Building an Anti-Racist Workplace

Own the fight to end systemic racism at work

As with all organizational imperatives, the fight to end systemic racism needs to be led from the top and be informed by your employees, especially women of color who have been historically and systematically marginalized. But as you undertake this work, recognize that the systemic racism we are now grappling with in our national dialogue is NOT new.

Consider the wider context of this moment amid a pandemic that is disproportionately impacting Black, Latinx, and Indigenous communities. The killing of Black people by state-sanctioned racialized violence. The rise of discrimination and hate crimes against Asian communities. The lack of action in cases of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls. This is all happening because of institutionalized racism and sexism, which governs how we care for and value people in this country. Now is the time to reflect deeply, examine your own organization, and speak up and show up for your staff.

Do not be silent in this moment

This is a moment in time when leaders everywhere need to speak out. If you are unsure what to say, seek guidance from your Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Lead or outside advocacy groups in developing a message that is authentic to you and your organization.

> ► **Don't let fear of saying the wrong thing keep you silent.** If you say something harmful or hurtful, even unintentionally, immediately issue a genuine apology and reiterate your commitment to combatting racial and gender discrimination.

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- **Know that silence can feel like violence.** Black people across the country are calling on all of us to acknowledge the harm felt by their communities. Saying nothing builds on those acts of violence. Understand that communities of color, LGBTQIA+ employees, and workers with disabilities need harms to be addressed, and institutional silence is complicit in that harm.

- **Be humble about where you're starting from and commit to backing up public statements with action.** If you have not done this already, now is the time to add anti-racism to your core values and operationalize those values by evaluating all of your policies and decision-making processes through an anti-racist lens.

Don't just signal support. Root out racism at your workplace.

- **Assess the demographic makeup of your entire staff**, at all levels, and up and down the wage scale, looking at factors such as gender, race, ethnicity, disability, LGBTQIA+ status, and more to be able to accurately analyze inequities while being mindful of people's agency in deciding which identities they feel comfortable disclosing.

- **Establish clear goals** tied to becoming an anti-racist workplace and attach owners and success metrics to them so that you can track your organization's journey over time.

- **Apply an [intersectional](#) analysis** as you seek to understand and improve the experience of your staff. Recognize the overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination some of them may face because of their race, gender, sexuality, gender identity, ability, and other critical forms of identity, and center their experiences in this work. Analyze the effects that your actions have on LGBTQIA+ employees, people with disabilities, older workers, and people with caregiving responsibilities — and then work to develop more inclusive policies.

- **Investigate the effects of your external actions** on Black people and people of color, particularly women. Consider bringing in outside expertise to evaluate the impact of your organization. How do the products you produce or the policies you lobby for impact Black communities? What can you do through your business to support Black women? The work that your organization does externally is directly connected to your internal culture. It can either build credibility and trust or undermine your stated values.

- **Devote resources** toward efforts that actually enhance the lives of Black communities and communities of color. Invest in structural changes that will genuinely benefit communities of color. For example, you can commit to a strategic planning process that centers on anti-racism; hire facilitators that specialize in racial equity and racial healing; or design long-term programs to develop and retain your talent. Set significant resources aside for training that effectively teaches people of all races and genders how to combat racist behavior, including unconscious bias and microaggressions.

Hold conversations to bring awareness to racism at work and create genuinely safe spaces where people can share their experiences openly

▶ **Hold several spaces for your Black employees and employees of color to gather and respect their boundaries and wellbeing.** This includes creating, funding, and prioritizing Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) for Black, Latinx, Asian, Indigenous, and other communities and making time and space, either virtually or in real life, for ERGs to gather, support one another, and raise issues, such as toxic workplace culture, fears of retaliation, and other barriers that prevent clear pathways to career growth and promotions. Recognize and support staff who hold multiple identities and may want to engage with more than one group. And while these should be safe spaces for employees of color, communicate that there are channels — including anonymous ones — to address and correct issues raised by ERGs.

▶ **Lead with empathy.** This is likely an exhausting and emotionally trying time for your Black staff. Ensure that they understand paid time off is an available option and that work can be reallocated in the interim. Respect the response you receive and make the offer again at a later time without an expiration date. This is not a time to add additional responsibilities or offload emotional labor onto your Black staff, particularly Black women who may be experiencing additional caregiving responsibilities at home. Encourage managers to ask their Black team members how they want to be supported and to honor whatever they may need, especially if you don't fully relate to their healing process.

▶ **Create opportunities for all staff to come together as a group.** In addition to holding spaces for your staff of color to gather, bring your entire staff together to share what they are thinking and feeling, to answer questions or concerns, and to discuss how your organization should evolve to meet the essential demands of this moment. Recognize that every staff member is starting from a different place and that their proximity to and understanding of systemic racism will vary widely. Be prepared to meet each person where they are without tolerating sexist or racist views and navigate these complexities by investing in experts and trained facilitators with cautiousness and understanding of these nuances. Some of your staff are already consumed by racial injustice while others are only just coming to terms with it. Ensure these spaces do not create additional trauma for your staff of color and that Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) do not bear the burden of explaining systemic racism to white staff. Amidst continued uncertainty around return-to-office plans, make sure these spaces are accessible to all of your employees — regardless of if they are working in the office or at home.

Lead the way on anti-racist efforts while learning from your BIPOC colleagues

▶ **Like other key priorities, anti-racism efforts should be led from the top, by the leadership team.** It is incumbent to educate yourselves independently, as this is self-guided work that you must approach before leading your teams *[See Demonstrating Your Leadership, pg 21]*. Be humble about what you don't know and reach out for advice. Do the work by [studying] how white supremacy, racial violence, and systemic racism have shaped, and continue to shape, American society. These issues are complex and pervasive. Consider how they shape your workplace and the lives of your employees.

▶ **Give voice to BIPOC leadership, colleagues, or employees, but do not lean on them to address these issues; you must own this work.** Involve Black staff and other staff of color in these efforts but don't expect them to do the work. Too often, Black staff and staff of color are called upon to help organizations navigate issues regarding race, only to end up shouldering burdens that are not theirs to carry. It is not right or fair to rely on your staff of color to tackle these issues; you must take the lead yourself.

▶ **If you're only asking for staff of color to weigh in on issues of race, that's an issue.** Give staff of color the option to contribute to your anti-racism work from the expertise of their lived experience and cultural sensitivity, but do not make assumptions about their time, emotional capacity, or interest in contributing. Give them credit, ask for their input, and run decisions by them, but be careful not to tokenize them. This can often happen when a trauma occurs that impacts members of a particular community, such as Black staff being asked to discuss police violence, Asian staff being asked to speak about Asian Hate, or Indigenous staff being asked to talk about colonization efforts.

▶ **Encourage and empower everyone to speak out against racist workplace practices and adopt a zero-tolerance policy for this behavior.** Set up systems that enable and empower your employees to come forward if they confront racist, unsafe, or illegal practices at work. These should cover a range of behaviors, from the most egregious acts to microaggressions that deprive your staff of the dignity they deserve at work. All of your employees, particularly women of color, must feel comfortable shining a light on workplace practices that jeopardize their safety or undermine their dignity.

▶ **Make sure you have a whistleblower policy in place that promotes a culture of transparency and accountability and gives staff a concrete way to share their concerns.** If you already have a whistleblower policy in place, review it and make sure it meets this moment. If not, work with your legal team to enact one that encourages your staff to unearth problems early and protects them from retaliation. Work with experts and facilitators to outline a clear process that facilitates learning, growth, and correction when incidents arise. Continue to check in with your staff about the processes that are created or revised. In a quickly evolving world, processes may need to be reevaluated or refreshed regularly.

Move into action swiftly to examine and dismantle racist and sexist practices embedded in all business functions

▶ **Evaluate the many ways racism shows up in the workplace and how racism harms staff and erodes company culture.** A lack of diverse representation at your organization may indicate racism or sexism within your recruiting and hiring practices. And language used in performance evaluations may reveal internal biases that impact pay and promotions.

▶ **Remove racism from your recruiting, hiring, and talent management processes and increase BIPOC representation across all levels and departments.** If you have paused new hires or are moving more slowly to fill positions, take the time to look for and build a more diverse pool of candidates. Remember that people are inherently biased toward those similar to themselves; however, if we are aware of implicit biases, we can work to combat them and cultivate more inclusive workplaces. And if you are in an industry that is growing and hiring, stay vigilant about protocols that promote the consideration of BIPOC and women candidates, even when you need to staff up quickly. Below are some practical tips for diversifying your talent pool and advancing your BIPOC staff:

  ▶ **Focus your talent pipeline:** Recruit candidates from historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and minority-serving institutions (MSIs). When recruiting at predominantly white institutions, seek out organizations that represent Black students and other students of color. Build relationships with networks that represent BIPOC emerging leaders. Place job openings on websites likely to reach talent of color and use inclusive language in the postings. Work with your local high schools and community college systems. Focus on skills, rather than credentials, which can artificially shrink your pool of candidates.

  ▶ **Commit to diversity internships, fellowships, and secondment programs** and commit a percentage of your internship hires to BIPOC. Consider how to support HBCUs and MSIs outside of recruiting. This could include investing in scholarships or offering financial support to these institutions in other ways. To reduce internship inequities, pay interns and provide housing stipends so that students from all financial backgrounds can access these opportunities.

  ▶ **Overhaul your talent processes to remove racist practices.** Conduct a thorough examination of your interview process, your performance management practices, your compensation structures, and your retention and promotion policies. How are these processes failing your Black staff? What additional mentorship and sponsorship can you offer your talent of color to ensure that they are supported at each stage of their career and have the opportunity to reach their fullest potential within your organization?

▶ **Examine your company policies related to dress code**, including [hairstyles](#) and other matters related to appearance to ensure they are not barriers to BIPOC professional and socio-economic advancement. Know that perceptions about what is deemed appropriate are rooted in white supremacy. Learn about how respectability politics has impacted the Black community.

Position the fight to end systemic racism as an ongoing effort that you are committed to in the long run

Becoming an anti-racist organization is not a static achievement; it is lifelong work that you and your colleagues must commit to each and every day. Make sure that the goals you set are understood, measurable, and embodied by everyone, and that every member of your team knows what role they play in achieving these goals. Remind everyone that you are building an essential muscle that will grow stronger with effort and time. There is no shortcut to this work; the only way forward is through.

As the author of *So You Want to Talk About Race*, Ijeoma Oluo [says](#), "You don't need to be free of racism to be an anti-racist. Anti-racism is the commitment to fight racism wherever you find it, including in yourself. And it's the only way forward."

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