



LOCAL AND REGIONAL
**GOVERNMENT ALLIANCE ON
RACE & EQUITY**



Commonly Asked Questions When Working on Racial Equity

Conversations about race and equity can sometimes be challenging. As a facilitator or leader, it is important that you be prepared for difficult or confrontational questions. Being able to address challenging questions in a compassionate and thoughtful manner will help to increase your effectiveness as a leader, enhance the engagement and commitment of your colleagues, and advance racial equity. Ignoring or being dismissive or antagonistic towards questions can cause the person asking the question to check out, become mad, upset, or hostile. Your responsibility is to build as much understanding, commitment, and support as possible.

This handout uses the communications model contained in our “Talking about Race Toolkit” (<http://www.centerforsocialinclusion.org/communications/talking-about-race-toolkit/>)

“ACT” – Affirm, Counter, Transform.

Follow the steps in order.

Step 1 – Affirmation

Offer understanding. You don’t have to agree with what the person has said, but responses should be empathic, acknowledge the underlying feelings, and build rapport while working toward a common purpose. Try to connect emotionally and look for shared understanding.

Step 2 – Counter

Help develop a more complex understanding by providing supplemental information that “counters” the question. Remember that growth occurs when participants leave their comfort zones. Explain the root cause of the problem, focusing on institutional and structural drivers of racial inequities, as opposed to individual decisions. Name race.

Step 3 – Transform

Offer concrete ideas for actions the person can take, based on the new information you’ve just provided. Support application of new knowledge and awareness. Describe the benefits of addressing racial equity, and provide paths that lead to solutions.

The remainder of this handout offers some commonly asked questions, along with short sample responses. Depending on the situation, you may have time to expand the response. You should customize responses to make them relevant to your own organization and situation, especially when it comes to transforming. Ideally, you should strive to shift questions into positive commitment and actions.

Q-1: Isn't this just about class, why are we talking about race?

A: Race and income are closely connected in the United States, and income inequities are large. We definitely need to be working on reducing income inequality. What we know, however, is that racial inequities aren't just about income. When we hold income constant, there are still large inequities based on race across multiple indicators for success—including education, health, jobs, incarceration, and housing. And at the same time, race continues to be the “elephant in the room.” For us to advance racial equity, it is vital that we are able to talk about race; we need to both normalize conversations about race and operationalize new behaviors, at both the individual and institutional levels. To do so, we need the active engagement of people who have more commonly focused on class, such as yourself.

Q-2: “Shouldn't we be using a “colorblind” approach? I don't see race / I don't see color.”

A: Race is indeed a social construct, meaning it has no actual basis in biology. However, we do live in a highly racialized society with deep and pervasive differences based on race, across all indicators for success. In other words, while race is a construct, the impacts for people of color are real. If we don't see color, we don't see important characteristics about people, and we limit our own ability to develop strategies to advance racial equity. While it is now illegal to explicitly discriminate against people of color, systems, policies, and procedures still work to favor white people. Because of this, it's important that we do talk about race, even though it can sometimes feel challenging. We need to both normalize conversations about race and operationalize new behaviors at the individual and institutional levels in order to advance racial equity. To do so, we need people like you to be actively engaged to work on new policies and practices.

Q-3: “Why do we need this if we have a diverse staff (or elected officials) already?”

A: We do have a diverse staff (or elected officials), and we can be proud of that progress. It is a great step for this organization. However, although it's an important part of an overall strategy, simply having a diverse staff (or elected officials) isn't enough to ensure racial equity. We still have deep and pervasive racial inequities in the community. It's important to look at how all our systems, policies, and procedures can work to advance racial equity, not just in our workforce (or among our elected officials). At the end of this presentation we'll all have a chance to envision how we as individuals, and our organization as a whole, can work toward racial equity. We recognize that there are staff here from many different departments who will have ideas, and we want to work with all of you on additional policies and practices that will advance racial equity in our organization and in the community.

Q-4: “Management doesn't care about these issues and I don't see them doing anything about this problem, even when it is brought to their attention.”

A: It can certainly feel frustrating when it seems like nothing is moving or it's all talk and no action. I agree that we do need to feel a greater sense of collective urgency. Some of the things we have done so far in this area are _____. We are currently working on _____. In the future, we plan to work on _____. We need the concerns, ideas, and support of people like you who can work with us on additional policies and practices that can advance racial equity in our organization. And we all need to be able to integrate racial equity into our own specific jobs. I'm wondering whether you and your work team might be willing to pilot the use of a racial equity toolkit.

Q-6: “What is the role of white people in doing work for racial equity?”

A: This is a complex and important question that I appreciate you asking. There isn’t a one-size-fits-all answer to this. Sometimes it means being quiet so people of color have room to speak. Sometimes it means speaking up if you notice individual or institutional racism. Sometimes it means educating other white people about racism. For white people in the room, it can be helpful and important to think deeply about ways you have benefited from systems, policies, and procedures that have harmed people and communities of color. We also know that when systems and structures are broken, they are frequently not working as well as they could for us collectively, and there are benefits to advancing racial equity for all of us.

Q-7: “What about gender and sexual orientation. Aren’t there institutional problems around those issues as well?”

A: There are definitely problems and inequities around gender, sexual orientation, and other areas of marginalization, and it’s important that we work on them too. There are some similarities between racism, heterosexism, and sexism in that they have all been built into institutions. At the same time, focus and specificity are necessary. Strategies to achieve racial equity differ from those to achieve equity in other areas. “One-size-fits all” strategies are rarely successful. For example, the movement around marriage equality laws is a unique strategy used specifically for LGBTQ equity. Different barriers and strategies need to address each area of marginalization.

Focusing on racial equity provides the opportunity to introduce a framework, tools, and resources that can also be applied to other areas of marginalization. This is important because a racial equity framework that is clear about the differences between individual, institutional, and structural racism, as well as the history and current reality of inequities, has applications for other marginalized groups. In addition, race can be an issue that keeps communities from effectively coming together. Recognizing the interconnected ways in which marginalization takes place will help to achieve greater unity across communities.

I’m hoping that you will work with me to look at the intersections across areas of marginalization and to build bridges to achieve equity for all our communities.

Q-8: “Don’t ALL lives matter? Why do people say that only Black lives matter?”

A: Thanks for the question. To put it in context, a movement has been building after the deaths of African-American youth and men Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri and Eric Garner in New York, among others, at the hands of police officers. The unifying message of the movement has been “Black Lives Matter,” and some have responded to this message by changing the phrase to “All Lives Matter.” Yes, all lives matter, but not all lives have been affected by police and the criminal justice system, both historically and presently, in the way the African American lives have. The Black Lives Matter statement calls out the particular struggle the African American community faces in regards to biased policing and inequities in the larger criminal justice system and beyond. When people of color call out ways their communities are particularly affected by issues, it’s important not to co-opt or change the message—but rather to support it when asked. All lives will matter when Black lives actually matter—and our systems, policies, and outcomes reflect that.