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A Helping Hand: 'MedTech Color' Aims To Move Minorities From Shop Floor To Executive Suite

by [Shawn M. Schmitt](#)

Industry veteran Kwame Ulmer has cobbled together a new group to help address perceived racial disparities at device firms. "MedTech Color" has already attracted attention from heavy-hitters Johnson & Johnson, Medtronic, 3M and Danaher, as well as industry advocacy group AdvaMed.

When Kwame Ulmer has visited various medical device companies over the years, he couldn't help but notice that people in top positions at those firms typically didn't look like him.

However, "when I'd go to manufacturing facilities, I would consistently see people of color on the shop floor," said Ulmer, an industry expert, and African-American, who has worked for both device-makers and US FDA.

"Now, when I say 'the shop floor,' I mean the people who are actually making the devices – so, generally, the lowest-paid people are black and brown people," he told *Medtech Insight*. "But when I would meet with the executives, they would look much different. They'd be middle-aged, Caucasian men.

"That always struck a chord with me – and not in a good way – because I thought there would be more diversity up and down the ranks, but there isn't," Ulmer added. "This has been consistent over my 15-year career in medtech."

After spending 12 years in FDA's Office of Device Evaluation (he left in 2014), Ulmer was a regulatory affairs director for Danaher Corp. and a quality/regulatory executive at dental implant-maker Implant Direct before striking out on his own, making [angel investments](#) in early-stage medtech companies.

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Because of those disparities, Ulmer created "MedTech Color," a group whose aim is to move more minorities from the shop floor to the executive suite. MedTech Color held its first in-person meeting at AdvaMed's Medtech Conference in San Jose, Calif., in August.

"The first step for us as a group was to get together at a luncheon during the AdvaMed meeting to talk about how we could move the needle, but that luncheon went on for so long that it turned into a dinner," Ulmer said. "We got sponsorship from Danaher and [recruiting firm] Korn Ferry for the meeting; those firms really facilitated the 15 executives coming together."

During the dinner, Ulmer discovered that others had similar experiences with racial disparity at device firms.

"We went around the dinner table, and everyone had different stories, but they were consistent in noticing issues like lack of representation" for minorities, he said. "People opened up in really amazing ways and were very candid."

But MedTech Color isn't only looking to move people of color up the corporate ladder. It also wants to increase the number of minorities that serve on the board of directors at device firms, as well as push more people of color to found medtech companies.

The group has three core objectives. "The first is to build community, to build out this network of people of color who are in medtech," Ulmer said. "The second is to add value to the ecosystem – how do we support each other so we're actually giving talks on pertinent issues in medtech? And the third objective is increasing the number of people of color who enter and stay in medtech."

MedTech Color has devised some potential short-term goals, including "publishing a list of executives of color in medtech to gain better visibility of who is in this community," Ulmer said. Another idea is to "create a speakers bureau where people could easily access thought leaders who happen to be thought leaders of color."

The group also wants to build formal partnerships with device manufacturers and industry advocate organizations such as AdvaMed, which Ulmer said has expressed interest in working with MedTech Color.



Kwame Ulmer

Thanks to its [Women's Executive Network](#) (WEN), which aims to put more women in executive roles, "AdvaMed already has a great track record of supporting gender diversity," Ulmer said, and he's hoping that AdvaMed's involvement will do the same for people of color. "It's a little early, but over the coming months I think we'll get more traction with AdvaMed."

As for building relationships with device-makers, MedTech Color is well on its way. "Johnson & Johnson has the largest number of executives in MedTech Color's planning group," Ulmer said. "J&J is really interested in this topic." Executives from Medtronic and 3M also were part of the August dinner meeting.

What MedTech Color won't be doing, though, is creating training programs for device-makers looking to help people of color rise through the ranks.

"But what we may develop is some sort of virtual network of peers who can serve as sponsors across companies, so if someone is stuck at a particular company, they have an outlet. They're visible and can be sponsored, provided that they're sponsor-ready, in a more accelerated fashion," Ulmer said.

"Another big, bold idea we're discussing is leveraging a virtual platform so we can form an angel network to fund companies that have founders of color," he said. "So, I would say we're thinking less tactical and more strategic. But if we do something tactical, we want it to be extremely scalable with the ability to impact a lot of people very quickly."

For the foreseeable future, MedTech Color will hold a series of virtual planning meetings. Its next in-person gettogether will probably be at AdvaMed's next annual conference in September 2018.

To join the group, visit [MedTech Color on LinkedIn](#) or send an email to Ulmer at Kwame.Ulmer@MedTechColor.com.

From the editors of The Gray Sheet