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## WHY START RACIAL EQUITY WORK, AND WHAT ARE ITS IMPLICATIONS?

### ***Impetus***

Be clear about why you are doing racial equity work. Clarity will keep your group grounded when the work becomes complicated and challenging, as it undoubtedly will.

Depending on the motivation for your work, different considerations will come into play. Racial equity work sparked by a particular racial incident may face different challenges and opportunities than work inspired by the need to address long-term, racial disparities. Special considerations for these two scenarios are outlined below.

### ***Racial Equity Work Sparked by an Incident***

Sometimes a group organizes in response to a particular incident. For example, a police department may face allegations of racially specific brutality, a public official may be the victim of racially motivated hate speech, or an unarmed young person of color may have been killed under “stand your ground” or other similar laws. One thing to remember is the incident itself is often “the tip of the iceberg” – that is, the specific incident around which you are organizing is the most current manifestation of systemic and long-standing issues. Another thing to remember is that not everybody will view either the manifesting incident, or its roots, in the same way. This is particularly the case in communities that have not organized around racial equity previously. Finally, not everyone will have the same level of confidence that actions taken in response to a particular incident will be effective or meaningful in the long-run – this is particularly the case in communities that have organized around racial equity previously, because incidents are recurring. All of these contextual factors are important to consider in choosing how to respond.

In addition, if you have begun racial equity work due to a particularly charged incident, then you and your colleagues will want to move both swiftly and cautiously—a delicate balance. When an incident occurs all eyes are trained on it. Direct response to an incident must be carefully tuned to the situation at hand so that the incident can be leveraged as a turning point rather than becoming a further wedge among communities and/or groups.

A first step is to convene trusted formal and informal leaders in order to gain advice, perspective and some level of consensus. It is important that these leaders are trusted by all, and that careful thought is given to who is brought together. Trust building is an essential element of racial equity work at every step and is something that needs to be nurtured throughout the process.

Many consider bringing someone in from the outside to lend some objectivity and to help reflect on and strategize around improving the situation. Again, take the time to ensure that the individual or organization is well respected by groups on all sides of the color line. Failure to do so results in an effort with little credibility and no traction. If the incident is of the magnitude that the media becomes involved, do what you can to provide language that promotes balance and understanding of the situation. [See [Working with the Media](#)]

### ***Long-Running Disparities***

One of the “benefits” of beginning the work due to long-running disparities, rather than a particular racially-charged incident, is that you are entering a less volatile situation than when responding to an incident. One of the drawbacks to entering the work this way, though, is that you must prepare to

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confront hard-to-move established patterns. While many are aware of racial disparities, it is unlikely that they will receive the same level of attention as when a racial incident occurs. Instead you are likely to encounter those (often in communities of color) who have tried repeatedly to move the needle on race relations and racial disparities and do not feel that progress has been made. And you are also likely to encounter (often in white communities) those who accept the disparities as something like a “natural order” and who are not aware of the roles that they might play. Though you may not have to deal with the intense passions you would confront in the wake of a hate crime or other incident, you will have to engage people’s deeply engrained points-of-view.

In order to break through these barriers, a compelling topic and way to frame it are necessary. An easy-to-understand relationship or something where the self-interest of all is evident can be leveraged as effective rallying points. It will be important, however, to think about and be prepared to explain why your undertaking is different from what has come before. [See [Framing and Messaging](#)]

Understanding what makes your undertaking different requires knowledge of the racial equity-oriented initiatives that have come before and their fates. Have access to solid data and maps to back up your perspective and be ready to leverage the supportive connections that you have in different communities and with different groups.

### **Whose Initiative?**

It takes courage and fortitude to undertake racial equity work of your own initiative. You will need a good strategy for gaining cross-racial and cross-sectoral partners. The work of undoing structural racism is too embedded to take on alone. Below are a few points to take into consideration:

- Be aware of your own position and what it means to the others with whom you’ll be working. This lends greater sensitivity and a broadened, more informed perspective.
- Be committed to long-term involvement. Initiating a racial equity effort is never to be taken lightly. And leaving a racial equity initiative too early can have a range of unintended consequences and in some cases can undermine the work significantly.
- Take time to become involved in discussion and learning with others doing similar work so that you will feel less isolated, and so that you can learn and share your own lessons, thus expanding the movement’s capacities and effectiveness.

There are other points to keep in mind if you are undertaking racial equity work because you have been asked to. You may find the issues to be important and compelling, but you may also worry about whether you are the right person, and/or about whether the effort you have been asked to put forward will amount to anything. In order to alleviate such anxiety begin by talking to others and learn what you can about what has worked for them. Keep in mind that it is unlikely that we will make progress on dismantling structural racism unless everyone plays a role.

### **How should the work be phased?**

Below are a few frequently asked questions for which we have provided some preliminary tips:

- Begin by talking with the most legitimate? and trusted experts, advocates, and stakeholders.
- Develop a group of champions of formal and informal leaders. The work of promoting racial equity is longitudinal and you will want to have a group of supporters who understand what is at stake, the mission of the work, and who will provide the support and connections.

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- Invest in building the capacity of these champions. One key lesson learned by other community initiatives is to take the time to invest in a training process so this group has a similar racial analysis and definitions.
- Establish norms and processes for working together, including ways to bring in new champions and leaders.
- Know that undertaking racial equity work is not unlike preparing for a marathon. Marathons can seem like extraordinary feats, and yet tens of thousands of people finish marathons every year. Just as in training for a marathon, careful pacing is essential. As Clarence Stone and his colleagues note, “*Marathoners set an ambitious goal, but break down the overall course into many shorter segments and discipline themselves to maintain a sustainable pace.*”<sup>1</sup>

### **What are the most common potential pitfalls?**

- Not having everyone’s views, perspectives, and interests on the table can lead to invisible yet influential undercurrents in a group. Take the time in the beginning for everyone to discuss their perceptions of the work and their interests in being a part of it. Being clear about what is at stake and having concerns and issues on the radar will make it easier to handle them when they emerge during the course of doing the work. (See resources under [Civic Engagement](#), [Dialogue and Deliberation](#))
- When people understand the problem differently there is more room for diverging priorities and agendas. Coming to agreement about a basic framework for understanding the problem and its solutions is very helpful for keeping clarity and focus.
- Both the tensions and the stakes are high and people can find it hard not to get burnt out by the magnitude of the challenge. Clarity of purpose helps to anchor the work, as does the achievement of small wins

### **Potential Challenges**

While there are many challenges as you take up racial equity work, being aware of them at the outset definitely helps in mitigating their impact.

- Lack of trust is, understandably, one of the challenges that surfaces, often very early in the work. Whether across color lines, generations or between groups from similar communities, lack of trust must be addressed when it becomes evident.
- It is more likely than not that a new initiative will encounter competing groups and agendas. Make every effort to know what these different groups and agendas are and, if possible, position your work so that it enhances rather than competes with existing work.
- Something unexpected and often contentious almost always arises over the course of the work. “Expect the unexpected” and do not let it affect perseverance.
- Impatience with a perceived lack of progress can develop over the course of an initiative. If you prepare for the work not being in a straight line and for the ways in which progress is often met with resistance and retrenchment you will be much more likely to sustain the efforts.

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<sup>1</sup> Stone, Clarence N., Henig, Jeffrey R., Jones, Bryan D., Pierannuzi, Carol. *Building Civic Capacity: The Politics of Reforming Urban Schools*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2001. p. 168.

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- The attitudes of wariness, jadedness, and “people have tried before...” have basis in reality. The more these attitudes can be countered with acknowledgement of achievements the better for the strength and longevity of the effort.

### **Identifying Opportunities**

Identifying challenges is no problem for the work of promoting racial equity, but identifying opportunities can seem like a more difficult task—especially identifying opportunities that will be appealing to a critical mass of people. With a little bit of creative thinking, however, the opportunities become evident.

- As covered above, a racially charged incident must be handled carefully, but it can also present an opportune moment to talk frankly about underlying causes and what can be done about them.
- Reports by universities and government can also be important leverage points. In the case of Kansas City, for example, a report featuring recommendations on how the Kansas City region could expand opportunity via the growing life sciences industry there sparked an initiative that ended up involving more than 80 of Kansas City’s key leaders to devise a strategy to improve Kansas City’s education-to-employment pipeline and to decrease the racially disproportionate graduation rates.
- Participatory evaluation of a group’s work can serve as a tool for learning and action, and can present another opportunity for gaining interest and buy-in among group members. (See [Inclusive Evaluations](#))
- Take the time to identify potential allies to your work. There may be unlikely allies in institutions, corporations and government who can help to leverage change in unexpected ways.
- Identify young leaders and include them as much as possible in your efforts. Not only do young leaders have much-needed generational perspective, but their energy and insights can serve to infuse the work with a sense of urgency. Including young people is also key to leadership development—a crucial component of keeping racial equity work alive and on track.

(See resources in [Identifying Opportunities and Challenges](#))