

RACE

Is Your Company Actually Fighting Racism, or Just Talking About It?

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The wave of uprisings across the nation have made it clear that police brutality disproportionately impacting Black Americans is out of hand. Many businesses have sought to distance themselves from such violence with statements and pledges.

But the same racialized violence that many are waking up to as unfair, unjust, and unacceptable, is happening within the walls of our businesses. The key difference between “police brutality” and “corporate brutality” is the means. The former is relatively, although not exclusively, more physical. The latter is more systemic and covert. But in either case the result is the same: People are injured, abused, damaged, and/or destroyed.

To adequately respond to the current uprisings, leaders must reckon with the Black experience inside their workplaces.

We have spent the past week listening to Black employees within several different companies. A common theme that emerged from these conversations was the disconnect between a

company's statement or commitment of resources externally and the daily employee experience. This disconnect is not new, but the awareness of its depth is novel for some.

Several companies have publicly acknowledged this disconnect. Larry Fink, CEO of BlackRock Inc, stated, "As a firm committed to racial equality, we must also consider where racial disparity exists in our own organizations and not tolerate our shortcomings." Jason Kilar, the CEO of WarnerMedia, explicitly named racism as a problem in the company and committed to work towards change.

The current moment has the potential to be pivotal in addressing the disparity if corporate leaders have the wherewithal to identify the harm being done to Black employees and employees of color, to name company- and industry-specific actions they will take to remedy the harm, and to hold themselves accountable.

Identify the harm without being defensive.

Defensiveness is a common reaction when waking up to the realities that racism is operating on your watch. You might feel personally responsible for the harms that are outlined. You might *be* personally responsible in some cases. But disrupting the harmful patterns will require deep listening and learning, not defensiveness.

And it may be that you already have the information you need. One sentiment we consistently heard from Black employees was, "We've been here before." "We've had focus group after focus group." These responses suggest that in some companies identifying the harm is as simple as asking employees of color about their experiences or looking back at data already collected. The hard work for leaders is taking *in* the data and taking *action* as a result.

Get specific about internal and external actions.

Blanket and abstract statements that merely denounce police brutality sound more like a politician trying to get votes than an institution prepared to take action. It tells people what you are *against* without having to commit to being *for* anything. Perhaps now more than ever, talk is cheap, and you need to guard against this saying at your company: *When all was said and done, there was a lot more said than done!*

Employees are attuned to the differences between political statements and real commitments. Some notable examples of companies committing to specific action are Uber, which has announced no delivery fees when customers order from Black-owned businesses. Internally, they have tied senior executive pay to measurable progress on diversity goals. Activision has added additional resources and in-game reporting systems to identify and ban racist language in their online gaming environment. These are small steps that companies have made to mitigate harm in a matter of days.

Deal with the discomfort.

Another theme we heard from Black employees was that while top-level executives were making statements, their managers lacked the capacity to translate the message. At times

they spoke awkwardly, fumbling over their words or side-stepping the issue completely. The way we are socialized around racism leaves white people unpracticed and uncomfortable talking about, let alone leading initiatives around race and racism.

To prevent this discomfort from being an obstacle to change, you might provide professional development opportunities that help managers reflect on and talk about race and racism — and not merely the race of others, but their personal racialized experience. For there to be sustainable change, all leadership, and white leadership, in particular, needs to tolerate their discomfort and push forward.

Be accountable.

If your organization takes a stand against racism, you must also articulate how progress will be tracked and communicated back company-wide. Otherwise, you look untrustworthy and disingenuous. There's no need for shame or guilt if your results are not glowing or swift. What has been given years to root will not be unearthed overnight.

Dig in and do the work as you would with a new account or a coveted growth opportunity. Consider the work it takes to commit to lifting weights and getting stronger. You would not walk into the gym, lift a heavy weight once, and declare you are strong. You would most likely seek expert guidance, and then you hold yourself accountable to lifting those weights consistently over time before you would expect to see results. You might avoid a workout, but doing so only makes the gains harder to come by in the long-term. Building the capacity to be anti-racist similarly takes commitment over time, involves hard work, and is not always pleasant. However, the results — a stronger company — are worth it.

One of the legacies of the Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which protects employees against discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin, was that it switched the focus from “intention” to “impact.” That is, it exposed and refuted the idea that harm is only realized when one can document intentional hate in the hearts of key organizational agents.

Instead, it opened our eyes to the reality that harm is best detected via its impact on people. This impact is caused by racism as a system, a pattern of norms, and policies that inflict corporate violence, not merely individual discriminatory behavior.

Institutions who are leading the way at this moment are grappling with the reality that the racism we are collectively calling out has been going on for centuries. They are reflecting on why it took this long for them to take a clear stand. Some are reflecting on how taking a stand before sadly did not keep George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and too many others from being killed. And they are reflecting deeply on how the racism that they are standing up against is replicated or facilitated inside their walls. That work calls for us to listen, to be innovative and specific, and to take action to create lasting change beyond this moment.

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