

# Not Talking About Diversity Makes You a Racist?

**Sam's Club CEO Rosalind Brewer found that even when you say all the right things, anything can happen when you talk about diversity.**

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December 21, 2015

Rosalind Brewer, the CEO of Sam's Club, has been all over the news thanks to a (<http://money.cnn.com/2015/12/16/news/companies/rosalind-brewer-sams-club-diversity/>)recent CNN video interview (<http://money.cnn.com/2015/12/16/news/companies/rosalind-brewer-sams-club-diversity/>). The birds are squawking loudly for her blood, or at the very least her resignation, which I find incredibly odd given the interview's contents.

In it, she talks about raising wages across the board and the importance of upskilling talent to coincide with the rise in technology. OK. Career paths, long-term employability and internal leadership development — good stuff. Then she talks about setting an example at the top, why it's important, and her emphasis on diversity when hiring senior leaders.

Then she recounts a recent meeting with suppliers, all of whom were white men. She said she chose not to address diversity with them in that moment, but that she planned to call them later.

What did she say that for?

Based on the reaction from some rather strident, dare I say confused, people, you'd have thought she called them all devils or something. Folks started squawking for a boycott of Sam's Club and parent company Wal-Mart, and called Brewer a racist. The manufactured drama even has its own hashtag: #boycottracistsamsclub.

I don't understand what she said that was so objectionable. If I'm understanding the scenario

correctly, she evaluated a situation in the moment, discerned that a discussion of diversity might not produce the kind of response she wanted, then made a decision to address it at a more appropriate time. What's the beef?

I think she exercised great judgment. Let's face it. We can't say what we want, when we want, all the time, especially when it comes to sensitive topics like diversity. To bring it up in that scenario, with a group of white men who were looking to do business with her organization, could have seemed like she was putting them on the spot. That likely would have made them defensive. Introducing the topic at that stage also might have been ill timed because it could have seemed like she was telling them, "Do this, or no contracts."

There's any number of misunderstandings that routinely rise around diversity because someone blunders forward in a ham-fisted way, rather than setting the stage and handling things in a more diplomatic fashion. And this is a CEO we're talking about — a black, female CEO at that. Diplomacy is likely Rosalind Brewer's unofficial middle name.

However those suppliers might have felt about diversity, to jump on the topic right then could have had them looking at each other like, what? Why is she talking about this now? What is she trying to say?

Although, let's face it. If she did bring it up then, which she didn't, it shouldn't have been a shocker. You want to supply a company like Sam's Club, with an established supplier diversity strategy and history? Come correct.

This is an organization that set its supplier diversity strategy in motion over a decade ago, and has increased its spending and the number of diverse suppliers it does business with by serious margins. CNN reported: "In 1994, it spent \$2 million with diverse suppliers; today, it does business with over 3,000 diverse suppliers, spending \$13.5 billion with those firms."

To call Brewer a racist over this roughly 20 seconds of commentary is excessive, unnecessary and ridiculous.

She said she supports diversity. Is it a stretch to think she'd want her organization's suppliers to be of like mind? Maybe that's what she planned to talk to them about. Duh.

She said: "It has to start with top leadership. I have to live it. I demand it of my team and within the

structure.” Therefore, she sees diversity as her responsibility. As a leader, she can choose how best to handle a potentially sensitive situation.

There’s a time and a place for everything. Making a decision not to bring up diversity does not mean she’s anti-white. The logic there is so convoluted; I just barely understand it. And my real understanding of this situation is, right now, diversity is everywhere. It’s literally trending, and some people are sick of it.

They’re fighting a rather desperate rearguard reaction in the face of discomfort and change, and they are lashing out in response. Thankfully, Wal-Mart President and CEO Doug McMillon has Brewer's back.

“For years, we've asked our suppliers to prioritize the talent and diversity of their sales teams calling on our company," he wrote in a statement (<http://news.walmart.com/news-archive/2015/12/14/doug-mcmillon-statement-on-rosalind-brewer-cnn-comments>). “Roz was simply trying to reiterate that we believe diverse and inclusive teams make for a stronger business. That's all there is to it and I support that important ideal.”

So, please. Find something real to throw racist dirt on. This woman did nothing wrong.



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