

# PHILADELPHIA BUSINESS JOURNAL

## Viewpoint: How to make meaningful change against racism at your organization

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Over the last three months, the protests against the extrajudicial killings and police brutality experienced by the Black community have caused many Americans to face – for the first time – the question of why the pain of Black men and women has been normalized, marginalized, and tolerated for so long.

As this movement expanded, and these voices grew louder, corporate America followed suit and issued public statements expressing pain and anger and condemning the anti-Black biases that exist in this country.

These statements, however, are just words without meaning if these denouncements of racism end with these public declarations. For real change to be realized, each organization must orient itself in a way to take deliberate and ongoing action to overcome a system that has failed so many for so long. Deeds must follow words, or the words won't matter.

Here are a few recommendations to jumpstart your organization's efforts to combat systemic racism and to ensure that your company's public statements are the beginning of your antiracism efforts and not the end.

### Expand your statement to include concrete action items

For change to occur in your organization, you must commit to doing more than merely speaking out against injustice. You must commit to taking real action and producing real results. While each organization's priorities are unique and should be determined by listening to the voices of your employees, the following are some actions to consider:

- Commit financial resources and personnel to an on-the-ground community organization dedicated to stopping systemic racism and uplifting people and communities of color
- Require that all new hire applicant pools include people of color before the selection process begins (similar to the NFL's Rooney Rule or the Mansfield Rule being adopted by many American law firms)
- Empower employees and leaders (through training and education) to call out racism and other forms of bigotry whenever and wherever they see it
- Examine historical data on hiring, promotion, and leadership to determine how racial and gender biases affect upward mobility and implement internal protocols to overcome these biases

One final point about taking action – accountability is key to implementation. Whether you form an “accountability committee” or regularly audit the organization's



progress, do not neglect this point! As my mentor has said many times, “only that which gets measured gets done.”

### Take steps to widen participation

Historically, the responsibility for advancing the ball in regard to diversity and inclusion has been placed squarely on an organization's diverse members. The same cannot be expected with regard to combatting racial injustice. Instead, for true progress to be made, all of us need to embrace this movement and take affirmative steps to translate our outrage and heartbreak into action.

Here are three steps you can take right now to gain traction and support for your antiracism efforts:

- First, recruit and activate the most influential members of your organization through direct requests. Request their participation on committees, invite them to inclusion events and discussion forums, and (most importantly) require them to listen to those most affected by systemic racism. With leadership on your side, it is much easier to take decisive action.
- Second, include a question in every employee self-evaluation that requires that employee to explain the affirmative steps that person has taken to combat racism that year. This tactic not only

requires each employee to actively consider his or her unique contribution throughout that year, but it also demonstrates that the organization will not reward an employee who fails or refuses to participate.

- Finally, widely communicate that every employee's participation is critical to your success. I have often heard white men and women suggest either that they have nothing to contribute or that their perspectives are unwanted. You must disavow them of this perception and extend an invitation, as their power and privilege are necessary to make meaningful change in your organization.

### Set up opportunities for meaningful conversations about race

Studies have shown that many white people do not involve themselves in conversations regarding race because they are reluctant to confront their ignorance about racism and to accept their inability to tolerate racial stress (i.e., white fragility). However, we cannot allow members of our organizations to be willfully ignorant of these crucial issues, and it is our responsibility to provide some practical tools for impactful discussions to occur.

It is also crucial to develop a vocabulary regarding systemic racism within your organization. Recent studies suggest that much of white America cannot define fundamental terms such as “antiracism,” “white fragility,” and “white privilege.” As such, we must provide opportunities for our organizations to understand these terms and, more importantly, to discuss them in an open and intelligent manner. Fortunately, there are plentiful online resources and expert speakers available to broach these topics with your companies.

Finally, you should set expectations for internal conversations about race and racism. Organizations must explain to participants that these talks may be uncomfortable or combative and that the conversations must continue nonetheless. We must also anticipate the reluctance of white employees to participate due to the fear of saying the wrong thing or using the wrong word. Again, while all employees must take ownership of the words they use, organizations can encourage discourse by recommending that participants engage in a respectful manner by asking questions (rather than sharing opinions) and by actively listening to the perspectives provided. Only by incorporating these conversations into our everyday work and home lives will the emotional and social barriers be overcome.

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