



## Ten Lessons for Talking About Race, Racism and Racial Justice

February 2017

As we strive to improve conversations about race, racism and racial justice in this country, the environment in which we're speaking seems to be constantly shifting. Yet, these conversations are more important than ever. We've put together some advice on finding entry points based on research, experience, and the input of partners from around the country. This is by no means a complete list, but it is a starting point for moving these discussions forward.

**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 persuade the undecided. 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 audience and 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 allies to serve as spokespeople if they might carry more weight with certain audiences.

**2. Know the counter narratives.** 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 try to start a productive conversation. A few common themes include:

- The idea that racism is “largely” over or 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.
- If we can address class inequality, racial inequity will take care of itself.
- Racism will always be with us, so it's a waste of time to talk about it.

### **3. Lead with shared values: Opportunity, Community, Equity**

Starting with values that matter to your audience can help people to “hear” your messages more effectively than dry facts or emotional rhetoric would. 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.

#### **Sample language:**

*Sample 1: To work for all of us, the people responsible for our justice system have to be resolute in their commitment to equal treatment and investigations based on evidence, not stereotypes or bias. But too often, police departments use racial profiling, which is singling people out because of their race or accent, instead of based on evidence of wrongdoing. That's against our national values, it endangers our young people, and it reduces public safety. We need to ensure that law enforcement officials are held to the constitutional standards we value as Americans—protecting public safety and the rights of all.*

*Sample 2: We're a better country when we make sure everyone has a chance to meet his or her full 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. Discrimination based on race is contrary to our values and we need to do everything in our power to end it.*

#### **Example:**

*“Let us be humble and do the difficult work of finding ways to collaborate and cooperate with those whose political affiliations may differ from ours.*

*But let us never, ever, surrender, forfeit, or retreat from our core values, our fundamental commitments to justice over prejudice; economic inclusion over poverty and unmerited privilege; and, always, love over hate. Let us speak truth to power;*

*fiercely defend those who are bullied, belittled, demeaned or degraded; and tenaciously fight for all people and the ideals we cherish.” – Senator Cory Booker on Facebook<sup>1</sup>*

**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.

**Sample Language:**

*It’s in our nation’s interest to ensure that everyone enjoys full and equal opportunity. But that’s not happening in our educational system today, where children of color face overcrowded classrooms, uncertified teachers, and excessive discipline far more often than their white peers. If we don’t attend to those inequalities while improving education for all children, we will never become the nation that we aspire to be.*

**Example:**

*A beautiful thing about this country is its multiracial character. But right now, we’ve got diversity with a lot of segregation and inequity. I want to see a truly inclusive society. I think we will always struggle as a country toward that—no postracial society is possible or desirable—but every generation can make progress toward that goal. – Rinku Sen, Race Forward, to NBC News<sup>2</sup>*

**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, and point out who is responsible for taking that action.

**Sample Language:**

*Sample 1: Asian Americans often face particularly steep obstacles to needed health care because of language and cultural barriers, as well as limited insurance coverage. Our Legislature can knock down these barriers by putting policies in place that train health professionals, provide English language learning programs, and organize community health centers.*

*Sample 2: The Department of Justice, Congress, local and state legislatures, and prosecutors’ offices should ensure that there is fairness in the prosecutorial decision-making process by requiring routine implicit bias training for prosecutors; routine review*

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/corybooker/posts/10156229962212228>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/envisioning-enacting-racial-justice-rinku-sen-force-behind-race-forward-n459996>

*of data metrics to expose and address racial inequity; and the incorporation of racial impact review in performance review for individual prosecutors. DOJ should issue guidance to prosecutors on reducing the impact of implicit bias in prosecution.*<sup>3</sup>

**Example:**

*“Organizing to achieve public policy change is one major aspect of our larger mission to create freedom and justice for all Black people. Our aim is to equip young people with a clear set of public policy goals to organize towards and win in their local communities.” –* BYP 100, “Agenda to Keep Us Safe,” website<sup>4</sup>

**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.

When we’re hoping to show the existence of discrimination or racism by pointing out racially unequal conditions, it’s particularly important to tell a full story that links cause (history) and effect (outcome). Without this important link, audiences can walk away believing that our health care, 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.

**Sample Language:**

*All of us carry around implicit biases and unconscious stereotypes in our heads. It’s part of being human. But when those biases go uninterrupted, they can cause real harm, like police officers shooting people of color who pose no threat or prosecutors seeking stiffer sentences for people of color charged with a crime than white defendants accused of the same conduct. Ensuring that people in law enforcement are trained to recognize and overcome their biases is essential to a system that upholds equal justice and keeps all communities safe.*

**Example:**

*“The widely-discussed phenomenon of ‘driving while black’ illustrates the potential abuse of discretion by law enforcement. A two-year study 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*

---

<sup>3</sup> <https://transformingthesystem.org>

<sup>4</sup> <http://agendatobuildblackfutures.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/BYP100-Agenda-to-Keep-Us-Safe-AKTUS.pdf>

*than white motorists.” – The Sentencing Project publication, “Reducing Racial Disparity in the Criminal Justice System: A Manual for Policymakers”<sup>5</sup>*

*“Native Americans and Alaska Natives are often unable to vote because there are no polling places anywhere near them. Some communities, such as the Duck Valley Reservation in Nevada and the Goshute Reservation in Utah, are located more than 100 miles from the nearest polling place.” – Julian Brave NoiseCat, Native Issues Fellow at the Huffington Post<sup>6</sup>*

**7. Be explicit about the different causes of racial vs. socioeconomic disparities.** We need to make a case that racism causes different problems than 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 inequity persists.

**Example:**

*“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 racism likely serves as a source of chronic stress, negatively affecting the body’s hormonal levels, which can increase the likelihood of premature birth and low birth weights.” – American Journal of Public Health article, “Very low birthweight in African American infants: the role of maternal exposure to interpersonal racial discrimination”<sup>7</sup>*

**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 affect all of us and 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.<sup>8</sup>

Research also shows that people are more likely to acknowledge that discrimination against other groups is a problem – and more likely to want to do something about it – if they themselves have experienced it. Most people have at some point felt on the “outside” or that they were unfairly excluded from something, and 6 in 10 report that they’ve experienced discrimination based on race, ethnicity, economic status, gender, sexual orientation, religious

---

<sup>5</sup> The Sentencing Project. *Reducing Racial Disparity in the Criminal Justice System: A Manual for Policymakers*, 2008

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/13-native-american-issues\\_us\\_55b7d801e4b0074ba5a6869c](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/13-native-american-issues_us_55b7d801e4b0074ba5a6869c)

<sup>7</sup> Collins JW, David RJ, Handler A, Wall S, Andes S. Very low birthweight in African American infants: the role of maternal exposure to interpersonal racial discrimination. *Am J Public Health*. 2004;94(12):2132-2138.

<sup>8</sup> The Opportunity Agenda/Langer Associates. *The Opportunity Survey*, 2014.

beliefs or accent.<sup>9</sup> Reminding people of this feeling can help them think about what racism and oppression really mean for others as well as themselves.

**Sample language:**

*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. Many of those circumstances lead to being treated differently – maybe in finding housing, looking for a job, getting an education. We need strong laws that knock down arbitrary and subtle barriers to equal access that any of us might face.*

**Examples:**

*“Discrimination isn’t just an insult to our most basic notions of fairness. It also costs us money, because those who are discriminated against are unable to make the best use of their talents. This not only hurts them, it hurts us all, as some of our best and brightest players are, in essence, sidelined, unable to make their full contributions to our economy”. – David Futrelle, Economic Reporter in Time Magazine<sup>10</sup>*

*“Racial inclusion and income inequality are key factors driving regional economic growth, and are positively associated with growth in employment, output, productivity, and per capita income, according to an analysis of 118 metropolitan regions. ... Regions that became more equitable in the 1990s—with reductions in racial segregation, income disparities, or concentrated poverty—experienced greater economic growth as measured by increased per capita income.” – PolicyLink publication, “All-In Nation”<sup>11</sup>*

**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.

**Sample language:**

*Sample 1: Every child deserves an equal opportunity, regardless of the zip code they are born into. Our country has made great strides breaking down barriers of discrimination, but still today, too many people are kept out of networks of opportunity connected to where you live, like quality schools, good parks and recreation, jobs, and hospitals which help you make a better life for your family. Sometimes decisions on where to build schools, affordable housing and transportation keep minorities outside of these*

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> <http://business.time.com/2013/02/19/discrimination-doesnt-make-dollars-or-sense/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://allinnation.org/ms-content/uploads/sites/2/2013/10/AllInNation.pdf>

*opportunities. We need strong laws that connect people, provide equal opportunity, and dismantle patterns of segregation and discrimination wherever they exist.*<sup>12</sup>

*Sample 2: We've made tremendous progress in this country on race. When I tell my kids that hotels used to refuse to give rooms to people who weren't white, or that black people used to have to drink from separate water fountains, they look at me like I'm from another planet. But we're all susceptible to unconscious biases we pick up from watching television or from personal experiences, which can make us react to people in ways we aren't even aware of. Brain researchers have compared people's reactions to pictures of white and black male faces presented so fast that people had no idea they even saw anything – consciously, that is – but slow enough that their brains could tell the difference. Unlike the white faces, the faces of black men triggered fear circuits in most people's brains. So it's easy for us to be suspicious of a young black man at a street corner, even though he's actually just a kid or a college student who's waiting for a light to change. But knowing how our brains work may help us overcome our own biases so we can live up to our moral values, and treat all people truly equally, regardless of the color of their skin, their gender, or anything else.*<sup>13</sup>

**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.

**Sample language:**

*This country was founded on the ideals of equality and opportunity. While we've never lived up to these ideals, some of us face more barriers than others in achieving this because of who we are, what we look like. We have to recognize this and move toward the ideal that we should all be able to live up to our own potential, whether we are new to this country, or living in disadvantaged neighborhoods, on reservations that are facing economic challenges, or in abandoned factory towns*

**Example:**

*"We affirm our commitment to stand against environmental racism and to support Indigenous sovereignty. Across the United States, Black and Brown communities are subject to higher rates of asthma and other diseases resulting from pollution and malnutrition; as demonstrated recently not only at Standing Rock but also through the water crisis in Flint, Michigan. Our neighborhoods are more likely to have landfills, toxic*

---

<sup>12</sup> Lake Research Partners, NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, and The Opportunity Agenda, Findings from Focus Groups and a Dial Survey on Disparate Impact (July 23, 2015).

<sup>13</sup> Modified from messages tested in Speaking to the Public about Unconscious Prejudice: Meta-issues on Race and Ethnicity. Drew Westen, Ph.D. March 2014

*factories, fracking, and other forms of environmental violence inflicted on them. We will not let this continue.*<sup>14</sup> – Million Hoodies, blog

*“The internment was a dark chapter of American history, in which 120,000 people, including me and my family, lost our homes, our livelihoods, and our freedoms because we happened to look like the people who bombed Pearl Harbor. ... ‘National security’ must never again be permitted to justify wholesale denial of constitutional rights and protections. If it is freedom and our way of life that we fight for, our first obligation is to ensure that our own government adheres to those principles. Without that, we are no better than our enemies. ... The very same arguments echo today, on the assumption that a handful of presumed radical elements within the Muslim community necessitates draconian measures against the whole, all in the name of national security.”*<sup>15</sup> – George Takei, actor, in the *Washington Post*

## Applying the Lessons

### VPASA: 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 (stating what you’re *for*), 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 one Maryland study, 17.5 percent of motorists speeding on a parkway were African-American, and 74.7 percent were white, yet over 70% of the drivers whom police stopped and searched were black, and at least one trooper searched only African American. Officers were no more likely to find contraband on black motorists than white motorists. These practices erode community trust in police and make the goal of true community safety more difficult to achieve.*

---

<sup>14</sup> <http://millionhoodies.net/million-hoodies-in-solidarity-with-standing-rock/>

<sup>15</sup> George Takei: They interned my family. Don’t let them do it to Muslims *Washington Post* (November 18, 2016).[https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2016/11/18/george-takei-they-interned-my-family-dont-let-them-do-it-to-muslims/?utm\\_term=.8e15097e3b44](https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2016/11/18/george-takei-they-interned-my-family-dont-let-them-do-it-to-muslims/?utm_term=.8e15097e3b44)

## **Solution**

*We need shared data on police interactions with the public that show who police are stopping, arresting and why. These kinds of data 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 increases 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 them 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**

*As Americans, we believe in treating everybody fairly, regardless of what they look like or where their ancestors came from.*

## **Problem**

*But what we believe consciously and what we feel and do unconsciously can be two very different things and despite our best attempts to rid ourselves of prejudices and stereotypes, we all have them - it just depends how conscious they are. All of us today know people of different races and ethnicities. And we usually treat each other respectfully and joke around together at work. But for most of us – Americans of all colors – the subtle or not so subtle attitudes of our parents or grandparents, who grew up in a different time, are still with us, even if we consciously reject them.*

## **Solution**

*Personally, I look forward to the day when we can all see past color—all of us, white and black, brown and Asian. To do that, we all have to be aware of what's going on in our own heads right now. And how that collective bias has shaped our history and where we are now.*

## **Action**

*But we're just not there yet. Let's make it a priority to get there.<sup>16</sup>*

The Opportunity Agenda is a social justice communication lab. We collaborate with social justice leaders to move hearts and minds, driving lasting policy and culture change. We bring the inspirational voices of opportunity and possibility to social justice issues through communication expertise, and creative engagement.

For more messaging advice and to sign up for our newsletter, please visit **[www.opportunityagenda.org](http://www.opportunityagenda.org)**

THE OPPORTUNITY AGENDA IS A PROJECT OF TIDES CENTER.

568 Broadway

Suite 701

New York, NY 10012

Tel: 212.334.4202

Fax: 212.334.2656

[contact@opportunityagenda.org](mailto:contact@opportunityagenda.org)

---

<sup>16</sup> Modified from messages tested in Speaking to the Public about Unconscious Prejudice: Meta-issues on Race and Ethnicity. Drew Westen, Ph.D. March 2014