

The time to be more inclusive is now

 By [Jessica Tennant](#)

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VMLY&R SA's Live from The Edge presented both local and global thought leaders talking to the theme 'From Cultural Clichés to Brand Authenticity', addressing cultural relevance in an African context.

Wrapping up the one and half hours of insights, global CEO Jon Cook shared his views on what's happening from a diversity, equity and inclusion standpoint.



Jon Cook, global CEO of VMLY&R

Firstly, he said the time to be more inclusive is now. We're in the middle of a firestorm. "Pandemic, economic recession, social injustice... natural disasters... we're in the middle of a big one here in the US." What's become clear, he said, is that with all of this going on, you need to be that much more sensitive, that much more supportive of one another, that much more inclusive. "You just can't judge on any Zoom meeting that we're on when somebody's having a particularly bad day. It's a given that on any given day in one of those meetings, someone is having the effect of one of those major impacts in their life."



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The second thing he shared was about a debate he's been having with himself between how much you say you're doing and how much are you're actually doing. "At VMLY&R the debate is how much do you do and how much do you say about what you're doing?"

It's a hard question to ask yourself, he said, because one would say, 'Well, of course, you'd report all out.' "But there's a danger of, as you report things externally, those things seeming like grandstanding, those things seeming like you're checking boxes."

What he found was that people want to be communicated with and they want to see action. "Some of my instincts have been not to communicate externally at times. Some of those instincts have been not to relay internally everything that we're doing. Some of that stuff is quite personal, but at the end of the day, communicating and communicating even more."

But as you take action, and particularly in terms of diversity, equity, inclusion, as a leader, you're going to get criticism, he warned. "You're going to get friction, there's going to be more tension as you put more texture out there, and I think that's completely OK."

He said he was initially resistant to the criticism. Nobody wants to be criticised. But what he found was that when you put yourself out there, as long as your heart is in the right place, it's still worth taking action.

He referred to their annual meeting earlier this year, as an example of this. "We had our annual meeting, thousands of people in one meeting, talking about our efforts in DE&I and I mentioned a day when there wouldn't be a diversity, equity and inclusion committee. I dreamed of a day when programming wasn't labelled as 'diversity programming', and what I meant and how I was heard were two different things. I meant I wanted it all to be just at the core of our company and that we didn't need to label things that way. The way it came off to some was that those things weren't that important or that diversity or some groups wasn't or weren't that important."

He received feedback in a very fair way, he said, and although his initial reaction could have been to be defensive, he wasn't. "I took it in, understood the feedback and it led to good dialogue, and I just would encourage everybody to do those things. Take that feedback, don't stop putting yourself out there with fear of the feedback or the criticism, as long as you're willing to take action."



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If you missed the event or would like to find out some of the insights that were shared, keep an eye out for the rest of our coverage on [Bizcommunity.com](https://bizcommunity.com) and follow [#VMLYRTheEdge](https://twitter.com/VMLYRTheEdge) on social media.

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