I'm not going to revisit the well-covered outrage over Ken Fisher’s offensive remarks at the Tiburon conference. Instead, I'm going to propose how our advisory profession can do better. Time has come for change. Let’s take a hard look at the abolition of silence, the role technology can play, our values and identity as a profession and who we allow to lead us.

**Silence can be overcome**

Fisher was confused about the outrage that followed his remarks. He is reported to have made similar off-color remarks before in his speeches, which were met with no such a response. I’m as confused as Fisher as to why those in attendance stood by silently.

Not that I am looking to exonerate Fisher, but why didn’t any of his peers take him aside and say something years ago? Somebody agreed to have Fisher speak at the Tiburon conference. Why didn’t any one of the conference organizers know his past? Didn't they do their research? Perhaps there was nothing to find because his behavior was kept a secret.

To make meaningful progress as a profession, we have to call out people who we respect and admire if they are offenders, especially those who have power over us and who have more money, stature and clout than we do. We have to be willing to stand up to our coworkers, bosses, clients, vendors and colleagues. We can’t be afraid.

When injustice happens in silence, it persists because we allow it to fester within the code of our silence. We cannot become distracted or intimidated; our silence must be overcome.

Unlike how incidents like this are usually handled in the advisory profession, this issue became exposed when an insider, Alex Chalekian, posted a video about what he witnessed at the conference. His post had over 120,000 views within a few days. This was a private, off-the-record event where participants had to sign an NDA.

May this be a lesson to all of us: With free and always-available social media platforms, there is no safe haven for offenders. Social media gives us the power to break the silence that is holding us back as a profession.

**Technology as the agent of change**

Chip Roame, in his open letter to the financial services industry, expressed discontent over the speed and tenor of many of the comments on Twitter:

> Do not assume too quickly. Do not judge too quickly. Do not tell us that we must prioritize replying to journalists. Do not claim that we refused to comment (which is not true)... The industry’s issue will not be improved by a few people sending off uniformed [sic] tweets and emails, making further accusations.

Sorry, Chip, but I disagree.

Chalekian’s video was posted on October 9 at 2:18 AM. Roame published his letter on October 10 in the afternoon, almost a day and a half later. This is an eternity on social media. If you had a stock falling as fast as your reputation was, you would have put a stop-loss order on within a few hours.
Roame’s words reflect an old-fashioned way of looking at things. People communicate as fast as they can type nowadays – it’s not like the past when you had to leave a voicemail and wait for someone to call you back. People are reachable at any point during the day. How can you blame them for assuming that you were indifferent or were hoping they would just go away? If you didn’t have time to respond in depth right away, how hard would it have been to post even a simple, “We support diversity and apologize for the offensive comments made at our recent conference.”

Delaying your response made you look as guilty as Fisher.

Consider the damage that was done to both Fisher and Tiburon in a short amount of time. There’s never been a time in our profession where communication could happen so quickly. Let’s embrace technology as we make this change.

But it’s not just about social media. It’s not about creating diversity taskforces or writing length letters of apology after the fact. The response must be immediate and live. We have to be willing to stop the person in mid-sentence right then and there before these ideas are allowed to percolate in any public discussion.

**Values, leadership and our new identity**

Let’s think about how outsiders to our profession perceive us. There was Madoff, Wells Fargo, Enron, WorldCom (remember Bernard Ebbers?). Even if you can get past the outright fraud, look at what a demonstration we’re making for all the world to see – the sexism, arrogance and pushy salespeople. Look at what people are seeing on social media with the Fisher imbroglio: icons degrading humanity, advisors and journalists battling back.

And we’re asking them to trust us?

Does anyone bother to think what this looks like to an outsider? It’s such a shame for the hundreds of thousands of advisors who carry themselves with dignity, sensitivity, and class.

When leadership makes poor decisions, it destroys value for everyone involved in our line of work. It brings the whole profession down.

We need a new identity.

We are a profession that doesn’t know itself. We are confused about what we want to represent. We should think harder about the people we choose to represent us – at our conferences, professional associations and on our boards. Instead of just assuming someone is a worthy leader because of their success on paper, we should look harder at their character and their values as human beings. And let’s get more diversity at the podium instead of just selecting the same old speakers who are on some list. Conference planners, I’m talking to you.

My hope is that the future leaders of the financial services industry will rise up based upon who has the strongest values not just who has the best resume. I’m optimistic and full of hope.

**Sara’s upshot**

I am a mother of four biracial children. I have daughters. I sat there the other night putting my kids to bed, thinking of what they are going to encounter in this world. It scares me to think of what they may go through, that a day may come when they may be victims of this sordid way of thinking.

It is incumbent upon all of us – advisors, podcasters, writers, speakers, and everyone from the CEO to the administrative assistant – to step up and take action. Please follow my podcast [here](#). In the future I am going to be interviewing leaders with the intent to forge a new identity as a profession. I sincerely welcome your thoughts on APViewpoint. I also have started a new group called “Diversity at the Podium” on LinkedIn to encourage higher diversity in keynote speaking as well as equal pay. Please join [here](#); we welcome you to the discussion.

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