

**Keynote Address: "What Will You Do?"**  
**Delivered by Nzinga Shaw, CEO, Attack the Glass**

Good evening, everyone! It's a pleasure and honor to be here at the Georgia Minority Supplier Development Council annual conference, and especially to be speaking at such an inspiring venue—the National Center for Civil and Human Rights. What a fitting place to have this conversation about the future of supplier diversity and personal accountability in these pivotal times.

Today, I'm asking one central question: **What will you do?**

We're living in an era where fact seems like fiction, and fiction often masquerades as fact. It's easy to feel disoriented by the constant stream of information—whether through media, politics, or business. But the truth remains: **our actions, individually and collectively, matter.** Minority businesses like the ones represented here deserve the chance to compete equitably. We deserve a fair shot, not just as a form of inclusion, but as a crucial driver of economic progress in our communities and our nation.

As a Black woman entrepreneur, I made the difficult but rewarding decision to leave the safety of Corporate America to start my own business. My consultancy, **Attack the Glass, LLC** was born from a belief that human capital—particularly diverse human capital—is the most valuable asset any organization can possess. But let me tell you, entrepreneurship is no easy journey. Securing clients consistently, or even getting the opportunity to pitch for contracts, is a challenge I face every day. And I know many of you have faced similar challenges. But despite the obstacles, I push forward—because representation matters. We all know the power of seeing someone who looks like you at the table. For our businesses to grow, for us to thrive, we must first be **seen** and given the opportunity to compete.

Yet the responsibility doesn't just lie with those at the top; it lies with **each one of us.** Every person in this room has a role to play in moving the needle on supplier diversity. **What will you do?** Will you take personal accountability for creating change, or will you wait for someone else to do it?

Supplier diversity isn't a "nice-to-have" anymore; it's a must-have. Companies that don't prioritize diverse suppliers are not just missing out on innovation—they're

missing out on **sustainable growth**. Studies have shown time and time again that businesses with diverse suppliers are more adaptable, more innovative, and more reflective of the communities they serve.

But here's the reality: change doesn't happen just because we wish for it or because we know it's the right thing to do. **Change happens when we act.**

We are all standing on the shoulders of giants—trailblazers who fought for civil rights, economic equity, and a place at the table. Now it's our turn to be **the giants** for the next generation. It's our turn to fight for the uncharted future, not only for ourselves but for those who will come after us.

We are witnessing a troubling trend in the corporate world: the dismantling of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) programs. These initiatives were instituted to address systemic inequalities and foster inclusive workplaces. Their dismantling is not just a rollback of policies but a setback for progress and equity in our professional environments.

DEI programs are more than just buzzwords; they are essential to creating fair and productive workplaces where everyone, regardless of their background, can thrive. We must push back against these regressive steps and advocate for the continuation and strengthening of DEI initiatives. Our commitment to diversity and inclusion must be unwavering, and we should strive to build workplaces that reflect these values in every aspect.

### **What will you do?**

Next, I will address the recent lawsuit brought against the Fearless Fund, a venture capital firm dedicated to supporting Black women entrepreneurs, and the broader implications of this case for minority businesses across the country.

Let's be clear: less than 1% of Black women-owned businesses receive venture funding. The Fearless Fund was created to change that by investing in and empowering women of color entrepreneurs who are often overlooked by traditional funding avenues. However, this mission came under attack when **Ed Blum**, a conservative activist, filed a lawsuit through his organization, the American Alliance for Equal Rights, alleging that the Fearless Fund's **Strivers Grant Contest**, which provided \$20,000 grants to Black women entrepreneurs, was

discriminatory. In response, a federal appeals court ruled in favor of Blum, forcing the suspension of the grant contest. This was a devastating blow, not only for Fearless Fund, but for the countless Black women-owned businesses that rely on opportunities like these to survive and thrive in an environment that is often stacked against them.

The lawsuit comes on the heels of the U.S. Supreme Court decision to end affirmative action in college admissions, further fueling an onslaught of attacks on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs in corporate America. Companies like **Lowe's** and **John Deere** have felt pressure to alter or even dismantle their DEI initiatives, and Fearless Fund is just the latest casualty in this growing trend.

The fear behind these legal challenges is clear: when we empower marginalized groups, it challenges the status quo. The grant contest from Fearless Fund was about giving Black women, who are statistically the most underfunded demographic in entrepreneurship, a chance to compete in a marketplace that has historically excluded them. Ed Blum and those like him want to stop these initiatives, not because they threaten fairness, but because they threaten the power structures that benefit from the lack of equitable access.

Let me emphasize the magnitude of this: Ed Blum **succeeded in halting a program designed to uplift those who, due to systemic barriers, are seldom afforded a fair chance.**

But what does this mean for us, and what will we do?

The Fearless Fund lawsuit is a warning shot to all of us in this room who believe in creating opportunities for minority businesses. It's not just about the Strivers Grant; it's about a concerted effort to dismantle any initiative aimed at creating equity in a system that has been inequitable for far too long. This lawsuit is bigger than the Fearless Fund; it represents an attack on the very idea that Black businesses, minority businesses, **deserve** targeted support because they face unique barriers to entry. When fewer than 1% of Black women entrepreneurs are getting funded, programs like the Strivers Grant are not just important—they are necessary for leveling the playing field.

And make no mistake, this attack won't stop here. The lawsuit, as civil rights attorney **Ben Crump** noted, was settled to avoid setting a precedent that could open the floodgates to eliminating race-based funding altogether. By settling, the

Fearless Fund was able to protect the broader landscape of opportunities for minority-owned businesses, ensuring that race-based initiatives could still exist. But this isn't a permanent solution. The tide is turning, and we must ask ourselves: **what will we do** in response to this?

As business leaders, entrepreneurs, and allies, we cannot sit idly by. We must advocate for policies and programs that recognize the unique struggles faced by minority-owned businesses. This means taking a stand, not just within our companies but in the public square, and engaging politically. The upcoming Presidential election will be critical in determining the future of these initiatives. Every candidate should be addressing issues like economic prosperity, minority business support, and racial equity—not just in words, but in policy. Our vote, our voice, our **action** will decide the future of supplier diversity and minority business inclusion.

In these times of conflict, it is essential to remember our shared humanity. Political and ideological differences must not overshadow the basic human rights to safety, security, and dignity. We must work towards dialogue, understanding, and solutions that prioritize peace and the well-being of all affected communities.

In the face of these challenges, it is easy to feel overwhelmed and powerless. However, it is precisely in these moments of contention that our resolve to create good in the world must be strongest.

Promote Justice and Accountability. Stand up against abuse and support survivors. Advocate for stronger protections and hold abusers accountable.

Champion Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. Fight against the dismantling of DEI programs. Support initiatives that foster inclusive and equitable environments in all spheres of life.

Advocate for Peace and Humanity. Work towards peaceful solutions in conflict zones. Support humanitarian efforts and stand in solidarity with those affected by violence.

We are living in one of the most challenging days and times, where everything going on around us is documented on social media and privacy is a thing of the past. Some of us only have “selfie” esteem when what we need is self-esteem. We

are worried about having more “likes” than “love,” we are consumed by what’s going down in the DM, and desperate for “followers” instead of “friends.” Some select a place of employment based on the public popularity of the brand, and the size of the budget, not knowing if there will be managers that are rooting for their success, or colleagues that want to take the professional journey *with* them.

Although we are living in contentious times, we are not without hope or agency. Each of us has the power to contribute to a more just, inclusive, and peaceful world. Let us channel our frustration and anger into positive action. Let us be the change-makers, the advocates, and the allies that our world so desperately needs.

Inclusivity is at the heart of purposeful leadership. It is not just a buzzword or a box to tick; it is a fundamental principle that drives innovation, engagement, and resilience. Inclusive leaders create environments where diverse perspectives are not only welcomed but actively sought out and valued.

Research consistently shows that diverse teams outperform homogeneous ones. When people from different backgrounds, cultures, and experiences come together, they bring a wealth of ideas and solutions that drive creativity and problem-solving. Inclusive leaders recognize this and work tirelessly to build diverse teams and cultivate a sense of belonging.

But inclusivity goes beyond diversity. It is about equity and ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to contribute and succeed. Purposeful inclusive leaders challenge systemic barriers and biases, champion equal opportunities, and create pathways for underrepresented groups.

As we chart the course for the future of leadership, it is essential to translate these principles into action. Here are some practical steps for cultivating purposeful inclusive leadership:

**Self-Awareness and Continuous Learning:** Inclusive leaders start with themselves. They are self-aware and committed to continuous learning. This means reflecting on their own biases, seeking out diverse perspectives, and being open to feedback. It also involves staying informed about social and cultural issues and understanding their impact on the organization and its stakeholders.

**Building Diverse Teams:** Actively seek to build diverse teams. This means going beyond traditional recruitment methods and looking for talent in unconventional places. It also involves creating an inclusive hiring process that mitigates bias and ensures equal opportunities for all candidates.

**Fostering an Inclusive Culture:** Create a culture where everyone feels valued and included. This involves setting clear expectations for behavior, providing training on inclusivity, and establishing mechanisms for addressing discrimination and bias. It also means celebrating diversity and creating spaces where different voices can be heard.

**Leading with Empathy:** Purposeful leaders lead with empathy. They take the time to understand the experiences and perspectives of their team members and show genuine concern for their well-being. This involves active listening, being approachable, and creating a supportive work environment.

**Aligning Purpose with Action:** Ensure that your organization's purpose is reflected in its actions. This means integrating social and environmental considerations into decision-making, setting clear goals for diversity and inclusion, and holding yourself and your organization accountable for progress.

**Advocating for Change:** Use your platform and influence to advocate for broader societal change. This means speaking out on social issues, supporting policies that promote equity and inclusion, and collaborating with other organizations to drive collective impact.

As we look to the future, it is clear that the evolution of purposeful inclusive leadership is not just a trend but a necessity. The challenges we face—whether social, environmental, or economic—require leaders who are not only capable but also compassionate and committed to making a difference.

Purposeful inclusive leaders have the power to transform organizations, drive innovation, and create a more equitable and sustainable world. But this requires courage, vision, and a relentless commitment to doing what is right, even when it is difficult.

In closing, I want to reiterate that the responsibility lies with each of us. If we do nothing, we allow forces like Ed Blum to roll back decades of progress. We must commit to **doing**—whether that's mentoring young minority entrepreneurs,

advocating for inclusive procurement policies, or simply voting for candidates who prioritize our communities' needs.

So again, I ask you: **What will you do?**

Will you mentor a young entrepreneur who just needs guidance? Will you commit to ensuring that minority businesses have the same access and opportunities as anyone else?

There's another critical responsibility we must not ignore—our role as **engaged citizens**. We are nearing an important crossroads with the upcoming Presidential election. Regardless of where you stand politically, this election matters. Issues like immigration, health care, economic prosperity, and education are all on the line. And as business owners, these are issues that affect **every single one of us**.

It's not just about casting your vote; it's about holding our leaders accountable to address the issues that impact our communities. Candidates must be pushed to have clear, actionable plans for supporting minority businesses, promoting economic equity, and creating fair opportunities for all. We cannot afford to sit on the sidelines and let someone else dictate the future of our communities.

So, I ask again: **What will you do?** Will you vote? Will you use your voice to ensure that the issues we care about—like supplier diversity—are part of the national conversation?

In these "interesting times" where the lines between fact and fiction blur, **personal accountability** is our strongest weapon. We cannot afford complacency. Each of us must be willing to do the work, to show up, to fight for our place at the table, and to demand fairness for minority businesses.

This is our time to act. **What will you do?** Will you be part of the solution? Thank you.