

Talking About Race – Message Advice

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America’s conversation about race is more in the open and more present than any time since the Civil Rights movement. Which raises the question, what’s the best way to communicate about race if our goal is not just to decry racism? What’s the best way to combat the aggressive use of race to divide us? And to help people understand why racial disparities continue and what to do with them?

In our communication we want to reach two groups of people. One is people who understand the imperative of championing racial justice. The other is people who have questions about the role of race in society. I’m not talking about people who really are driven by racist views (even if they don’t see that). I am talking people who may support progressive issues but also find an appeal in messages about government services “going to people who don’t work” or really think that immigrants may “threaten their jobs.” Or people who really don’t understand why racial disparities persist or see racism in purely personal terms.

In talking about racism it’s helpful to think about three different ways it is expressed:

- 1) *Strategic racism*, a term coined by [Ian Haney-Lopez](#) for dog-whistle racism or coded racism, is the use of race by the powerful to divide people who have common interests in opposition to the powerful. Today, the dog-whistle has been replaced by a Twitter bullhorn.
- 2) *Racial disparities* are the differences in outcomes and conditions between people of different races. Communicators often describe these to emphasize that a problem is more acute among communities of color.
- 3) *Structural racism*: The racial barriers and injustices embedded in our institutions, our policies and our culture. Structural racism has deep historic roots, setting in place unjust policies based on race that magnify and reverberate through time and are root causes of racial disparities.

Whatever you do – be solution oriented: If we want to reduce cynicism and despair we need messages that are solution oriented. Research finds that when we show that change is possible, people are more likely to both support and advocate for progressive policies. Focusing on solutions is essential to overcome the belief the powerful can be defeated or that change is possible.

A good way to do that is by telling stories about successful change. Talking about how people came together to make change in the past, and/or are doing so successfully now, can be a powerful tool to engage people on your issues.

Message Advice: Below we lay out a simple narrative structure, with examples for the three kinds of racism we want to speak to. Follow these short narratives for the most effective messaging.

Strategic racism and the Race Class Narrative: In 2018, the think tank Demos released the findings of an extensive research project aimed at communicating about strategic racism. The research was conducted by ASO Communications (principle is Anat Shenker-Osorio) and a team at Lake Research Partners. Titled the Race Class Narrative (RCN), the research found a short narrative that has a strong appeal to both base and persuadable constituents. You can find the complete RCN messaging recommendation report [here](#). Lake Research summarized its four key components as:

1. Start with a values-based aspiration that introduces race in an inclusive way;
2. Define the problem as people being divided;
3. Put the blame on those would divide us so they can benefit. We must have an explanation of how they gain from dividing us for this to be more widely believed;
4. Then appeal to unity as a solution across races to benefit a policy agenda. *And put the weight of the message here.*

An example, from the original RCN research is:

1. “No matter where we come from or what our color, most of us work hard for our families.
2. “But today, certain politicians and their greedy lobbyists hurt everyone by handing kickbacks to the rich, defunding our schools, and threatening our seniors with cuts to Medicare and Social Security.
3. “Then they turn around and point the finger for our hard times at poor families, Black people and new immigrants.
4. “We need to join together with people from all walks of life to fight for our future, just like we won better wages, safer workplaces, and civil rights in our past. By joining together, we can elect new leaders who work for all of us, not just the wealthy few.”

Racial Disparities: We often want to point out the racial disparities that people of color are more likely to experience when we describe a problem. For example, “Wages are low, particularly for Black and Hispanic people.” However, doing so can reinforce existing racial prejudices as people may fill in the reasons with their own biases rather than thinking of systemic causes and solutions.

For that reason, when talking about unequal outcomes always describe the barriers that cause them, so that people don’t fill in the explanation with their own prejudices. Barriers are a strong metaphor because they are put up by people and by social practice – they are not natural. For example:

- “Wages are even lower – due to discrimination in hiring, underfunded schools and a biased criminal justice system – for Black and Hispanic people.”

Better still, put this in a solution way:

- “We need to break down the barriers – hiring discrimination, underfunded schools, biased criminal justice – that hold down wages and opportunity for Blacks and Latinos.”

Still a better approach is to tell a story that combines aspirations, solutions and success:

1. Lead with values and common purpose, introducing race in an inclusive way.
2. Talk about breaking down systemic barriers so you are describing unequal outcomes in solution terms, including the choice to break down barriers. Show that solutions can work.
3. Return to an aspirational conclusion.

An example would be:

1. “Every working person should be paid enough to care for and support their families, no matter what color we are or where we come from.
2. “We need to raise wages for all working people and that includes breaking down barriers like hiring discrimination, underfunded schools and a biased criminal justice that hold down wages and opportunity even more for Black and Hispanic people. We’ve learned from steps we’ve taken before that when we take measures like raising the minimum wage to \$15 or provide the funding for schools our kids need to succeed, wages and opportunities both rise.
3. “When we rewrite the rules so all working people, White, Black and Brown, men and women, get paid enough to live a decent life, our spending creates jobs on Main Streets and helps all our communities thrive.”

Here is another example on an issue with a long history of unequal outcomes:

1. “When it comes to having a child, no matter who we are or where we come from, all of us want a healthy pregnancy and baby.
2. “We know from lots of experience that when moms get nutritious food and quality health care, they are much more likely to have a healthy baby. Which is why we are working to take down the barriers that today result in babies born to Black women being more likely to not reach their first birthday. Choosing which moms get the food and care they need for a healthy baby is a choice we don’t need to make.
3. “By joining together, we can be sure that all women, Black, Brown and White, have a healthy pregnancy and baby.”

Structural racism: Structural racism – also called institutional racism – addresses the systems in our society that have caused and perpetuate racial disparities. It’s often a challenge for people to see or understand them. And if we focus too much on their history, it can reinforce that change is almost impossible. So it’s particularly important in addressing structural racism to be clear about its causes and to emphasize that progress can be made.

The structure is:

1. Values-based, aspirational beginning that introduces race in an inclusive way;
2. Explain structural racism in concrete terms, referring to history and naming who is responsible. Research (not included in the summary below) found that explaining more is helpful;
3. Propose solutions in a positive way, that conveys success;
4. Value-based, aspirational conclusion.

Here are two examples:

1. “Every family — Black, White and Brown — should have the security of some savings, whether to fall back on in times of an emergency, to put down a deposit on a house or help start a small business.
2. “That’s tough for a lot of Americans today and because of our history much tougher for African Americans. It’s not just that slavery started Black people off without anything, it’s a long history of discrimination, like our government denying low-cost mortgages to Black communities while providing them to White communities in the 1930s. Or Black veterans not being able to take advantage of the GI bill to pay for college, because colleges wouldn’t admit them.
3. “Today, we need to take steps to assure that every American family – no matter what color they are – has financial security. When we do that, it’s simple fairness to take specific measures that assure Black families have the opportunity to save or buy a house or afford college. We know we can do this; we’ve made real progress despite all the challenges in expanding opportunity, but we can’t stop now.
4. “When all of us – Black, Brown and White – can fully participate in our economy, we will build thriving communities across America.”

Another example:

1. “Equal justice for all, no matter where you come from or what color you are, is a fundamental American value,
2. “but for generations our criminal justice system discriminated against African Americans. Today, videos of Black men being killed by police just because they were driving or selling cigarettes has helped more and more White Americans understand what’s been happening for a long time. No mom or dad should have to fear that their child will be profiled or harmed, and their future ruined, because of the color of their skin.
3. “Now, people of all races, Republicans and Democrats are coming together to right this long-time wrong. In response, we are beginning to see cities, states and even Congress, take down barriers like cash bail, high fines and long criminal sentences for non-violent offenses that were set up to discriminate against Blacks but continue to destroy the futures of millions of Americans, White, Brown and Black.
4. “The fight for equal justice in America is everyone’s fight, a fight for thriving families and communities across our nation.”

Conclusion

There’s nothing new about the use of race to divide people; sadly it’s as old as the Republic. But as with all crises, we should look at the virulent use of race today as an opportunity to change the narrative and create a new cultural common sense. An understanding that when everyone can fully participate in our society, when we can each contribute to our full potential, the better all of us do and the nation does. A story of an America that works for all of us not just the wealthy few, where regardless of the circumstances we were borne into, all of our families and communities can thrive. That’s a story we should all tell, every day.