

**Mike Fernandez**  
**Recipient of the 2016 PRSA Foundation Paladin Award**  
**Acceptance Remarks**  
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First let me do what my mother would reprimand me for, and my wife would be disappointed in, if I didn't do it. And both would rather see it in writing – and text or email don't count – and that is to say, "Thank you."

Thank you, Jack Leslie, for that wonderful introduction and for being such a great friend and counselor through the years. I am very grateful since our college days at Georgetown that our paths have continued to cross, first in politics and then in the public relations profession. I greatly admire Jack. For as long as I have known him, he has had great passion to engage in matters and causes throughout the world – and especially in Africa and Latin America – that do not benefit him personally but improve the lives for many others in parts of the world less fortunate.

Thank you to my dear friends and industry colleagues who are here this evening and supporting the important cause of the PRSA Foundation.

And a very special thank you to the diverse array of talented individuals who have worked with me and for me who are with us this evening. I know that I would not be standing up here this evening without your great deeds. You contributed mightily to this moment and made me look a lot better than I would have on my own.

My family could not be here tonight, but I must thank my wife, Pat, and my four very accomplished children (Lucy, Dorothy, Laura and Will) who remind me every day of what truly matters in this life. Their understanding of my imperfections and their unconditional love in response have made me both more thoughtful and a stronger person.

Thank you to Torod (Neptune) and Kim (Hunter) in having the temerity and courage to ask me to address all of you this evening, and on the very challenging topic of diversity in our industry. Forewarning: This is a very dangerous and disruptive act on their part.

Thank you to the board of the PRSA Foundation. I am truly humbled and honored by the Paladin Award in part because of those who came before me [industry pioneers like Dan Edelman and Harold Burson; game changers like Marcia Silverman, Charlotte Otto and John Graham; and innovators and friends like Jon Iwata and Harris Diamond]; and I am especially humbled by the mission you have embraced in recent years at the PRSA Foundation to fuel the passions and dreams of diverse, ambitious and promising students. "Rising Talent, Raising Diversity": I love that thought and love that mission.

But like one of those old *Saturday Night Live* "Wayne's World" skits with Mike Myers and Dana Carvey, I feel as though the appropriate response is: "I am not worthy."

You see, I grew up on the wrong side of the tracks from that heralded group you previously honored, and I even have a "Z" at the end of my name to prove it. Of course, I know, someone will pinch me and we'll all awaken from this dream.

In many ways my life and career path have been a bit of a dream, some might even say the American dream. A kid of humble roots becomes the first in his family to graduate from college, counsels Senators and Congressmen, works with titans of industry, and becomes noted in his chosen field.

Now I promise not to go all Horatio Alger on you. The reality of my life is less than a dream. My actions far less than perfect and the story of my life is probably a bit more like Forrest Gump. That is, if Forrest were the product of a mixed marriage, with one parent having grown up the second of nine children in Spanish Harlem and the other in an orphanage in a small mill town in South Carolina. You see, my parents are nearly a matched pair of opposites. They met on a California beach in the 1950s. He was a gregarious, kinky-haired, dark brown -- almost black -- eyed, dark-skinned male whose parents were from Puerto Rico and Cuba, and she was an introspective, blond-haired, blue-eyed, fair-skinned female who spent most of her early years never knowing who her parents were.

Shortly after they first met, my mother would graduate from high school and years later my father would earn his GED. They both worked extremely hard, sometimes multiple jobs to make ends meet and build a little dream for their family of four. In their journey they faced many an indignity, and many were suffered as their two young children looked on and saw the slights as a result of a Hispanic surname or the color of my father's skin.

I would see my parents denied rental housing because the owner or apartment super didn't like the sound of our name or the way we looked. And I have sealed in my memory forever what my father once said to me after suffering one of those moments (and I'll modify it here for the children in the room), but he said, "You remember that son, in America everyone's free to be an idiot."

Even in the face of such bias, my father was and is a very proud man, and very proud to be an American. He served his country during the Korean War and his five brothers would also serve in various branches of the US military; even when at times their own country -- or at least parts of it, or people in it -- did not always serve them well. You see they and their parents had a love affair with the American dream, even when it did not love them back.

My professor and advisor at Georgetown, Evron Kirkpatrick (for the political types among you, he was Jeanne Kirkpatrick's husband, and in that day he was the head of American Political Science Association), used to teach these wonderful courses whose titles began with "The Theory and Practice of..." My favorite was "The Theory and Practice of Representation in America."

Our diversity challenge in the public relations profession, if I may, needs to move beyond the theory and the studies and our best intentions. It needs to be about our practice -- or our very practice, as public relations professionals, will suffer. If we do not move more quickly to provide a hand-up to our diverse talent, our very remit to communicate might be compromised by an inability to relate to the very publics we intend to reach.

Tonight, for me, this is very personal. I come here tonight not because I want to shake a finger at any one, nor do I come here to be an apologist for deeds yet done. Indeed through the years I have found myself, like many diverse students today, conflicted. I turned down multiple opportunities early in my career where others made me offers to work in diversity recruiting and multi-cultural marketing and PR. I wanted to advance my career, but I did not want to be pigeon-holed.

I also approach tonight's subject from the vantage of having great empathy for the diverse young professionals in our industry and at the same time knowing the pressures of being in a leadership role with a fiduciary responsibility to make the right personnel choices that will make my organization more successful. So my message to you tonight is that the solution to greater diversity is not easy.

If it were easy, you would think that some of America's smartest people – entrepreneurs, engineers and computer scientists in Silicon Valley – would have figured this all out and they would not be struggling to recruit and retain minority and female talent the way they are.

You would also think that Hollywood and the newsrooms of America would be more diverse than they are. And, yet, as this year's flap at the Oscars attests, Blacks, Latinos and older women are challenged to find leading roles that matter, as well as consistent employment – even though they are more prevalent today.

We also live in a world where – despite advancements – we still hear footsteps and see actions that cause us pause and sometimes pain. For the order of the day in some places is still fear, misunderstanding and prejudice:

- Waves of refugees escaping the horrors of war and oppression are greeted in Europe by retention camps and signs in many languages saying "Go Home" – even when for many that might be a death sentence,
- In the US we have legislatures in state's like North Carolina and Missouri trying to turn back the clock on the LGBT community
- Some of our national politicians say we need higher walls and bigger barriers to keep out immigrants; they fan the flame of Islamophobia and even refer to Mexican immigrants as "rapists" and "criminals".
- And from Ferguson to Baltimore to Charleston we've seen blacks murdered and it has made many of us wonder how much we have really progressed in the more than 60 years since Brown v. Board of Education – and whether black lives really matter.

Despite all of this, you and I know there has been numerical progress in our profession; and that I would not be standing up here this evening if there had not been. When I was made a chief communications officer for the first time 20 years ago at US WEST, I was only the 2<sup>nd</sup> Latino to ever serve as the chief communications officer of a Fortune 500 company, and at that time there were less than a handful of African Americans and Asians who were CCOs as well.

Today, as I look at the membership rolls of the Arthur W. Page Society – which consists of CCOs of Fortune 500 companies and leading non-profits, and the CEOs of some of the top PR firms, as well as academics from some of the top business and communications schools – I see that two handfuls are Latino, about 20 are Black and more than a dozen are Asian out of a universe of about 650 members. That is not exactly a landslide, but it is progress.

Now to be clear: Page Society is not to blame for that result. The outcome is the by-product of hiring, retention and promotion decisions made inside the companies, agencies and organizations from where Page's members come from.

But let's look at those numbers a bit more closely. They mean that roughly 6.5% of the leadership of our industry is represented by ethnic and racial minorities. Meanwhile, these categories account for nearly 35% of the US population. And for the math geeks in the room – that means at our current rate of progress – it likely will take us more than 30 years for our industry's leadership numbers to come even close to mirroring our general population today.

The pipeline, according to the Census Bureau, for all managers and above in advertising, marketing and PR roles is a tad better: 7.5% are Latino, 4.8% are Asian and 4.7% are Black – collectively that comes to just 17%.

And yet, the data and research on the value of diversity keeps coming in:

Ronald Burt, a sociologist who teaches at the University of Chicago's Booth School of Business, has produced several studies over the years which suggest that people with more diverse sources of experience and information consistently generate better ideas.

Economists Sara Fisher Ellison of MIT and Wallace Mullin of GW published a study two years ago in the *Journal of Economics & Management Strategy* that shows "mixed-sex teams" actually produce more creative solutions than those dominated exclusively by men or dominated exclusively by women.

And a CEB workforce study suggests that in a more diverse and inclusive organization: individual discretionary effort improves by 12%; intent to stay improves by 20%; and team collaboration and commitment improve by nearly 50%.

So – despite our open commitment to diversity, our investments in scholarships, internships and increased hiring of diverse talent – why are we still not doing as well, as I think, we all would like to?

Bruce Rohde, the former chairman and CEO of ConAgra Foods and my boss there, used to say: "Everything communicates."

It is not just what we say, it is how we say it, and what we do through our actions that matter. How we answer the phone, how we greet people in public, whether we make people feel comfortable or stressed, and how we treat people through a broad array of non-verbal cues, all of it communicates.

I remember Harold Burson counseling me when I was a mere babe in this profession. He made the point that to communicate well, you had to be intentional. To succeed in this business you had to realize that you communicated for a reason. Effective communication is about sustaining or altering a perception, behavior or result – and if possible a business result. Everything else is just noise.

In an odd way, when it comes to the subject of diversity, both Bruce Rohde and Harold Burson are right. We need to be both intentional and, at the same time, try to better understand that our actions may be undercutting our intent.

Put another way, one of my favorite playwrights George Bernard Shaw (who wrote *Pygmalion*... which most of us remember in its musical form as *My Fair Lady*) wrote: "The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion it has taken place."

Sometimes there is a great mismatch between what we think we are communicating, and what is actually heard by the intended audience. We need to focus less on our words and more on how we are being understood – or, should I say, misunderstood.

Lynn Applebaum and Frank Walton have conducted some very interesting research, sponsored by the PRSA Foundation. It points up that perceptions are really hard to change, especially when people earlier in their career do not see people like themselves in leadership positions. They quickly make assumptions that while they have a job today, they may never have a shot at the corner office tomorrow, because no one there quite looks like them.

From the other perspective, as a manager I want to hire the very best talent, and have the very best team. I've read all the studies about, and know the value of diversity. But in wanting that best talent, if I am not careful, I may inadvertently create requirements that prevent me from achieving that aim.

In the job selection process often times the qualifications needed, the years of experience required, and the preferences we cite, render many a diverse candidate ineligible. If we ask for 15 years of experience, we quickly rule out all millennials, which are the most diverse generation of all in the US workforce today – 44.2% of millennials in the US are part of a racial or ethnic minority. Whereas the percentage of minorities among Baby Boomers is half that.

Add to that a story in *The Wall Street Journal* from a year ago that underscores the myth of experience. Johnson & Johnson – one of our sponsors this evening – went back and analyzed how their “university hires” versus their “experienced hires” did on performance. What they found is very interesting. Performance was comparable; but “the college hires” stayed longer with the company. So in 2014, the company smartly increased its percentage of newly-minted bachelor and MBA degree holders by 20%.

Sometimes we set our screens on certain geographies, schools and education majors because we mistakenly associate proximity with professional fit. We tend to hire and advance talent based on our own narrow experiences. There is a certain comfort we have with others who have traversed the same terrain. After all, we've seen the model work for us. So we become more inclined to hire and advance people who fit that model, or share the same alma mater.

Three years ago I participated in a discussion billed as “The Fearless Conversation”. It was an event for The Brand Lab – a terrific group dedicated to building a more diverse workforce in the advertising, marketing and PR community in the Twin Cities. The panelists were an African American female who leads a business unit at General Mills, a Puerto Rican male who then was the CMO for Caribou Coffee (and now is the CMO for Famous Dave's restaurants) and me. We discussed the challenges of communicating in a diverse world.

But somewhere in the conversation the question was posed: Where did you go to school? My General Mills colleague said she graduated from Princeton, my CMO friend graduated from Cornell, and I, of course, graduated from Georgetown.

Each of us is the product of very highly competitive schools and proud of our achievements. But I wonder – not that we shouldn't celebrate and hire diverse talent getting into and succeeding at some of America's top universities – but I do wonder whether each of us would have been on that stage, or achieved our level of success or gotten our first jobs, if we had not gone to these schools that hiring managers hold in such high esteem?

Would I have been on that stage if I had done what many Latinos and people of color do and go to a junior college first and then on to a state school? What if I had gone to Rio Hondo Junior College, and then on to Cal State – L.A.? By the way, that's EXACTLY the path recommended to me by my high school guidance counselor when I entered my freshman year at Arroyo High School in El Monte, California.

Now I share that not to belittle those schools or the people who attend, but to make a point. For some, those schools may indeed be the correct path, but for me at the time it made me angry. It seemed as though my own guidance counselor was selling me short and limiting my options on account of where he thought a young man with a "Z" at the end of his name should go.

I wanted to go further. Like the classic story about the math teacher challenging his Chicano students at Garfield High School in East Los Angeles, I wanted to: "Stand and Deliver."

Recently I overheard a conversation at a PR industry event where one agency executive was lamenting to another... that young talent today in his firm... is not as focused, not as intent on getting ahead... as they were in "his day." He talked about how there had been a winter event that the agency was staging and they had gotten an overflow crowd, but had forgotten to make plans for a coat check. So he quickly asked 3 recent hires in the agency if they would lend a hand and serve that purpose. The next day one of the three – an African American female – handed in her resignation saying in part that she had not signed on to the firm to be a coat check girl. A few days later a second member of that threesome – a Latino male – handed in his resignation as well and in the midst of an exit interview with HR mentioned the coat check experience. The third member of the group – a young white male – is still with the firm and viewed as a real go-getter.

Pam El is the chief marketing officer for the National Basketball Association and an African American woman. I had the honor of working with Pam at US WEST and State Farm Insurance. In an interview a few years ago she talked of one agency having its pitch presented to her by an intern...because the intern was the only black person at the agency.

And we wonder why many diverse individuals in our profession are concerned about the pace of change.

Dr. Rochelle Ford and Cedric Brown at the Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University, in a white paper, sponsored by the National Black Public Relations Society, exploring the attitudes of Black PR professionals, and in another PRSA Foundation study conducted by Professor Richard Waters of the University of San Francisco it is clear that there are more diverse faces in PR offices than ever before. The industry is clearly different from what it was 20 years ago. But both studies convey that the challenge of sustaining that progress rests at the mid- and senior-levels of the profession. There is also a sense by many a diverse practitioner that they have to punch more items on the list to advance, than their white counterparts do.

So how do we step up our diversity game?

Let me talk first to the diverse individuals among us, and then to the leadership of our industry.

Those of us who are diverse and those of us who run PR departments and agencies have unique responsibilities in all of this. So to my fellow diverse PR professionals:

One, we have to be careful to be the owner rather than the victim. The moment we say we cannot do something because of someone else, or some other circumstance, we lose. We talk a lot these days in public relations circles about powerful narratives. It is a much more powerful personal narrative to say "I make life happen" than saying it happens to me. Just as we hope other parties better understand us, we need to strive to better understand them.

Two, find mentors among senior people you respect, and don't wait for someone in HR to assign you one.

Three, network with people and peers that you can learn from. Networking does not mean just showing up to a social event. It means engaging in ways that enhance your understanding of the craft and the world.

Four, understand the business and politics of your firm or company. You hear the words "business acumen" and everyone thinks they need to be an accountant or finance expert. No, but you do need to know how business decisions are made, and what issues, activities and strategies matter most to the profitability of the firm.

Five, you need to master your craft. Spoiler alert: the likelihood is that you will still have to work harder than others. But most who truly get ahead do, regardless of their birth circumstance.

Six, turn your birth circumstance and your experience into a competitive advantage. Speak up, provide your point of view, and bring the value add of your whole self to your job every day and provide the unique perspectives that only someone like you can share. Those kinds of insights over time will be valued and rewarded.

Now what do the leaders in the public relations industry need to do?

One, we need to reduce the cost of candor on the issue of diversity and others, and create a more welcoming environment.

Google in recent years has used some of its analytical prowess in an effort called Project Aristotle to tease out what makes for the most successful teams within Google. What they have learned is that the biggest differentiator was not having the smartest people in the room. It was having teams where there was psychological safety. Where people demonstrated good listening behaviors and attempted to draw others into the conversation – regardless of age, rank, experience or whether they attended Cal Tech or MIT. Teammates treated each other with respect. People were granted close to equality in actual speaking time, and their social sensitivity, what some of us refer to as emotional intelligence, was very high.

Two, we need to continue the research, those scholarships, internships and mentorships, and continue to hire more diverse candidates.

But as an industry – and as someone who has helped to fund some of that activity – we need to better coordinate our activities. The PR Council has its efforts, as does the Arthur W. Page Society, the Institute for Public Relations, the Plank Center, the Lagrant Foundation, the PRSA Foundation and a host of others. Rather than doing the same work, rather than stumbling over each other, I'd rather us continue the dialog that was begun in recent months among many of these organizations to optimize our collective efforts in ways that will advance the cause and allow us to achieve our aim more quickly.

Three, inside our firms, we need to more seriously address the retention and development of our diverse employees. That means including diverse talent in the discussions of the firm's most precious work. It means challenging them to bring their experiences to the table. Don't make them feel as though they need to "cover," encourage them to come to work with their whole self. We talk about being inclusive, but what we need is to help our employees feel included.

It also means that we need to give special attention to development of our diverse talent, so their skills and capabilities are honed, and they remain competitive and able to deliver value. We also have to help provide them with the skills and sensibilities to better navigate their own careers (I know this next month Page Society is experimenting with just such a program). This can also be embellished by offering up mentors who are solely focused on this topic with their mentees.

Four, we need to set real goals and hold ourselves and our managers accountable. Borrowing a page from the Rooney Rule in the NFL, I require my team to surface at least two diverse candidates for every opening. This improves the manager's line of site to diverse talent, and ultimately improves our numbers.

Five, as I suggested earlier, we need to readjust our job descriptions to broaden our normal candidate pools so that our opportunity to hire diverse candidates improves at every level.

And six, like the Nike slogan: Just Do It. We don't need many new studies. We just need to hire more, develop more and that includes at the very tops of our organizations. Torod Neptune said it best in his interview for IPR with Tina McCorkindale "it boils down to leadership and courage."

We know that retention will improve and attitudes will change when diverse talent sees reaching for the top in our profession not just as theoretically possible, but a matter of practice.

By now, I'm sure many of you may be suffering from a bit of diversity fatigue; but growing diversity of our workforce should be a cause for celebration.

Robert Kennedy referred to diversity as America's "ultimate response to the intolerant man."

For our firms, it should be a cause for celebration: of clear thinking, greater marketplace understanding, and even competitive advantage.

So raise your glasses in toast for the PRSA Foundation's commitment, and our combined commitment to transform our diversity conversation into bias for collective action.

Thank you. Salud!