO of Basic Investment Group LLC and chair of REEC

have kindly agreed to help us assess where the commercial real estate industry is today with respect to diversity and, most importantly, how it continues to evolve. In a series of conversations around critical topics, we are excited to share their stories, perspectives and counsel over the next month. Most importantly, we discuss what every person in the industry can do to ensure that our broad commitment to diversity is not just a moment but a movement, and how we can all improve and expand our knowledge, perspectives and skills to be the very best allies we can be.

To learn more about REEC please visit REEC.org and for information on REEC's Diversity Partnership opportunities, please contact REEC's CEO, Ken McIntyre at KMIntyre@REEC.org.

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