



Ten Lessons for Talking About Race, Racism and Racial Justice

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1. Consider Audience and Goals. In any communications strategy, we should start with who we’re trying to reach and what we want them to do. In engaging on topics around race, racism, and racial justice, this is particularly important. We all know that people throughout the country are in very different places when it comes to their thinking about race. In strategizing about audience, the goal should be to both energize the base and speak to persuadables as well. A few questions to consider:

Who are you hoping to influence?	Narrowing down your target audience helps to refine your strategy.
What do you want them to do?	Determine the appropriate action for your strategy. Sometimes you may have direct access to decision makers and are working to change their minds. Other times you may have access to other people who influence the decision makers.
What do you know about their current thinking?	From public opinion research, social media scans, their own words, etc.
What do you want to change about that?	Consider the change in thinking that needs to happen to cause action.
Who do they listen to?	Identify the media they consume and the people who are likely to influence their thinking. This may be an opportunity to reach out to partners and allies to serve as spokespeople if they might carry more weight with certain audiences.

2. Know the counter narrative. Some themes consistently emerge in conversations about race, particularly from those who do not want to talk about unequal opportunity or the existence of racism. It’s important to examine these conversations and become familiar with these themes. The point in doing this is not to argue against each theme point by point, but to understand what stories are happening in people’s heads when we’re trying to start a productive conversation. A few common themes include:

- ▶ The idea that racism is “largely” over, dying out over time.
- ▶ People of color are obsessed with race.

- ▶ Alleging discrimination is itself racist and divisive.
- ▶ Claiming discrimination is “playing the race card,” opportunistic, hypocritical demagoguery.
- ▶ Civil rights are a crutch for those who lack merit or drive.

3. Lead with shared values: Opportunity, Community, Equality

Starting with values that matter to most Americans can help audiences to “hear” your messages more effectively than do dry facts or emotional rhetoric. Encouraging people to think about shared values encourages aspirational, hopeful thinking – a better place to start when entering tough conversations than with fear or anxiety.

4. Use values as a bridge, not a bypass. Opening conversations with values like opportunity helps to emphasize society’s role in affording a fair chance to everyone. But starting conversations here does not mean avoiding discussions of race. We suggest bridging from shared values to the roles of racial equity and inclusion in fulfilling those values for all. Doing so can move audiences into a frame of mind that is more solution-oriented and less mired in skepticism about the continued existence of discrimination.

5. Be rigorously solution-oriented and forward-looking. After laying the groundwork for how the problem has developed, it’s key to move quickly to solutions. Some people who understand that unequal opportunity exists may also believe that nothing can be done about it, leading to “compassion fatigue” and inaction. Wherever possible, link a description of the problem to a clear, positive solution and action.

6. Talk about the systemic obstacles to equal opportunity and equal justice. Too often our culture views social problems through an individual lens – what did a person do to “deserve” his or her specific condition or circumstance? But we know that history, policies, culture and many other factors beyond individual choices have gotten us to where we are today.

In examples where we’re hoping to show the existence of discrimination or racism by pointing out racial disparities, it’s particularly important to tell a full story that links cause (history) and effect (disparities). Without this important link, audiences can walk away believing that our healthcare, criminal justice or educational systems work fine and therefore differing outcomes exist because people of color are doing something wrong.

It’s important to note that telling a more complete and systemic story does not necessitate delving into a full history of racism in our country, which is not persuasive to many audiences. Instead, try to find a balance between giving enough background to show how we’ve gotten to where we are and explaining every detail of oppression in our nation’s history.

7. Be explicit between the different causes of racial vs. socioeconomic disparities. We need to make a case that racism is a distinct problem from poverty, high-crime neighborhoods or challenged educational systems do. They are interrelated, to be sure, but study after study show that even after adjusting for socio-economic factors, racial disparities persist.

8. Describe how racial bias and discrimination hold us all back. In addition to showing how discrimination and unequal opportunity harm people of color, it's important to explain how systemic biases prevent us from achieving our full potential as a country. We can never truly become a land of opportunity while we allow racial inequity to persist. And ensuring equal opportunity for all is in our shared economic and societal interest. In fact, eight-in-ten Americans believe that society functions better when all groups have an equal chance in life.¹

Research also shows that people are more likely to acknowledge that discrimination against other groups is a problem – and want to do something about it - if they themselves have experienced it. And most people have at some point felt on the “outside” or that they were unfairly excluded from something, and six-in-ten report that they’ve experienced discrimination based on race, ethnicity, economic status, gender, sexual orientation, religious beliefs, or accent.² Reminding people of this feeling can help them think about what racism and oppression really mean for others as well as themselves.

9. Acknowledge the progress we’ve made. Doing so helps persuade skeptical audiences to lower their defenses and have a reasoned discussion rooted in nuanced reality rather than rhetoric. It’s not necessary to praise everything about our country or our history, but giving a nod to progress may remind people of some things they are proud of in our history, and then motivate them to want to continue that legacy.

10. Embrace and communicate our racial and ethnic diversity. Avoid black-white or other binary descriptions of racial equity, recognizing that different people and communities encounter differing types of stereotypes and discrimination based on diverse and intersectional identities. This may mean, for example, explaining the sovereign status of tribal nations, the unique challenges posed by treaty violations, and the specific solutions that are needed.

¹ The Opportunity Agenda/Langer Associates. *The Opportunity Survey*, 2014.

² Ibid.

Applying the Lessons

VPSA: Value, Problem, Solution, Action.

One useful approach to tying these lessons together is to structure communications around a **Value, Problem, Solution, and Action**, meaning that each message contains these four key components: Values (why the audience should care, and how they will connect the issue to themselves), Problem (framed as a threat to the shared values we have just invoked), Solution (to avoid issue fatigue), and Action (a concrete ask of the audience, to ensure engagement and movement).

EXAMPLE:

Value

To work for all of us, our justice system depends on equal treatment and investigations based on evidence, not stereotypes or bias.

Problem

But many communities continue to experience racial profiling, where members are singled out only because of what they look like. In fact, a two-year study showed that of 13,566 officer-initiated traffic stops in a Midwestern city revealed that minority drivers were stopped at a higher rate than whites and were also searched for contraband at a higher rate than their white counterparts. Yet, officers were no more likely to find contraband on minority motorists than white motorists. Such practices practice erode community trust in police, making the goal of true community safety more difficult to achieve.

Solution

We need shared databases on police interactions with the public that show who police are stopping, arresting and why. These kinds of databases encourage transparency and trust and help police strategize on how to improve their work. They also help communities get a clear picture of police interactions in the community.

Action

Urge your local police department to join police from around the country and participate in these important shared databases.

EXAMPLE:

Value

We're a better country when we make sure everyone has a chance to meet his or her potential. We say we're a country founded on the ideals of opportunity and equality and we have a real responsibility to live up to those values. Racism is a particular affront to our values and we need to do everything in our power to end it.

Problem

Yet we know that racism persists, and that its effects can be devastating. For instance, African-American pregnant women are two to three times more likely to experience premature birth and three times more likely to give birth to a low birth weight infant. This disparity persists even after controlling for factors, such as low income, low education, and alcohol and tobacco use. To explain these persistent differences, researchers now say that it's likely the chronic stress of racism that negatively affects the body's hormonal levels and increasing the likelihood of premature birth and low birth weights.

Solution

We all have a responsibility to examine the causes and effects of racism in our country. We have to educate ourselves and learn how to talk about it with those around us. While we've made some important progress in decreasing discrimination and racism, we can't pretend we've moved beyond it completely.

Action

Join a racial justice campaign near you.

EXAMPLE:**Value**

Our country was founded on the idea we're all created equal and that all of us are entitled to the chance to reach our full potential. Of course, those words did not apply to everyone at the start, but over time we've expanded and strengthened their meaning.

Problem

Discrimination threatens those ideas, holding people back from pursuing their dreams.

Solution

Government has a responsibility to ensure equal opportunity and freedom from discrimination, even if that discrimination is subtle. That requires watching how policies play out on the ground. Virtually all of us have been part of a family with kids, some are single parents, and many of us will face disabilities as we age.

Action

Support strong laws that knock down arbitrary and subtle barriers to equal access that any of us might face.

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