

6. COMMUNICATE AND ACT WITH URGENCY

RACIAL EQUITY IS A LONG TERM GOAL, and for many, it may feel like an overwhelming vision to achieve. What we have seen, however, is when there are topics that we feel urgent about and prioritize action for, significant changes can take place quickly. From marriage equality to recycling, the use of a shared vision with specific priorities and strategic actions and organizing has resulted in great success unimaginable before changes were made. We must do the same when it comes to racial equity.

Communicating with urgency will be critical to maintain motivation and inspiration to work collectively toward racial equity objectives. In jurisdictions with centralized power held by the executive, such as in strong-mayor city governments, leadership can influence stakeholders to commit to do their part to achieve equity. In Madison, WI, for example, which is a jurisdiction with a mayor-council government, executive leadership plays a significant role in the progress of racial equity strategies. Mayor Paul Soglin, who was active in the Civil Rights movement, has been very vocal about racial equity in Madison and stresses the importance of implementing equity strategies and dedicating staff time in every department city-wide. Staff in Madison believe that building an initiative to the same scale and urgency without top level leadership support would have been much more difficult. Similarly, a key factor in the progress Saint Paul has made in building capacity around racial equity is Mayor Chris Coleman's leadership. With a strong-mayor system of governance, Mayor Coleman has

been able to make racial equity a priority and implement that priority city-wide.

As described in Section 4 (Using Data and Metrics), data on racial disparities can be incredibly useful for motivating action and inspiring a sense of urgency. In Multnomah County, Oregon, for example, local officials launched its Health Equity Initiative in the wake of a report on racial and ethnic health disparities in the county (APHA report). The same report helped to motivate action at the city level in Portland. In Fairfax County, equity leaders have found that data are useful for bridging communication across departments that have very different cultures and language.

In building a partnership between Human Services and the Planning Department to build an Equitable Growth Model, Strategic Project Manager Karen Shaban learned:

“The planners and developers have a whole different set of language than we have in Human Services, so even to bridge and come up with common language within the same government is challenging. Data can provide a foundation to start the conversation.”

It is important to consider carefully how to communicate urgency among those who may not yet be fully invested in racial equity as a priority for their work. Research by the Center for Social Inclusion (CSI) suggests that using messages that explicitly evoke race rather than using “color-blind” frames is more effective for garnering support for equity-promoting policies (CSI). Crafting such messages requires

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an understanding of how framing works in shaping people’s interpretation of language. “Frames” are networks of association we use to interpret information—filters that help us make sense of the world. These networks, or unconscious thought processes, shape not just what we think, but how we think. People tend to reject facts that do not fit within their preexisting frames. For example, there are more white women on welfare than black women, but people will reject this fact as untrue because it does not fit their idea of who a welfare recipient is. People can also carry multiple frames that are sometimes linked and sometimes contradictory. For example, some social security recipients vote against social spending. Framing is a long-term project because people must receive frames in multiple forms and over time to actually shift their associations.

Talking about race in a productive way, then, requires understanding what frames people carry and what kind of messages will be received positively given those frames. CSI suggests that to understand how race is triggered cognitively in the messages that we hear in the media and in the public narratives, two key components have to be considered: The first is implicit bias, described in greater detail in section 1 of this toolkit. The second critical concept is “symbolic racism,” coined by social scientists Sears and McConahay in 1973 to describe and measure a new version of racism—the images and code words used, sometimes implicitly and sometimes explicitly, to exploit unconscious racial bias.

Symbolic racism is used to trigger the unconscious racism among “the middle”—the people we often need support from on critical policies like healthcare and financial reform. This combination of symbolic racism and implicit bias is how “dog whistle politics” works and how messages trigger racism (see *Dog Whistle Politics* by Ian Haney Lopez on the subject).

Experience shows that these tacit appeals work when they manipulate the unconscious fears of viewers, but only so long as the message is not explicit. The coining of the term “welfare queen” during Ronald Reagan’s presidential campaign is an example of dog whistle politics in action. The term has been used to refer to black women as the “takers” of society even though white women were the primary beneficiaries.

It’s more than just talk—you need to ACT.

AFFIRM

- 1. Start with the heart.** The health of our children, families, and loved ones depends on the environments in which we live.
- 2. Tell us how we got here in simple terms.** For decades, low income communities of color have been the dumping grounds for environmental hazards.

COUNTER

- 3. Explain “shared fate” in racially-explicit terms.** People of all races want to live in clean environments with decent housing, good jobs, and high-quality schools.
- 4. Take on race directly.** Having access to neighborhoods that support success shouldn’t be determined by your race.

TRANSFORM

- 5. Reframe winners and losers.** Corporations that contaminate our environments need to be held accountable. For our collective good, we need to value the quality of all of our neighborhoods above the profits for a few.
- 6. End with heart and a solution.** Join me in supporting legislation that will bring accountability to corporations. They need to pay their fair share so that all of us can have healthy environments in our communities.

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Eduardo Bonilla Silva has developed the following list of “race frames,” which help to shine light on how people tend to think about race in contemporary American society. Using this understanding as a foundation, we can begin to develop messages that counter these frames in ways that might be accepted rather than provoke defensiveness. These “race frames” include:

1. **Racism and racial inequality are things of the past since “white people are doing worse than people of color”;**
2. **Disparities caused by culture/behavior: “Poor Black and Latino youth don’t do well in school because their families don’t value education”;**
3. **Disparities are inevitable and/or natural: “Some group has to be at the bottom” or “Self-Segregation”;**
4. **Programs helping people of color are unfair to whites: a.k.a. reverse discrimination.**

In response to these common race frames and based on their research to test effective messages, CSI has developed the “ACT: Affirm, Counter, Transform” framework for crafting effective communication strategies that help bring others on board with racial equity goals without triggering further bias and resistance (see sidebar).

In implementing a racial equity strategy, a few additional concepts may be helpful in bringing each of the previous areas of focus together, as outlined in the following section.

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