

I. B. CONSIDERING READINESS

Communities and other groups working toward racial equity or social justice often would like to understand more about the readiness of their place for taking on this type of work. Foundations and others who provide support to this work also would like some way of understanding which places among those with whom they might partner are most likely to succeed in their joint efforts. Organizations have similar questions about those with whom they partner, and in addition, they often want to assess their own readiness to work with others on racial equity goals or to address their internal equity issues.

The concept of “readiness” of a place or organization for racial equity work in partnership with others may not be the most helpful way to think about this. “Readiness” implies that we know what it takes to do this work – and since we have never genuinely created racial equity or social justice in the United States to date – we really do not know exactly what it will take to do so. In addition, readiness implies that some characteristics, capacities and attitudes need to be in place before racial equity or social justice work begins, in order for that work to be successful. We know this isn’t the case – for one thing, every community and organization has faced inequities in one form or another, and done something about them – even if only maintaining them through inaction. In addition, the term is generally used for people to judge a community or organization on standards or criteria set outside that place. Thus, the idea of “readiness” as a precondition for partnering with a place on racial equity or social justice has some privileged assumptions and ways of working built into it.

For all those reasons, it might be more useful to think about “goodness of fit” – a term that has to do with how likely two events are to occur together. We are using it here to think about the extent to which there is a good fit between what a community needs and wants and what various helping partners bring to the table. If a community doesn’t want what you are offering, that is different from saying they are not ready to engage in your effort. This is partly a difference of language, and partly a different way of really thinking about how you work with others in racial justice or racial equity efforts.

To begin to think about the extent to which there may be a good fit, a group that is offering resources and supports to a community to work on racial equity and social justice can ask itself the following types of questions:

- What are the strategies and processes we believe it will take to make progress toward the particular racial equity or social justice issue we hope to work on together with this place (see [Tip sheet: Laying Out Assumptions: Understanding Your Theory of Change](#)).
- What parts of that are we very good at? How do we know? For example, does our evidence look at different results for different racial/ethnic groups? Long-term as well as short-term results? What might be contributed based on the fit between our strengths and what is required to do the work?
- How can we be completely open with our partners about what we do not know how to do? How can we invite them to help us understand what we don’t know that we don’t know?

- How willing are we to increase our understanding of privilege, racism of different kinds and the power relationships in our work and organization, and to put them on the table for scrutiny by our partners?
- What risks can we take as individuals, an organization or in partnership with a community? Who do we protect by virtue of our board, leadership and relationships? How will we handle the consequences if our work is successful at changing the status quo?

To understand what a community might want and need, we can do listening and dialogue strategies (see [Community Engagement](#) and [Dialogue](#)) and community assessments (see [Community Assessment Tools and Resources](#)). There are several toolkits, including the [Race Matters Toolkit](#) and the [Viable Futures Toolkit](#) that are also useful.

Once we have a clear sense of what we bring to the work, and a clear sense of what a community wants or needs with respect to the issues on which we are working, we are in a better position to assess “fit” – the likelihood that our partnership will be productive and successful. To do this, we can ask ourselves the following questions:

- What is feasible to accomplish in this place, given the starting point, where we want to go, the resources of time, money and people we bring and other resources that are possible and likely to be leveraged to the effort.
 - If this analysis suggests we work on fairly modest or short-term goals, how can we link that work to groups who can sustain and expand the work over time – what can we get started and what’s the best way to hand it off?
 - If we cannot think of ways to hand-off our short-term work, are there other kinds of work we should be doing – recognizing that movement toward racial equity or social justice requires sustained effort and comprehensive strategies.
- To what extent do the people with whom we are working – including ourselves – have a common vocabulary and analysis to talk about structural racism, and from which to build strategies (head work). What are the opportunities to build or strengthen that ability in this place or that we can bring from outside?
- What sorts of strategies and actions have been effective in the past in this place – what change strategies fit the culture and often are successful (“hand” strategies)? For example, does this place do well with broad community organizing that creates pressure on institutions to change their policies and practices? Does it build champions who get things going? Does it build on relationships more than formal memoranda of agreement? Is it most effective using bold strategies or incremental ones?
- Are there personal transformation and/or leadership type programs in place on which we can build (heart strategies)?
- What capacities are needed to implement the strategies? Do we know how to help others build those capacities? If not, are there people or groups in the community who have those capacities and/or can help build them among our group?
- Do we have agreement on what we want to be the legacy of our work in this place? Have we built our exit strategies into the plans from the very beginning? Are they transparent, equitable and of use to the community? Are we putting more in, in terms of benefits (capacities, resources, and genuine changes in the well-being of people) than we are taking out?

- Finally, is there a good relationship and understanding among all partners about what would be considered success, and how the group will handle any potential fall-out or negative consequences if that success is not achieved?

Answers to these questions can help an organization, coalition, funder or other group to decide if it is ready to work on racial equity or social justice goals with another group or a community. Answers to these same questions can help a community determine if a technical assistance provider, funder or other providers of support are offering the kinds of resources that are a good fit for them.