

How This Tech CEO Is Leading His Company Through Racial Unrest

June 17, 2020 6 min read

Travis Montaque founded his company on the core principle that the way we communicate today fundamentally discourages people from showing empathy. When we can hide behind keyboards or phones, we're more likely to say things we don't really mean or misconstrue messages. His company, Holler, aims to change that through its interactive gifs and stickers, which can be integrated in everything from dating app conversations to Venmo payments.

Because the core mission of Montaque's company is helping a wide range of people share a common language and communicate in new ways, the events of the past several weeks have made him think about the role his company – and tech in general – can play in the conversations about racial injustice happening on a national level. But, Montaque is also a black CEO in the predominantly white world of tech, so this feels even more personal.

After taking several days to reflect, Montaque took to LinkedIn to share the memo he sent Holler's employees in an article titled "Actions Over Words". In the intro, he writes: "It hasn't been easy to gather all of my thoughts and feelings onto a page. Because it's true, words just simply aren't enough to express how I feel about what's going on in our society right now. But, at Holler, I've made it our mission to be all about the conversation, and I know I simply can't remain silent. As a Black man, and as one of the few Black

tech CEOs in this country, I felt it necessary to speak up.”

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Montaque went on to outline how his own company would take action to combat systemic racism and has continued to write on the topic for other outlets since then. In a moment of rare downtime, Montaque spoke with *Entrepreneur* about why he felt compelled to speak out and what he would ask of tech CEOs like Mark Zuckerberg and Tim Cook if given the chance.

How does your work at Holler overlap with your thoughts on current events?

Montaque: There’s something about online communication that inherently makes us less empathetic to each other. You’d be hard-pressed to find a situation where somebody walks up to you and says to your face, “I hope your children die,” but that’s common rhetoric on online platforms. We believe that some of the fundamental things that drive empathy between people are missing in an environment that’s text-based alone.

Our “why” is not to deliver stickers and be funny but to foster empathy and understanding between all people online. If that is our why, then racism has to be something we address. There’s obviously a personal aspect of the fact that I’m a black CEO, but even if I weren’t, we’d have to engage with this topic in the way that we are anyway.

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How has that shaped your actions as a CEO?

Expression is for everyone. We put a lot of effort into trying to understand the nuances of how different people all over the world communicate and try to give them the tools to do that

authentically.

With respect to how we operate as a business, it's important for us to think about how we compose our teams. We need to be representative, because we know expression is so diverse. How do we develop programs that enable us to represent that internally so that we can most effectively support that externally?

After George Floyd's death on May 25, which led to nationwide protests, what were your first moves as a CEO?

I needed to take a step back and reflect – to gather my own thoughts and feelings around the situation. The first couple of days, I listened to all the different perspectives and looked at the things that were coming from our team. I did not want to portray that I had all the answers. I engaged with meaningful discussions about this with my leadership team: What is the right thing for us to be doing as a company and as people in this matter?

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Are there reactions you've been disappointed in?

The problem is too complicated to be corrected in a day. The reactions from companies I see as some of the most unfortunate don't really get at the problem. If you rushed to say, "Okay, I'm donating to this one place and doing this one thing," that's not what people are asking for. [They're asking] what it is you're going to do to fix systemic racism.

Everybody is rushing to create a diversity and inclusion program and hit ratios. "By 2025 we want X amount of our staff

to be Y.” Diversity shouldn’t just be a goal that you meet by hitting a ratio. There needs to be a fundamental change in the mindset of the company.

What would you ask tech CEOs like Mark Zuckerberg or Tim Cook to do if you had the opportunity?

Systemic racism is endemic. Those massive companies are responsible for so many people. They should create very aggressive internal agendas to educate people on unconscious bias and other matters.

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What about CEOs of smaller companies who haven’t spoken out on issues like this before?

People turn to the government to drive who we are as a collective, but I believe companies have just as important a role in the world. When I think about why it was such an easy decision for me to put this at the top of my agenda, it’s because it’s the right thing to do. At the end of the day, people look for companies that are doing the right thing, not just for their customers but for society. People want to work for companies that have missions.

Indecision is a decision. Where business leaders for big and small companies are going to see pushback from staff or people they work with is if they don’t share where they stand on the topic. Saying nothing is not the thing to do in my opinion.

Then, immediately after you take a position, you need to explain how you’ll translate that to action. It’s okay to not have the answers, but you have to state your position and

outline a plan based on that position. Let people know what you're going to do and then execute and follow through on it.

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