



# LEADERSHIP & Race

JULY 2010

*How to Develop and  
Support Leadership that  
Contributes to Racial Justice*



LEADERSHIP LEARNING  
COMMUNITY



APPLIED RESEARCH CENTER  
*Racial Justice Through Media, Research and Activism*

Center for Assessment and Policy Development



KIRWAN INSTITUTE  
for the Study of Race and Ethnicity



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## About the Leadership for a New Era Series

Leadership for a New Era (LNE) is a collaborative research initiative launched in 2009 by the **Leadership Learning Community**. Through this initiative we seek to promote leadership approaches that are more inclusive, networked and collective. We believe the dominant leadership model that places a strong emphasis on the individual is limiting our ability to positively impact change in our society, so we have joined forces with a diverse group of funders, researchers, practitioners and consultants in the leadership development field to shift the current thinking. Our research focuses on the following four areas: *Leadership and Race*, *Leadership and Networks*, *Collective Leadership*, and *Leadership Across Difference*. For more information, please visit [www.leadershipforanewera.org/](http://www.leadershipforanewera.org/)

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### About Leadership Learning Community

We are a national nonprofit organization transforming the way leadership development work is conceived, conducted and evaluated, primarily within the nonprofit sector. We focus on leveraging leadership as a means to create a more just and equitable society. We combine our expertise in identifying, evaluating and applying cutting-edge ideas and promising practices in the leadership development field, with access to our engaged national network of hundreds of experienced funders, consultants and leadership development programs, to drive the innovation and collaboration needed to make leadership more effective. We also offer the following consulting services to help programs and foundations optimize their leadership investment strategy: scans, evaluations and network development. For more information, please visit [www.leadershiplearning.org](http://www.leadershiplearning.org).

## About Leadership and Race

The *Leadership and Race* publication, “How to Develop and Support Leadership that Contributes to Racial Justice,” is part of the Leadership for a New Era series. This publication explores the ways in which our current thinking about leadership often contributes to producing and maintaining racialized dynamics, and identifies a set of core competencies associated with racial justice leadership. Recommendations are included for helping leadership programs develop and support leadership that furthers racial justice in organizations, communities, and the broader society.

A number of organizations and individuals working in the racial justice and leadership development fields collaborated to develop, write and edit this report. The group worked together via webinars, the Leadership for a New Era wiki, and email exchanges.

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### Why This Matters

We believe that people of color will continue to be under-recognized for their leadership contributions and under-represented in leadership positions without more culturally inclusive leadership models. Current leadership thinking that is very much based on beliefs about the role of the individual in change often misses the significance of social identity in helping groups coalesce and act from a shared understanding of collective grievances and aspirations.

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Cover image: The University of New Hampshire (UNH) Mural Project: *What Does Diversity Mean to Your Generation.*

# How to Develop and Support Leadership that Contributes to Racial Justice

## Introduction

We live in a multiracial world, in which the nature and consequences of racism are in flux. Many people take pride in, and build on, the strengths of their racial and ethnic identities. Although many of the most egregious and overt examples of racism have been outlawed, it is still true that life chances and opportunities are heavily racialized—that is, determined by one’s race or ethnicity. Differences by racial or ethnic identity remain, and in some instances are growing, in areas of well-being that include wealth, income, education, health, and even life expectancy. These differences are the result of historical and current practices that produce and reproduce racialized outcomes in a way that is not well revealed by looking through our old lens of race.

This publication, produced through a partnership of those in the racial justice and leadership development fields, explores the ways in which our current thinking about leadership may contribute to producing and maintaining racialized dynamics, and identifies a set of core competencies associated with racial justice leadership. Recommendations are included for ways to develop and support these competencies. This paper does not seek to address all positive leadership competencies, but rather to highlight some particular capacities and practices

that can further racial justice in organizations, communities, and the broader society.

Leadership can play a critical role in either contributing to racial justice or reinforcing prevailing patterns of racial inequality and exclusion. In an ever-changing multicultural society, filled with racial complexities, the role that leadership plays requires continual re-examination and reshaping to contribute in positive ways toward creating a society in which opportunities and benefits are more equally shared. We need to change our leadership development thinking and approaches in order to become part of the solution to racial inequalities.

Failing to pay attention to structural racism in leadership development programs and nonprofit leadership leaves unchallenged several issues that undermine the effectiveness and sustainability of community-based organizations and racial justice work. Patricia St. Onge, et al., in “Embracing Cultural Competency: A Roadmap for Nonprofit Capacity Builders,” outlines some of these issues:

- A disproportionate percentage of executive directors and board members who do not reflect the general population
- The professionalization of nonprofit management in a way that overlooks the lack of connection between leaders and the communities they serve
- The unchallenged assumption that people of color can improve their leadership only as beneficiaries of highly prescriptive intervention from outside their communities, rather than from resources that support collective work and responsibility for self-determination in their own cultural context

## What is structural racism?

According to the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity, “The word ‘racism’ is commonly understood to refer to instances in which one individual intentionally or unintentionally targets others for negative treatment because of their skin color or other group-based physical characteristics. This individualistic conceptualization is too limited. Racialized outcomes do not require racist actors. Structural racism/racialization refers to a system of social structures that produces cumulative, durable, race-based inequalities. It is also a method of analysis that is used to examine how historical legacies, individuals, structures, and institutions work interactively to distribute material and symbolic advantages and disadvantages along racial lines.”

Just as modern-day schools have had to adapt to classrooms with expanding racial, cultural, linguistic, and developmental diversity, situated in neighborhoods and regions with wide variations in resources and opportunities, so must leadership development program staff and funders continually rethink and retool practices in order to appropriately adapt approaches.

### The Impact of Leadership Thinking and Practice on Race

To a large extent, current thinking about leadership focuses on individualism, meritocracy, and equal opportunity, as described by the *Aspen Institute (Structural Racism and Youth Development: Issues, Challenges, and Implications)*:

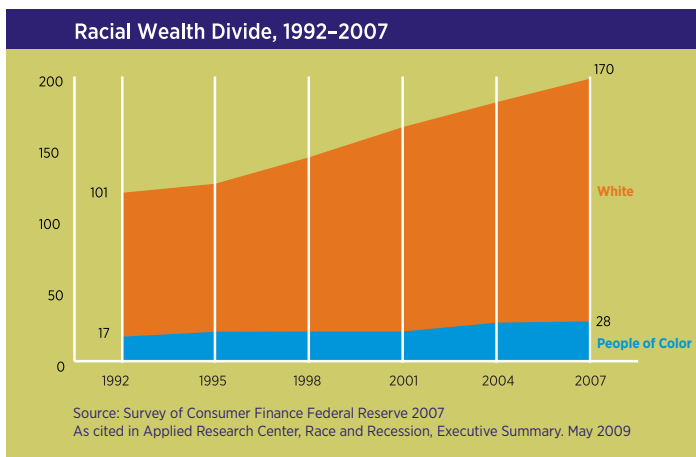
- Personal responsibility and individualism: The belief that people control their fates regardless of social position, and that individual behaviors and choices determine material outcomes.
- Meritocracy: The belief that resources and opportunities are distributed according to talent and effort, and that social components of “merit”—such as access to inside information or powerful social networks—are of lesser importance or do not matter much.
- Equal opportunity: The belief that employment, education, and wealth accumulation arenas are “level playing fields” and that race is no longer a barrier to progress in these areas.

Issues of advantage and disadvantage are largely influenced by racialized structural arrangements and group position; however, the focus on individualism and equal opportunity fails to recognize that link. Current leadership thinking and practice is strongly influenced by values and beliefs that are part of the dominant culture of individualism in the United States. There are several ways of understanding how this plays out in leadership work:

- Mainstream ideas about leadership carry the assumption that individuals have attained leadership positions based primarily on their talent, natural ability, or achievements. This thinking overlooks the many ways in which structural racism has created economic structures that create advantage, opportunities, and access (or lack of access) to leadership positions based on race. Even someone who attains a position of leadership may not have the needed resources to effectively lead or to deal with resistance embedded within the cultures of institutions. For example, focusing on supporting people’s success and leadership without addressing structural racism that may undermine their achievements—such as telling a young

### How does structural racism play out?

As an example of structural racism, the GI Bill disproportionately enabled white people to buy homes and create wealth (Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity). That wealth helped a generation of working middle-class white people send their children to better schools and take care of their health needs more easily. Government policies also opened the doors to higher education for later generations, enabling those eligible for the GI Bill to finance their children’s education as a consequence of wealth accumulated by home ownership. But these policies excluded certain groups of service people (nearly all people of color) and potential home buyers (also nearly all people of color). According to the website for the PBS series *Race: The Power of an Illusion*, “Today, 71% of whites own their own home, compared to 44% of African Americans. Black and Latino mortgage applicants are 60% more likely than whites to be turned down for loans. As housing gets more expensive and wealth gets passed down from generation to generation, the legacy of past discrimination persists, giving whites and nonwhites vastly different chances.” These factors, along with the fact that for many years the dominant culture accepted these differences as normal, are examples of structural racism with profound consequences.



person how to dress or behave in a job interview or leadership position without talking about racial barriers (prejudice, organizational culture, old-boy networks)—implies that they are fully responsible for their success or failure, in that if they work hard enough they have as much chance to succeed as the next person. Many organizations have demonstrated that this is not true and have statistically documented the disadvantage of race along a number of dimensions, including the likelihood of owning a home, of going to college, and of going to prison.

- Focusing on the role of individuals in creating and solving problems does not look at the impact that systems have on the ways people behave, and tends to attribute racism only to ignorance or hateful behaviors. Based on this logic, it would follow that we could eliminate racism by changing people’s attitudes; however, this is not entirely true. In her article, “Taking on Postracialism,” Rinku Sen points out that while intrapersonal racism and bias are declining, incidents of structural racism are on the rise. This is because many of the policies and practices that produce disparities appear “race-neutral”—that is, they do not specify different actions by race—but their effect is to give whites advantage over people of color. Funding education by property taxes is one example; requiring computer literacy or a valid driver’s license for jobs that do not demand them is another. If we do not understand and address the consequences of structural racism, we help to maintain it.

- Leadership exists within a context. The focus on individuals in leadership thinking does not address differences in social contexts that are created by systems of structural advantage and disadvantage and that shape social and racial identity. These collective identities create a shared experience from which collective grievances and aspirations emerge to motivate collective action. The focus on individuals misses the influence of social identity as a context of collective leadership and action. A leader’s power is often connected to the group that the leader is part of. Many leaders of color represent a constituency that has limited power because of structural racism or may be supported by groups from different backgrounds that do not share a racial justice perspective.

**To support leadership that contributes to racial justice, we need to focus on how individuals and groups are connecting, organizing, thinking systemically, bridging, and learning as part of a dynamic leadership process that mobilizes action on the scale needed to address racial injustice.**

- Leadership is often characterized by the heroic, directive, high-profile individual who exerts influence over others by virtue of authority, or position, or persuasion; this is, however, only one model of leadership. Leadership is not inherently individualistic. We often reward people whose leadership style is aligned with the individual model of the dominant culture, but not those who engage in more collective forms of leadership. This serves to render invisible the leadership of many women and people of different races/ethnicities.

## Core Competencies for Racial Justice Leadership

Given the cultural influence of individualism, many leadership development programs assume that if you select individuals who have demonstrated leadership potential or ability and provide them with additional knowledge and skills, they will then strengthen their organizations’ performance and ability to serve the community. This approach does not take into

account structural and systemic issues that inhibit individual power, or the fact that dismantling structural racism requires collaborative, adaptive approaches.

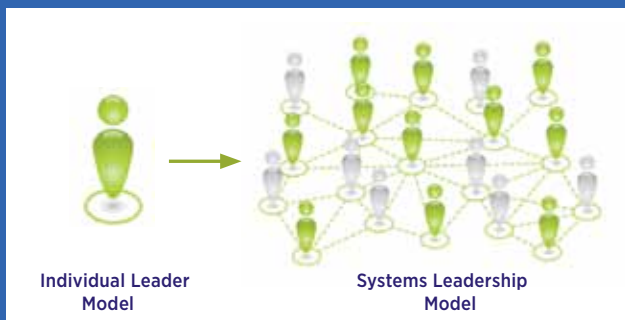
Changing the behavior of individuals is not enough: it will not support a system intervention that addresses the root causes of structural racism. Having a systemic perspective and a focus on leadership as a process, leads us to ask not only which individuals to support but also how to embed racial justice competencies in the ongoing practice and culture of organizations, networks, and communities.

**Meaning Making and Connecting** | Building alignment around an explicit and active commitment to racial justice requires a deep knowledge of oneself and others, and is core to

working together on racial justice in organizations and communities. This involves making meaning of one's own experience with issues of power. Understanding intersecting identities builds connection and shared commitment to racial justice work. Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity (PRE) and **mosaic** also link the meaning-making process to leadership development, explaining that the work of youth development organizations is to help youth analyze and comprehend the world around them at a critical stage in their development. As young people better understand how their lives and opportunities are influenced by racism, they can become a collective voice and advocate for themselves.

**Systems Thinking** | The Kirwan Institute helps us understand that racial disadvantage is primarily

### Why is systems thinking a critical racial justice leadership competency?



African Americans, who remain the most racially segregated population in the nation, are segregated not just from whites but also from opportunities that are critical to the quality of life, stability, and advancement. Where one lives determines one's connection to jobs, high-performing neighborhood schools, green space, quality

retail stores, fresh foods, and safety. Neighborhood is also an indicator of one's physical and mental health. If you are trying to open up opportunity for a marginal group by building low-income housing or providing tax credits for housing in neighborhoods with access to more resources, this increased integration of African Americans will likely have an impact on a more powerful group that could effectively veto such efforts.

A leadership development program cannot address an issue, such as access to quality of education, without an understanding of the complex context and system in which a particular school operates: the history of the neighborhood, the dynamics among potential stakeholders in the school's success (parents, realtors, mortgage lenders, churches, community groups, unions, school boards, teachers), the politics of the school system, the tax base, the demographics of the school, and the competition for teachers with other school districts that may have more resources and fewer problems.

a product of opportunity structures within society. “A systems perspective helps us understand how racial disadvantages manifest, accumulate, and resist efforts to address them by allowing us to see the world in terms of wholes, rather than in single event ‘snapshots’ and how parts of a system work together to produce systems outcomes” (Systems Primer). Systems thinking deepens understanding of how structural racism is perpetuated. This includes a commitment to assessing racial impacts of key plans and proposals before making final decisions, to maximize equitable systemic impacts.

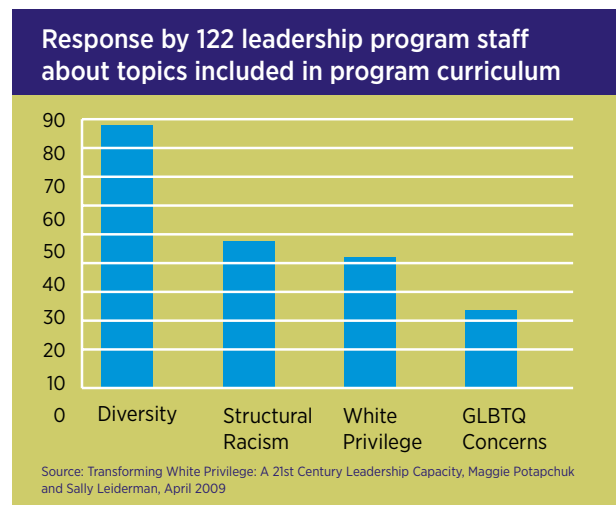
**Organizing** | Conscious attention should be paid to racial justice in all aspects of organizing, in a variety of contexts ranging from organizations to networks and coalitions. This means organizing the work such that equity and inclusion are paramount and the process and pursuits are fully aligned. It requires transparent conversations about power and privilege in decision-making and governance issues.

**Learning and Reflection** | Reflection on one’s individual experience with institutional power and privilege, along with learning about racialized opportunity structures, is a continuous process that is integrated with action. It means being collectively accountable for how we are doing on our racial justice goals and mobilizing to do better, individually and as groups. This competency within organizations and communities includes understanding how to use data to diagnose an issue and track progress.

**Bridging** | Understanding leadership as a process makes more visible the natural connections between many organizations and individuals in different parts of a system, and encourages leadership that builds strategic alignment around problem analysis and vision with a diverse array of stakeholders. To achieve racial and social justice, we need to move beyond the emphasis on the power of individuals to a philosophy of interdependence and building connections.

## Recommendations for Effectively Supporting Racial Justice Leadership

**Make racial justice an explicit and active commitment.** Just as many programs have adopted an explicit commitment to diversity and anti-discrimination, organizations can be encouraged to adopt an explicit commitment to racial justice. It is helpful to see diversity as a tool to help us get to racial justice, rather than an end in itself. A recent survey illustrates that a large number of leadership programs place a strong emphasis on diversity but more could be done to stress issues of structural racism and white privilege.



Racial justice leadership needs to express this commitment through concrete planning and, to make it a reality, through practice in terms of diverse staffing, inclusive policies, and power in making curriculum decisions. It is also important to understand how an organization’s commitment to racial justice is reflected or inhibited in the structure of the institution and in relation to other institutions.

**Be accountable for racial justice outcomes.**

If we are going to hold ourselves accountable for transforming structural racism through our leadership work, then, according to Sally Leiderman of the Center for Assessment and Policy Development, we need to

track all of the following: changes at organizational and community levels for different racial groups over the long term; the extent to which race becomes a less powerful predictor of how people fare; and progress toward a community's understanding of how privilege and oppression shape opportunities. And we must share our stories of success.

**Provide those engaged in leadership of organizations, networks, and communities with access to tools and resources that support them in making racial justice a conscious part of planning and decision-making in their leadership work.**

Leadership within organizations and communities needs to understand the racial impact of programs and policies. This begins with developing the individual and institutional knowledge and the confidence to ask tough questions, such as: What aspects of our organizations actively work to create inequities? What are the power dynamics at play? Whose voices are at the table? Whose are not? Is there a single cultural lens through which policies, practices, and experiences are interpreted and determined? Who benefits from the way things are done? These leadership skills can be supported with the following types of tools and resources:

- **Issue Framing Guide** | Some organizations have learned new ways to highlight the racial dynamics of social issues they are addressing. For example, the board of directors of Citizen Action of New York enacted a policy that requires its chapters and issues committees to use a racial justice framing tool to assess whether to explicitly address racial inequities in its issue campaigns. If the chapters or committees decide not to address racism, they must provide an explanation to the board. Having this policy and tool provides leaders with a concrete way to consciously address race.
- **Policy and Budget Filter** | City officials in Seattle and county officials in King County, Washington, are using planning and budgetary guides to help them address racial disparities in making planning and budgetary decisions.
- **Racial Equity Impact Assessments** | Some government bodies and non-profits are beginning to use Racial Equity Impact Assessments during the

**Leadership development programs and strategies cannot undo structural racism, but they can provide increased opportunities for individuals and groups who, because of racialized systems of structural advantage, are less likely to have had equitable access to resources.**

planning and decision-making process to predict and prevent negative racial impacts. Legislators in Iowa and Connecticut have passed laws requiring the use of minority impact assessments when considering legislative proposals that could affect the racial population of state prisons, in order to help prevent further racial disparities.

**Incorporate racial justice training into leadership development strategies.** Effective leadership development can be strengthened by racial justice trainings, which include an analysis of structural racism and support the development of skills and strategies for advancing racial equity and institutional change. These differ from diversity and cultural competency trainings, which often focus on interpersonal relations, prejudice reduction, and cultural awareness, and even from dismantling racism trainings. The latter, at their best, usually provide an institutional analysis and critique of racism and deeper awareness of racial privilege and oppression, but they tend to focus on organizational change and may fail to connect to strategies for external community and policy change.

**Support the development of systems thinking and analysis.** Tackling structural racism as a system requires understanding how systems operate and perpetuate themselves—recognizing in particular the role of “leverage points” in altering a system’s ability to maintain itself and resist efforts toward change.

Other considerations from a systems analysis approach include:

- **An understanding of the deep relational nature of systems.** It is important for leadership to understand resistance (whether implicit or explicit) to the goal of racial justice and how this goal aligns or conflicts with other institutional and inter-institutional goals and dynamics. Failure to understand and address such issues can undermine the effectiveness of leadership in general, but especially in matters of race.



- **A shift in the meaning of race and the grammar for race.** Instead of focusing on individual or group feelings and thoughts, it becomes necessary to consider what work the institutions are doing and how to influence them. It also becomes important to have an understanding of implicit racial messages and meaning.

**Provide time, processes, and conducive space for talking about race and racial/ethnic identity.**

Conversations about race that deal honestly with conflict can give participants an opportunity to learn something new and transform their thoughts and feelings (*Taking Back the Work: A Cooperative Inquiry into the Work of Leaders of Color in Movement-Building Organizations*). Making meaning of individual and collective experiences in a safe environment for emotional exploration of racism can also support healing. It is important to address racial nuance in the course of business and to recognize and value the importance of giving needed time to these discussions in real time as racialized dynamics surface.

**Promote inclusive models of leadership that recognize leadership as a collective process through which individuals and groups take action on racial justice goals.**

Many programs promote the individual model of leadership, which is associated with leadership “over” others, creates relationships of dominance, and has historically applied coercion, force, or influence to reinforce power and privilege. Leadership needs to be reframed as the process by which individuals and groups align their values and mission, build relationships, organize and take action, and learn from their experiences to achieve their shared goals. Leadership programs should honor multiple approaches to leadership by inviting participants to share and learn from the different ways that they and their communities exercise collective, action-oriented leadership.

**Provide resources, networks, and skills to groups that have been historically disadvantaged.**

The kinds of support structures needed for people of color, especially those from low-income backgrounds, may differ considerably from those needed for middle-class whites. Without paying attention to these

differences, a typical program approach that assumes equal opportunity will not take the extra steps needed to address historical disadvantage. Examples of what to provide to program participants include:

- **Targeted Resources** | Provide resources based on need; for example, cover child care costs, missed time from work, health care, and educational opportunities. Targeted efforts like these are critical to achieving more universal goals intended to benefit all, which in the case of a leadership program, might be the intention to provide reflective time in a retreat-like environment, to help all participants align their mission and values.
- **Response to Specific Needs** | Provide a safe space in which people of color can examine their own internalized oppression, to avoid having others tokenize their experiences and to create effective multiracial coalitions for addressing ineffective policies and practices. White people may need different support structures to help them recognize their own white privilege and step out of their comfort zones to ask and understand the effects of racism, in order to become allies for racial justice.
- **Skills Development** | Provide access to skills that facilitate participation of people of color at policy tables, to which they can bring a racial impact analysis, as well as access to planning, decision-making, and evaluation tools related to promoting racial justice outcomes.
- **Networks** | Provide strategies that connect people who have been marginalized to existing networks while building new networks for mentoring, intergenerational partnership, information exchange, and access to resources.

**Adequately fund leadership programs and strategies that promote racial justice:**

Financially support programs that have an explicit commitment to racial justice goals, demonstrate inclusive leadership diversity and incorporate program strategies that enhance the ability of participants to access resources, opportunities to talk about race, employ a racial impact analysis and build connections needed to tackle structural racism.

## Conclusion

We who are involved in leadership work have an opportunity to address disparities in how resources and opportunity are distributed in the U.S. Bringing a race conscious lens to common assumptions about leadership raises an important question about the impact of our leadership work, “Are current approaches to leadership contributing to growing disparities or supporting a more equitable and just future for people of all races and ethnicities?” Leadership programs engage thousands of people every year and will make a difference. It is up to us to decide what that difference will be. A commitment to racial justice will require a new consciousness, and new approaches to our leadership work. We developed this publication to stimulate the conversation about needed changes in leadership work, offer suggestions about racial justice leadership strategies and identify resources that can guide leadership programs in better supporting racial justice. The work is still emerging and we invite you to help strengthen it by sharing your experience and learning.

This publication is part of a larger collaborative research initiative, Leadership for a New Era, which promotes leadership approaches that are more inclusive, networked and collective. We invite you to visit the central site for this collaborative initiative, [www.leadershipforanewera.org](http://www.leadershipforanewera.org), to connect with peers across the nation, add ideas, raise questions, get resources and ultimately, join us in promoting changes that will increase the contributions leadership can make to racial justice.

## Tools

### Evaluation

- Evaluation Tools for Racial Equity: [www.evaluationtoolsforracialequity.org](http://www.evaluationtoolsforracialequity.org) (June 2010)
- “Doing Evaluation Differently” (Chapter 9), *Flipping the Script: White Privilege and Community Building* (Potapchuk and Leiderman with Bivens and Major, 2005)
- Social Policy Research Associates (SPR) has developed an institutional change model that focuses on the organizational context required for the success of any leadership efforts to address racial equity. See *Commissioning Multicultural Evaluation: A Foundation Resource Guide* (Inouye, T., Yu, H.C., Adefuin, J., January 2005) <http://www.spra.com/pdf/TCE-Multicultural-Evaluation.pdf>

### Others

- Racial Equity Impact Assessment Toolkit: [www.arc.org/content/view/744/167/](http://www.arc.org/content/view/744/167/) (June 2010)
- Racial Equity Tools: [www.racialequitytools.org](http://www.racialequitytools.org) (June 2010)



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