

## Talking About Race – Message Advice

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A workgroup of the Our Story Advisory Committee spent some time earlier this year looking at what we have learned from opinion research when we communicate about race. Our goal was to identify the most effective ways to communicate about strategic racism, structural racism and racial disparities. We were looking for advice that would both:

- 1) Motivate people who understand the imperative of championing racial justice;
- 2) Move people who are concerned about racism but have questions about why and to what extent it continues to be a problem.

Our operating assumption in coming to this work is that we need to talk about race explicitly, which has not always been practice. We need to talk about race because of the harsh impact of racism, the aggressive use of race to divide us, and the imperative of championing racial justice. We also understand that there are challenges in talking about race as measured by what's broadly popular in polling, including with some constituencies that support progressive issues but are conflicted about how to think about race. Our goal is to provide the best advice we can now and to continue to strengthen our understanding of the most effective ways to communicate about race as we learn from future research and practice.

Below we address communicating about three different types of racism:

- 1) *Strategic racism*, often called dog-whistle racism or coded racism, is the use of race by the powerful to divide people who have common interests in opposition to the powerful. Today, the dog-whistle has been replaced by a Twitter bullhorn.
- 2) *Racial disparities* are the differences in outcomes and conditions between people of different races. Communicators often describe these to emphasize that a problem is more acute among communities of color.
- 3) *Structural racism*: The racial barriers and injustices embedded in our institutions, our policies and our culture. Structural racism has deep historic roots, setting in place unjust policies based on race that magnify and reverberate through time and are root causes of racial disparities.

The importance of solution-oriented messaging: Across the research, a key finding is that messages are more likely to be effective if they are solution oriented, particularly if measures of effectiveness are support for progressive issues and willingness to take action. Describing problems without a solution reinforces cynicism and despair. Focusing on solutions is essential to overcome the belief the powerful can be defeated or that change is possible.

A good way to do that is by telling stories about successful change. Talking about how people came together to make change in the past, and/or are doing so successfully now, can be a powerful tool to overcome despair and cynicism.

Strategic racism and the Race Class Narrative: In 2018, Demos released the findings of an extensive research project aimed at communicating about strategic racism. The research was conducted by ASO Communications (principal is Anat Shenker-Osorio) and a team at Lake Research Partners. Titled the Race Class Narrative (RCN), the research found a short narrative that has a strong appeal to both base and persuadable constituents. Using the RCN was also found to increase support for issues. The RCN was presented to many progressive organizations and is being used in issue and electoral communications.

You can find the complete RCN messaging recommendation report [here](#). Lake Research summarized its four key components as:

1. Start with a values-based aspiration that introduces race in an inclusive way;
2. Define the problem as people being divided;
3. Put the blame on those who would divide us so they can benefit. We must have an explanation of how they gain from dividing us for this to be more widely believed;
4. Then appeal to unity as a solution across races to benefit a policy agenda. *And put the weight of the message here.*

An example, from the original RCN research is:

1. “No matter where we come from or what our color, most of us work hard for our families.
2. “But today, certain politicians and their greedy lobbyists hurt everyone by handing kickbacks to the rich, defunding our schools, and threatening our seniors with cuts to Medicare and Social Security.
3. “Then they turn around and point the finger for our hard times at poor families, Black people and new immigrants.
4. “We need to join together with people from all walks of life to fight for our future, just like we won better wages, safer workplaces, and civil rights in our past. By joining together, we can elect new leaders who work for all of us, not just the wealthy few.”

*A note on introducing a partisan frame*: Lake Research Partners advises that the RCN, and discussions of race generally, are more polarizing, and less able to attract persuadables, when there is a partisan frame. For example:

- “Republicans divide us” is more polarizing than “politicians divide us.”
- The RCN is more effective when applied to issues and ballot initiatives than to candidates, with persuadable voters.

Racial Disparities: We often want to point out the racial disparities that people of color are more likely to experience when we describe a problem. For example, “Wages are low, particularly for Black and Hispanic people.” However, doing so can reinforce existing racial prejudices as people may fill in the reasons with their own biases rather than thinking of systemic causes and solutions.

For that reason, when talking about unequal outcomes always describe the barriers that cause them, so that people don’t fill in the explanation with their own prejudices. Barriers are a strong metaphor because they are put up by people and by social practice – they are not natural. For example:

- “Wages are even lower – due to discrimination in hiring, underfunded schools and a biased criminal justice system – for Black and Hispanic people.”

Better still, put this in a solution way:

- “We need to break down the barriers – hiring discrimination, underfunded schools, biased criminal justice – that hold down wages and opportunity for Blacks and Latinos.”

Still a better approach is to tell a story that combines aspirations, solutions and success:

1. Lead with values and common purpose, introducing race in an inclusive way.
2. Talk about breaking down systemic barriers so you are describing unequal outcomes in solution terms, including the choice to break down barriers. Show that solutions can work.
3. Return to an aspirational conclusion.

An example would be:

1. “Every working person should be paid enough to care for and support their families, no matter what color we are or where we come from.
2. “We need to raise wages for all working people and that includes deciding to break down barriers like hiring discrimination, underfunded schools and a biased criminal justice that hold down wages and opportunity even more for Black and Hispanic people. We’ve learned from steps we’ve taken before that when we take measures like raising the minimum wage to \$15 or provide the funding for schools our kids need to succeed, wages and opportunities both rise.
3. “When we rewrite the rules so all working people, White, Black and Brown, men and women, get paid enough to live a decent life, our spending creates jobs on Main Streets and helps all our communities thrive.”

Here is another example on an issue with a long history of unequal outcomes:

1. “When it comes to having a child, no matter who we are or where we come from, all of us want a healthy pregnancy and baby.
2. “We know from lots of experience that when moms get nutritious food and quality health care, they are much more likely to have a healthy baby. Which is why we are working to take down the barriers that today result in babies born to Black women being more likely to not reach their first birthday. Choosing which moms get the food and care they need for a healthy baby is a choice we don’t need to make.
3. “By joining together, we can be sure that all women, Black, Brown and White, have a healthy pregnancy and baby.”

Structural racism: Communicating effectively around structural racism is challenging, as you can see from the research review below. The research shows that other than among African Americans, structural racism is not widely recognized. And that even among African Americans, describing structural racism can be deflating. However, since structural racism is a fundamental problem in our society, we need to find the most effective way to communicate about it. Here I suggest an approach that aims at addressing these issues.

The structure is:

1. Values-based, aspirational beginning that introduces race in an inclusive way;
2. Explain structural racism in concrete terms, referring to history and naming who is responsible. Research (not included in the summary below) found that explaining more is helpful;
3. Propose solutions in a positive way, that conveys success;
4. Value-based, aspirational conclusion.

Here are two examples:

1. "Every family — Black, White and Brown — should have the security of some savings, whether to fall back on in times of an emergency, to put down a deposit on a house or help start a small business.
2. "That's tough for a lot of Americans today and because of our history much tougher for African Americans. It's not just that slavery started Black people off without anything, it's a long history of discrimination, like our government denying low-cost mortgages to Black communities while providing them to White communities in the 1930s. Or Black veterans not being able to take advantage of the GI bill to pay for college, because colleges wouldn't admit them.
3. "Today, we need to take steps to assure that every American family – no matter what color they are – has financial security. When we do that, it's simple fairness to take specific measures that assure Black families have the opportunity to save or buy a house or afford college. We know we can do this; we've made real progress despite all the challenges in expanding opportunity, but we can't stop now.
4. "When all of us – Black, Brown and White – can fully participate in our economy, we will build thriving communities across America."

Another example:

1. "Equal justice for all, no matter where you come from or what color you are, is a fundamental American value,
2. "but for generations our criminal justice system discriminated against African Americans. Today, videos of Black men being killed by police just because they were driving or selling cigarettes has helped more and more White Americans understand what's been happening for a long time. No mom or dad should have to fear that their child will be profiled or harmed, and their future ruined, because of the color of their skin.
3. "Now, people of all races, Republicans and Democrats are coming together to right this long-time wrong. In response, we are beginning to see cities, states and even Congress, take down barriers like cash bail, high fines and long criminal sentences for non-violent offenses that were set up to discriminate against Blacks but continue to destroy the futures of millions of Americans, White, Brown and Black.
4. "The fight for equal justice in America is everyone's fight, a fight for thriving families and communities across our nation."

*Research on structural racism:* We don't know how well the approach I've suggested will work in overcoming some of the challenges identified in communicating about strategic racism. New research is ongoing and when results are available, I will share them. Here's a look at some of the challenges identified by research:

- When asked what is a bigger problem, discrimination "built into laws and institutions" or "based on the prejudice of individuals," all racial groups chose "individuals," although among Blacks it was by a closer margin, 48% to 40%. Among Hispanics and Whites, "individuals" was the choice by at least two-to-one.
- When people were asked to rank some specific systems for why Blacks "have a harder time getting ahead than Whites," Blacks rate structural issues more highly than Whites:

	Blacks	Whites
Lower quality schools	75%	53%
Racial discrimination	70%	36%
Lack of jobs	66%	45%

- A slight majority of all people polled (52%), agreed that “the criminal justice system unfairly targets Black people,” with strong agreement among base constituencies (Black; Hispanic; millennial women).
- A study by Topos tested three approaches: Successful Collective Action by Communities of Color, Racial Disparities and Structural Racism Defined. Among White people, all three message approaches have beneficial outcomes – increases in belief that government should do more to solve problems; support for increased investment in schools, bridges and other needs; and desire to continue making changes to give blacks equal opportunities with whites. Among marginalized people of color, the Collective Action story is the strongest because it overcomes this audience’s principal objection – that change is hard and unlikely. It makes strong gains in inspiring lower income people of color that change can happen. The Disparities message doesn’t shift opinion among people of color – for or against – any of the key indicator questions. The Structural Racism message, problematically, further distances people of color from government, likely reinforcing their experience with neglectful government and rigged structures.
- The qualitative work done in the initial stages of the RCN project explored messages around structural racism but found that the lack of a clear villain made it very hard for people to accept the story being told. The RCN message, by contrast, identified the powerful forces responsible.
- An unpublished study compared a color-blind populist message to the RCN and to a message around structural racism, in communicating to diverse audiences of people of color. The study affirmed the effectiveness of the RCN. It also found that only among African Americans was there a high level of agreement about structural racism. Furthermore, the structural racism message reduced belief that change was possible among all racial groups in the study.