



THE ASPEN INSTITUTE

Roundtable on Community Change

# TEN LESSONS FOR TAKING LEADERSHIP ON RACIAL EQUITY

**Many Americans think of race as the third rail of social and political interactions—that anyone who touches it will be burned.** In our ten years of promoting leadership and action on racial equity, however, we have found that it *is* possible to engage racially mixed groups in both productive dialogue and collective work on race. After all, most Americans are at least generally aware that people of color don't do as well as the white majority on any measure of well-being. Many people of goodwill believe that our failure to address racial inequity undermines our democracy, our economy, and our standing in the world. They want to contribute to solutions around race but don't have the experience or the tools to take it on. Most people tend to avoid the issue altogether rather than venture into risky territory.

*Ten Lessons* summarizes what we've learned about how to navigate that terrain and take leadership around race. They are especially for those who want to play more of a role in promoting racial equity but aren't sure about where or exactly how to begin. While there are, of course, many more than ten lessons that might inform the daily work of building racial equity, we hope that these ten will encourage new actors, and that they will be a useful tool for those already playing active roles.

**RACIAL EQUITY:** When people in a society have equal chances to reach their full potential and are no more likely to encounter life's burdens or benefits just because of the color of their skin.

The lessons described here have grown out of our Racial Equity Leadership Development Program, which engages leaders from across sectors to develop and implement strategies for eliminating racial divisions and disparities. More than 1,000 leaders have participated since 2003. Many of them have gone on to introduce and influence public policies, change institutional practices, engage top decision-makers, improve media coverage, and launch new racial equity-promoting organizations. For more information, visit [www.aspeninstitute.org/policy-work/community-change/racial-equity](http://www.aspeninstitute.org/policy-work/community-change/racial-equity).

# 1.

## Start with Facts and Put Them in Context

Basic facts about racial disparities in access to opportunity or in life outcomes are not common knowledge. People have varying degrees of information and understanding about the magnitude of racial disparities and the myriad of factors that contribute to them. Starting with data shows how racial disparities occur regularly, systematically, and cumulatively across all sectors, and across the country. Data alone, however, cannot speak for themselves, and so it is crucial to look at them in context—both contemporary and historical.

One of the most positive aspects of American culture is that we focus both on what is possible in the present and on what people are able to rise to regardless of how humble their beginnings. When it comes to understanding how to overcome racial disparity and division, our wish to leave the past behind does not serve us well. It does not allow us to appreciate how the legacy of history endures today in housing segregation, educational inequity, wealth differences, and social standing. For example, beginning with the founding of our nation, whites were allowed to take advantage of a number of wealth creating and social mobility opportunities such as free land, access to capital, and home ownership subsidies from which people of color were legally excluded. Starting racial equity work with data in context accomplishes four important things:

- Ensures that everyone starts with a common frame of reference and an objective knowledge base
- Grounds dialogue in facts rather than in opinions or misconceptions
- Shows a way forward through an often volatile and painful topic
- Helps people understand that the past still has bearing on the present when it comes to race

The more people understand the facts behind our current picture of racial inequity the more likely they are to take action.

## 2.

### Create Safe Spaces for People to Talk about Race and Develop Strategies for Achieving Equity

Talking about race is the first step to devising effective strategies for undoing racism, but it can be a minefield that many do not want to traverse. People of color can be reluctant to engage in dialogue that may cause them to feel pain and anger or that asks them to speak for their entire race. Whites can be reluctant to engage in dialogue in which they might be called racist or blamed for the circumstances of people of color.

Creating an environment that facilitates productive dialogue about race and lays a foundation for action is challenging. Leaders of racial equity efforts must be prepared to deal with emotional and unpredictable reactions. In addition to using traditional strategies for facilitating effective dialogue about volatile social problems, we have found the following to be especially helpful in creating a safe space for addressing race:

- Engage a respected convening entity and high-quality facilitators
- Talk with participants in advance to understand their concerns and goals
- Provide background materials, especially films and videos, that create a common knowledge base and bring the issues to life
- Have the group develop ground rules for interaction that establish respect, reduce anxiety, and address concerns
- Keep the focus of the dialogue on the level of societal problems not personal stories
- When personal reactions arise, validate the feelings they bring up and link the discussion back to the underlying structural context as soon as possible

Remember that trust is a long-running casualty of racism and can be an issue, especially in mixed-race groups. While trust cannot be built overnight, it can develop over time as people spend time, work, and develop their understanding together.

## 3. **Emphasize That Today's Racial Inequities Don't Depend on Intentional Racism**

Most racial inequity today is not sustained by overtly racist talk or action, although those certainly exist and should continue to alarm us. Instead, racial inequities have come to be sustained by their own momentum because they are baked into our belief systems and into the places, policies, and practices that shape our daily lives. This has the overall effect of allowing racial disparities to seem fair or 'natural.' These dynamics continue to segregate people of color, relegate them to low-paying jobs, and label them as threats to public safety. Change requires conscious interruption of the status quo. This means unpacking and analyzing the effects of seemingly neutral public policies, institutional practices, and beliefs, and reshaping them if they are contributing to inequity.

## 4. **Counter Stereotypes and Bias**

Racial stereotypes and coded messages are pervasive in American culture and media. They influence how we frame and interpret the world around us. We are surrounded by images of black men as criminals, Latinos as illegal immigrants and unskilled workers, Muslims as terrorists, and Asians as model minorities. Given increasing residential and educational segregation, such negative stereotypes might be the only images many have of other racial groups. Making progress means confronting these popular representations directly. As a start, any person who takes leadership on racial issues must develop a language, a comfort level, and a set of clear examples to counter the standard stereotypes and so-called common sense about race. Stereotypes can also be countered on a larger scale through deliberate outreach, messaging, and media-related strategies.

## 5. **Start by Preaching to the Choir**

Even those already addressing racial inequities in concrete ways often need help communicating about why inequality persists in contemporary America and what to do about it. The racial story of the 21st century is more complicated and harder to see than the overt racist attitudes and actions of the pre-civil rights era. Since there is no single overarching reason for what's happening today—but instead a complex interaction of policies, practices, and belief systems—it's impossible to put forth simple, cause-and-effect explanations for persistent racial disparities. Motivating a core group of allies—the choir—to take action requires a persuasive framework and language, as well as tools to help identify the most effective routes to progress on this longstanding societal challenge. Starting with the choir builds a critical mass of those who are willing and able to make progress on racial equity and to bring others into the fold along the way.

# 6.

## Explore Contradictions

Explore the contradictions between our racial reality and the idea of the United States as an equal opportunity society. Our national values of equal opportunity, meritocracy, and individualism often lead us to believe that people are solely responsible for their own well-being, and that if they work hard enough, they will be successful regardless of race or ethnicity. Yet an array of laws, public policies, and institutional practices has influenced who does and does not have access to the opportunities—good schools and well-paying jobs, to name just two—that contribute to success and well-being. While it is true that the laws and policies excluding people of color from avenues of social mobility are no longer on the books, opportunity is still not evenly distributed across the races. Researchers have shown, for example, that a white man with a felony conviction for cocaine possession is more likely to be hired than a black man with no criminal record whatsoever—even with otherwise identical résumés. Findings like these exist in education, health, and the justice system, causing us to rethink what meritocracy and equal opportunity really mean in 21st-century America.

Surfacing such contradictions between our national values and our realities helps us to compare what we would *like* to have with what we *actually* have. It sheds light on what we need to do to achieve our values, and it broadens the perspective on the kinds of changes needed to advance racial equity. For instance, if a decision-maker thinks that high black and Latino jobless rates are due to lack of effort on the part of people of color, then he or she will probably be unlikely to support jobs programs or income supports. But if that same decision-maker compares the ideals to what opportunity paths are actually available, then his or her focus is likely to shift from blame or resignation to support for programs that improve employment pathways and increase opportunity access.

# 7.

## Engage Leaders with the Greatest Level of Influence

Racial equity work needs the legitimacy, protection, and sense of urgency that the highest level of leadership in an organization or community can provide. Having leadership's support makes it far more likely that racial equity work will be taken seriously and not dismissed as irrelevant or a concern of the past. Such authorizers have many avenues for taking action and for influencing others, and given the complex dynamics of modern forms of racial inequity, it is difficult to make progress without their support and involvement.

# 8.

## Help People Find Their Roles as Agents of Change

People often need help seeing how they can be effective agents of change in the context of the complex, mutually reinforcing system of beliefs, policies, and practices that produce racial inequities. The big picture, or structural, view of how race operates in 21st-century America may be intellectually illuminating, but it can also feel overwhelming and may not always indicate where to begin. There are at least three ways to take action:

- Identify a long-term racial equity goal. Use the Racial Equity Theory of Change,<sup>1</sup> or a similar method, to unpack the goal and map backwards to action steps. This process is best undertaken by teams from the same organization or community.
- Identify each person's unique sphere of influence and potential actions. These may be small steps such as reaching out to a peer to share a new analysis or insight about race, or big steps like a foundation president convening government, civic, community, philanthropic, nonprofit, and business leaders with the goal of changing inequitable policies and practices to advance racial equity.
- Identify opportunities for supporting or creating partnerships and networks with existing racial equity leadership groups. Partnerships among nontraditional allies are especially powerful, such as corporate leaders and civil rights leaders, the mayor and grassroots activists, or media leaders and the nonprofit community.

1. See [www.aspeninstitute.org/sites/default/files/content/images/Roundtable%20on%20Community%20Change%20RETOC.pdf](http://www.aspeninstitute.org/sites/default/files/content/images/Roundtable%20on%20Community%20Change%20RETOC.pdf)

9.

## **Make Sure It's Someone's Job to Focus on the Work of Building Racial Equity**

Progress toward a better, fairer, and more equitable society will not happen on its own. Changing the policies, practices, and belief systems that contribute to racial disparities requires ongoing attention over a long period of time. Too often, advances are made in one area but are eroded in others. At the same time, many potential leaders feel overwhelmed managing their existing work portfolio. As much as they may want to incorporate a racial equity focus in their work, they often are uncertain about how to add that to an already overwhelming list of responsibilities. So it's important to identify a person, team, or organization that can help leaders develop and implement their racial equity plans, connect them to others, and keep the work focused.

10.

## **Support One Another and Continuously Cultivate New Leadership**

Those dedicated to achieving racial equity all agree that it's hard work. It can be tiring, and evidence of progress might not come along often enough. Long-term strategies need to be balanced with early wins. Early wins build constituencies, keep people on board, energize the process, and prove that it's possible to make progress. New energy, perspective, and talents keep efforts relevant and fresh, so always be on the lookout for new allies and young leaders. The path is a long one, so it's essential to fortify oneself and one's allies, and to celebrate successes, both large and small.





THE ASPEN INSTITUTE

Roundtable on Community Change

477 Madison Avenue  
Suite 730  
New York, NY 10022  
212-895-8000  
[www.aspenroundtable.org](http://www.aspenroundtable.org)

**OUR MISSION:** The Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change distills lessons about how to revitalize distressed communities and helps policymakers, practitioners, and funders develop and implement effective strategies for promoting vibrant, racially equitable communities in the United States and internationally.

Copyright © 2013 by The Aspen Institute  
One Dupont Circle, NW  
Suite 700  
Washington, DC 20036

Published in the United States of America in 2013 by The Aspen Institute.

All rights reserved.  
Printed in the United States of America.  
ISBN: 0-89843-588-9  
Pub. No. 13/014

Suggested Citation: The Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change. 2013.  
“Ten Lessons for Taking Leadership on Racial Equity.” Washington, D.C.: The Aspen Institute.