

# You Know What to Do

Business leaders are among the most influential people in American society. They are educated, have deep competencies, and can mobilize enormous economic and human resources—when they choose to.




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Friday, May 30th, five days after the killing of George Floyd, I receive a copy of an email from a leader I respect greatly. When Fritz Francois, a gastroenterologist, scientist, and Chief Medical Officer at NYU Langone Health, transitioned from physician to senior executive, he was an avid student of leadership who expected the very best of himself. But this time it is I who became the student. Mail from Fritz Francois:

Colleagues: over the past 3 months we have been deeply involved in the care of COVID-19 patients who have presented with a chief complaint of “I can’t breathe”, and we responded regardless of age, race, gender, or religion...This week we saw a video with the same plea of “I can’t breathe” being uttered by George Floyd in a heart wrenching situation where we watched his life being taken away...This week I once again had to have a conversation with my own son about how to prepare himself whenever he steps out of the house so that he will make it back home safely; even if he is just going for a run in the neighborhood...This week we can not look away. As a healthcare system we can not pretend we don’t know the diagnosis.

Fritz urges his colleagues to be present for all the members of the hospital’s staff during this time and concludes with Martin Luther King, Jr.’s words, “In the end we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends.”

## It Could Have Been Me

I had intentionally not watched the video of George Floyd. Now I have and I understand why it hits so hard. Minute after minute, in the same frame, we see the faces of two men: one man, hands in his pockets, taking a life, the other taking his last breath. I write to Fritz.

### Mette Nørgaard:

“It is a heartbreaking video. The words are all too familiar, as is the senseless brutality. Thank you for letting your heart speak out loud in such a professional context. There is no place to hide for anyone reading your words.”

### Fritz Francois:

“It is indeed a very difficult moment in our history. It is not possible to read about what happened without being reminded of the accompanying images and haunting pleas



*Fritz Francois, gastroenterologist, researcher, Professor of Medicine, and Chief Medical Officer at NYU Langone Health.*

from a 46-year-old man. I am fully aware that it could have been me on the ground with a knee pressing down on my neck for eight minutes. I am fully aware that if we don’t address our system of justice, this could still happen to me or to my son on any given day.”

Contrary to Fritz Francois I know, this could never happen to me, a white woman. I write:

### Mette Nørgaard:

“I cannot fathom what it must be like to live with such awareness every day.”

### Fritz Francois:

The lack of such awareness can literally cost me my life. As such I have never had the luxury of not being fiercely conscious of the additional tax I must pay for the personal and professional journey I must take. Society needs to do better.

### Mette Nørgaard:

“Society does need to do better... but clearly you, with your MLK quote, also expect your friends to do better. Do you have time to talk?”

## The Silence of Our Friends

When we connect we speak about the cultural, economic, and political forces that underpin and amplify racism, and we talk about the silence of white people. For while I have the right to express myself on women’s issues (and consider women’s issues to also be men’s issues) I feel I lack psychological standing when it comes to black issues. It is not legitimate for me to speak up. “I don’t know what to do,” I say. Fritz’ answer is short and to the point, “Mette you know what to do.”

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He reminds me that business leaders, like the ones who participated in the one-year experience he was part of, are among the most influential people in American society. They are well educated, have deep competencies, and can mobilize enormous economic and human resources—when they choose to. In fact, he stresses, it is difficult to find a more powerful group than such leaders.

## A Demanding Study

Today I invite leaders to reflect, by unreservedly sharing my own ruminations. This has led to some profound and rewarding conversations with experienced executives from both parties.

At the same time I seek to become more aware of my own biases and to educate myself. Fritz and I continue our quick exchanges.

When I had read Ta-Nehisi Coates’ letter to his son titled *Between the World and Me*, Fritz recommended I continue with James Baldwin. When I had seen Ava DuVernay’s documentary *13th*, about the 13th amendment, he suggested Ibram X. Kendi’s opus *Stamped From the Beginning*.

It is an overwhelming study and I’m grateful to have such an experienced advisor. ■