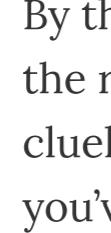
2020  
by ARTICLE GROUP

## Mistakes We've Made, 2020 Edition

Over the past few years, we here at Article Group have shared the various mistakes we made over the previous year. This year, we continue the tradition, but with a twist.



**Joe Lazar**  
President

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Over the past few years, we here at Article Group have shared the various mistakes we made over the previous year. It's a fun and sometimes cringeworthy exercise in self-reflection, and, ideally, it helps prevent those mistakes from happening again.

### This year, we continue the tradition, but with a twist.

While there are plenty of mistakes we can list — like hiring too slowly and subpar internal communication — we're only going to focus on one big mistake. It's one that a lot of us around the world have made and continue to make. It's one that isn't easily solved, either.

I'll stop with the suspense. This year, I'm going to dive deep into the mistakes we made around **diversity, equity, and inclusion**. I'm optimistic a lot of folks can relate and, hopefully, improve their work in this area too.

By the way (and this probably goes without saying, but I wanted to address the elephant in the room), the advertising industry is infamously heavy handed with diversity, and pretty clueless when it comes to equity and inclusion. We don't really have a model to follow. If you've come across any agencies that are tackling our nation's systemic race problem with grace, by all means, [let us know](#). We'd love to look them up.

### Mistake #1: Waiting for a social movement to act

Like everyone else, we were horrified at the footage of George Floyd's death. We were inspired by protests and activism that came out of it. We were motivated by the active discussion and the new ways of thinking about social justice that exploded on and off line.

But what we weren't was surprised.

The injustice we were seeing wasn't new. Many of us learned about it in college through a combination of courses, protests, and marches. It doesn't take too studious a read of history to know how widespread racism is and has been.

Yet, as an organization, we never took on this cause. The problem felt too big. We are a small agency, what could we do? There was a pandemic to deal with, too. We also didn't want to face the uncomfortable truth that our team was predominantly white. We knew that was a problem, and one we wanted to address. But it just wasn't on the front burner.

This year taught us that a problem this big needs *everyone* to act. It's not OK to sit on the sidelines. And we were.

### Mistake #2: The Task Force

Right as protests started, we convened our regular Monday morning meeting. We had one of our colleagues share her thoughts about racial justice and what was happening in America. It was a passionate and moving speech. We were all shaken by what we had seen, and this speech galvanized us. It was clear that, as an organization, we had to take *some* action.

I took personal responsibility for getting us to act on this. While I didn't know exactly where to start, I knew we had a collection of great problem solvers, many of whom were already active in social justice in their personal lives. It seemed like putting together a task force from this incredible group would help us find a place to start.

But what I didn't understand was just how different personal activism is from corporate responsibility — how recognizing the effect of our work on society is different from rethinking our workplace. I knew everyone was already exhausted by the roller coaster that was 2020, but I didn't realize just how much more exhausting engaging on this at the company level would be. With everyone hustling to complete their day jobs, along with the intensity and pressure associated with "getting DEI right," crowdsourcing wasn't going to work and the task force just wasn't ever going to be successful.

### Mistake #3: Wrong people, wrong job

Apart from the ill-conceived task force, we brainstormed ideas about how to address racial justice. We donated to organizations that supported the cause. We had a handful of meetings to provide an open and safe space for people to talk. But we weren't making meaningful progress.

There were lots of reasons for our ineffectiveness. One was we didn't really know what we were doing in this space. While we knew we needed to do this work, it simply wasn't our area of expertise — after all, our lack of comprehension about the problem was a big reason why we'd failed to solve it in the first place! Our team was also slammed with client work. It was just too much to ask. These were the wrong people doing the wrong job.

The ultimate example of "wrong people, wrong job" was Article Group trying to do this alone, *when we created a sister organization — ArticleGroup.org (AGO) — to work on exactly these kinds of issues*. We were so consumed with showing up for racial justice, we didn't think to include the wider team we had created. It's incredibly boneheaded in retrospect.

Once we engaged the combined organizations, we started to make progress.

### Mistake #4: Trees, meet forest

Core to making progress was adding some sorely needed *outside expertise*. And even though we weren't hiring a bunch of new positions, we were super excited about learning how to become a more diverse organization. Because that's what this was about, right? More diversity?

Wrong.

Yes, of course, more diversity is important. But that's just the "D" in DEI. Equity and inclusion are also essential, but for reasons we never could have fathomed.

Diversity can be solved with a pretty obvious prescription: Simply hire more people who look different from the founders and from each other. But making sure different people have an equal chance at success and a real say in the business? That's a much more subtle goal. It turns out, to our surprise and dismay, we weren't running nearly as inclusive and equitable an organization as we wanted to.

In our case, that means leadership and decision-making authority was confusing to much of the staff. Many people didn't know who to turn to with issues. We were messy in ways we just didn't realize, and we have a lot of work to do.

### Causes for optimism

We made more mistakes through this process, and will continue to make mistakes. But as my kindergartener's teacher says, "Mistakes are great! It's how we learn!"

While I wish I could be as cheerful as his teacher is about mistakes, it is true. We have learned *a lot* and are going to continue to improve as an organization. We have a roadmap, a better vocabulary and understanding of the issues at our company, and look forward to a more direct local community in 2021 and beyond. The future really does look bright.

In the end, we want DEI not to be a thing we do, but a core part of who we are. It hasn't been easy, but we've found the most worthwhile projects rarely are. And we can't think of anything more worthwhile than this. This is for us and our communities. And it is way overdue.

We're finally off the sidelines, and it's great to be on the field.



### Joe Lazar

President

Joe is an expert in branding, marketing, and communicating executive vision. He loves a good guitar, woodshop, and fly rod.

[in](#) Joe Lazar



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