

U.S. Businesses Must Take Meaningful Action Against Racism

by Laura Morgan Roberts and Ella F. Washington
Harvard Business Review
June 01, 2020



Mark Felix/Getty Images

The United States is in crisis. As we write this article, videos of racial violence and racist threats toward Black people in America flood social and news media channels. Public demonstrations against injustice are happening in at least 30 localities. During non-violent protests, other parties have engaged in vandalism and looting, spurring varied and often disproportionate police response. Several cities are burning, while Covid-19 continues to rage throughout the country, hitting minority communities the hardest.

In a week that focused on “reopening the economy,” everyone has become keenly aware that there is more than one pandemic affecting U.S. lives and local economies. As the American Psychological Association has declared, “we are living in a racism pandemic” too. World leaders are weighing in. The United Nations has urged action from U.S. authorities.

No matter your racial, political, or other identity, these events are almost impossible to escape. In particular, millions of Black people and their allies are hurting. And these issues are not ones that organizations or their leaders — from CEOs at the top of the hierarchy to team managers on the frontline — can ignore.

While conventional diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives focus on employee engagement and belonging, today’s challenges reach far beyond marginalization in the workplace. We now see and hear Black people who are suffering from the weight of dehumanizing injustice and

the open wound of racism that has been festering for centuries. Black leaders like Robert Sellers, the University of Michigan's vice provost for equity and inclusion and chief diversity officer, are openly sharing their feelings of exasperation. Blogs like Danielle Cadet's caution readers that "Your black colleagues may look like they're okay – chances are they're not." Another social media message that has gone viral really struck us: "There are black men and women in Zoom meetings maintaining 'professionalism,' biting their tongues, holding back tears and swallowing rage, while we endure attacks from a pandemic and police. Understand and be mindful."

The psychological impact of these public events — and the way it carries over into the workplace — cannot be overstated. Research shows that how organizations respond to large-scale, diversity-related events that receive significant media attention can either help employees feel psychologically safe or contribute to racial identity threat and mistrust of institutions of authority. Without adequate support, minority employees are likely to perceive their environments as more interpersonally and institutionally biased against them. Leaders seeking to create an inclusive environment for everyone must find ways to address these topics.

Avoiding Missteps

First, we'd like to outline three common missteps to avoid.

Keeping silent. For people not directly impacted by these events, the default response is often silence. Many Whites avoid talking about race because they fear being seen as prejudiced, so they adopt strategic colorblindness instead. We know that many managers also think they lack the skills to have difficult conversations around differences.

But no one has the perfect words to address atrocities in our society. It is the leader's responsibility to try, conveying care and concern for all employees but especially targeted groups. As Desmond Tutu once said, "If you are neutral in the situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor." You might be tempted to rest on the laurels of your organizations' diversity statements and active employee resource groups. But that is not enough. The words of Dr. Martin Luther King remind us: "In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends."

Becoming overly defensive. Another common misstep when approaching uncomfortable conversations about racial injustice is to react defensively, especially when our world views, positions, or advantages are questioned or challenged. Robin DiAngelo's research on white fragility highlights this phenomenon. For instance, when learning about police brutality against unarmed Black people, one reaction might be to search for evidence about what the victim did to deserve abuse, rather than demonstrating compassion and empathy. Another example is diminishing protesters by focusing on and judging those who engaged in looting instead of discussing the unjust act that drove people to the streets. Leaders must resist such reactions because they do not allow for constructive engagement. Instead, they make members of targeted groups feel even more alienated. Remember that comments on systemic inequalities are not personal attacks.

Overgeneralizing. When triggering events occur, there is a tendency to make sweeping generalizations about groups of people involved in the public conflict. Though individuals of the same race, gender or other identity often have shared experiences, there is diversity within groups that should be recognized. Instead of presuming that all members of your in-group or out-group think and feel similarly and talking about what “everybody knows,” how “all of us feel,” and what “none of us would ever do,” leave room for dissenting points of view. When in doubt, ask employees about their individual experiences to honor their uniqueness. Think about how you can allow your employees to discuss what’s happening without putting them on the spot or asking them to speak for everyone in their identity group.

Best Buy’s senior leadership team offered one of the first corporate statements acknowledging the death of George Floyd under a white police officer’s knee in Minnesota, the harassment of bird-watcher Christian Cooper by a white woman in New York City, and the death of jogger Ahmaud Arbery at the hands of armed white gunman in Georgia, while also paying service to the fact that the Black experience in America is not monolithic: “We write about these ... events ... not because most of us know what this fear must be like. We are as a group, by and large, not people of color. We write this not because most of us have known anyone personally in a situation like this. Thankfully, most of us do not. We write this because it could have been any one of our friends or colleagues at Best Buy, or in our personal lives, lying on the ground, struggling to breathe or filming someone as they threatened us.”

Citigroup CEO Mike Corbat acknowledged that many employees have experienced racism in their everyday lives in overt and subtle ways. “I want you to know that your colleagues and I will always stand with you,” he said in a memo to employees. “While I can try to empathize with what it must be like to be a black person in America, I haven’t walked in those shoes.”

Taking Meaningful Action

Next, we’d like to provide a framework for meaningful action. Leaders must not only offer physical and psychological safety. They also have the power and platform to lead change. Statements from the top are valuable, but they are just a start. Anyone, at any level of the organization, can take small steps to exercise greater compassion and initiate action that provides needed support and promotes racial justice for Black workers as well as others who are marginalized. Managers have a particularly important role in connecting with their employees on these issues. Here’s how:

Acknowledge. It’s important to acknowledge any harm that your Black and brown coworkers have endured. This means committing to lifelong learning about racism. Seek the facts about racist events, as well as the aggressions and microaggressions that your minority coworkers have most likely faced inside and outside of your organization. We suggest the following steps:

- *Do the research to fully understand events, using data from reliable sources. Take the initiative to search beyond social media.*
- *Do give your Black and brown employees the space to be angry, afraid, disenchanted, or even disengaged from work.*

- Do seek out support from your human resources team or office of diversity and inclusion. Books and articles can also be good resources. Three we recommend are: *Race, Work and Leadership: New Perspectives on the Black Experience*, which one of us edited and to which we both contributed, as well as the related HBR article series “Toward a Racially Just Workplace”; *The Person You Mean to Be* by Dolly Chugh, and *How to Be Anti-Racist* by Ibram X. Kendi. There are also free resources such as the “Talking about Race” web portal from the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.
- Do not rely on Black and brown people to educate you about what happened in order to justify their hurt and outrage or counter “colorblind” rhetoric.
- Do not ask your Black and brown leaders or employees to comfort or advocate for colleagues or justice initiatives.

In the organizational setting, you have the power to step up. JPMorgan CEO Jamie Dimon and the company’s diversity chief Brian Lamb wrote a memo to U.S. employees stating: “This week’s terrible events in Minneapolis, together with too many others occurring around our country, are tragic and heartbreaking. Let us be clear — we are watching, listening and want every single one of you to know we are committed to fighting against racism and discrimination wherever and however it exists.”

At Georgetown University, president John DeGioia wrote a heartfelt message to the community acknowledging the harm of a series of racist events: “On too many occasions over the years, there has been cause for me to share reflections with our community, as we grapple with the devastating impact of racism and hatred in our nation. In August 2014, following the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri; in December 2015, following the grand jury decision in the killing of Eric Garner in Staten Island, New York; in August 2017, following the march of white supremacists and neo-Nazis in Charlottesville, Virginia. In these moments, which encompass far from the full extent of experiences of racism and racist violence, I have tried to frame the work in which we must engage within the mission and purpose of the Academy.”

Affirm. People are looking for leaders to affirm their right to safety and personhood and help them feel protected. When presidents, governors, mayors and sheriffs aren’t doing so, corporate, university, and non-profit leaders can. This means offering continued opportunities for reaction, reflection, conversation, growth, development, impact, and advancement. Affirmation can start with creating a space for employees to share. For example, when asked, “How are you today?” many people of color respond in a scripted manner, instead of answering honestly. Instead, use more thoughtful prompts and questions.

You might say something like this: “I’ve been thinking about the harm of racism in our country, especially considering recent events.” Next, describe your personal reaction and concerns, then make a commitment. “I’d like to help in promoting equity, so here’s one thing I plan to do to help prevent future tragedies like these.” Explain those intentions. Then, offer to engage. “Please let me know if there’s anything else I can do to be supportive, even if you just want to talk about what’s happening. I understand if you don’t, and I won’t be offended. But I just want you to know that the door is open, and that I care.” The last line is important. Not

everyone will be interested in or comfortable with discussing racism at work, especially if they haven't built a solid foundation of trust.

Act. Think critically about how you can use your power to effect change. Employees value words of understanding and encouragement, but leaders' and organizations' actions have a more lasting impact. We have witnessed some courageous steps, such as Joan Gabel, president of the University of Minnesota, ending contracts with the Minneapolis Police Department after George Floyd's death. Franklin Templeton Investments fired executive employee Amy Cooper after her interaction with Chris Cooper in Central Park.

Georgetown president John DeGioia's statement went on to say: "Our role in society — to pursue the truth — through the methodologies and disciplines through which we establish knowledge in our world, demands our engagement. In our response, we have sought to accelerate our academic commitment to addressing racial justice and to address our own connection to the institution of slavery and the enduring legacy of racism and to undo the structural elements that sustain this legacy."

More examples include YouTube pledging \$1 million to the Center for Policing Equity, Glossier giving \$500,000 to support racial justice organizations and another \$500,000 to Black-owned beauty brands, and Peloton not only donating \$500,000 to the NAACP but also calling for its members to speak up for and learn ways to practice anti-racism.

What can you and your organization do in your community? What would promote equity and justice and activate meaningful change? Whether you are a senior or junior leader, how can you advocate for such action?

Racism isn't just Black people's problem; it's everyone's problem because it erodes the fabric of society. Leaders at every level must use their power, platforms, and resources to help employees and communities overcome these challenges and build a better world for us all.



Laura Morgan Roberts is a professor of practice at the University of Virginia's Darden School of Business, and the co-editor of *Race, Work and Leadership: New Perspectives on the Black Experience* (Harvard Business Press, 2019).



Ella F. Washington is a professor of practice at Georgetown University's McDonough School of Business and the founder of Ellavate Solutions, which provides executive coaching and diversity and inclusion strategy and training for organizations. She can be reached at info@ellavatesolutions.com.