Leading a Racially-Just Organization: A 5-StepToolkit

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Free source for leaders committed to building healthy and resilient organizations

Content

Why did we write this Toolkit?

Your people determine the success or failure of your organization. No other resource brings creativity, innovation, and out-of-the box thinking. These skills lead to next level productivity, profitability, effectiveness, efficiency, quality, and loyalty.

One of the toughest responsibilities leaders face is managing people. This requires an organizational environment where all people are treated fairly.
Build your people! Provide employees with opportunities to grow. Engaged, loyal, and fulfilled employees, working together, will always outperform people who don't feel that same connection.

THIS TOOLKIT IS:

Practical, "leadership tips" for you to bring back to your teams;
Grounded, in HR management and emotional science;
E-friendly, save and come back to;
Dynamic, click for access to resources.

Ira Kitmacher, Esq., J.D., M.S.

Our goal is to empower you, the leader, in building a workplace where all employees are appreciated, treated fairly, and work in an organization in which justice, regardless of race or other inherent characteristic, is the norm.
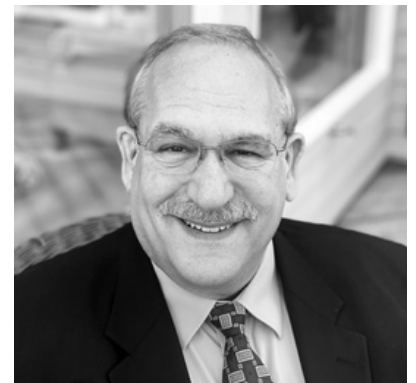

Tatijana Busic, Ph.D., C. Psych

L E A D I N G   D U R I N G   C R I S I S

The actions of leaders, in the midst of crisis, significantly determine the organization's fate. A cool deliberateness and a willingness to be patient, even under pressure, are critical. The ability to see opportunities, flexibility to anticipate and handle the unexpected, passion in the face of adversity, trusting and building trust, are key. Both managing the day-to-day, and leading by guiding people to the desired outcome, are needed. Leaders must take a broad, holistic view of the crisis' challenges and opportunities. They need to avoid taking a solely operational perspective—taking the long view. Leaders must resist the temptation to try and control everything, rather delegate where possible. Most importantly, leaders must keep their people first and foremost, over those resources that lend themselves more easily to metrics.

"Justice is what love looks like in public"
Martin Luther King

Leadership Resources

Article: The Psychology Behind Effective Crisis Leadership, Harvard Business Review, April 2020
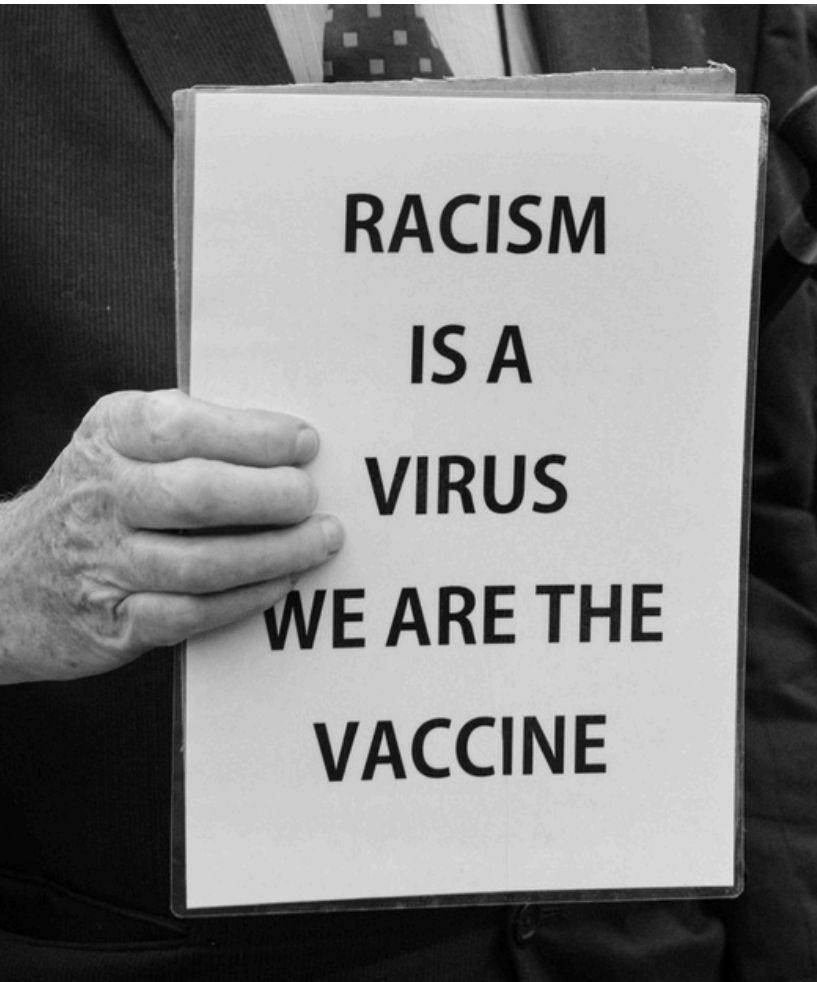*Article:* Leadership in a Crisis: Responding to the Coronavirus Outbreak and Future Challenges, March 2020
Podcast: Apple Podcasts on Crisis Leadership, April 2020

THE PROBLEM

All humans deserve equal justice in their communities and workplaces. Despite numerous efforts, this has yet to be achieved. Generations of civil rights advocates have pushed for and achieved improved levels of legal, political, educational, and other societal protections. However, the poor treatment of Indigenous peoples, people of color, and other racial injustices have yet to be fully overcome. Ingrained racism and its practitioners have given rise to movements by people of all races, colors, national origins, and beliefs to make meaningful change. Systemic racism still blocks the advancement of people of color in all societal realms, including organizations. This is unacceptable and must be remedied now. **Organizational leaders are in unique and powerful positions to achieve racial justice in their workplaces and beyond.** Achieving racial justice is not a sprint, it is a marathon and requires firm commitment that begins with you, the leader.

Racial justice begins with examining existing feelings, prejudices, procedures, and policies. Racial injustice ends when concrete steps are taken to change the organization's culture toward racial justice and fairness.

THE BIG QUESTION
Where do we begin?

INDIVIDUALS

- Get to know more people of color. Trust-building includes knowing people better!
- Question one's own beliefs, prejudices, and ideas about racial issues.

TEAMS

- Form racial justice committees, they provide opportunities to learn and see issues from different perspectives.
- Diversify leadership teams, offering true inclusion in thought work and decision-making.

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

- Mentor people of color!
- Provide opportunities for two-way feedback. Do people feel included? Do they feel comfortable disagreeing?
- Address unconscious bias (e.g., hiring, promotion, development practices, etc.).

Person-Centred Change Model

Circular diagram with the following nodes:
- Educate on & Understand Racism
- Practice Inclusive Leadership
- Listen & Communicate
- Engage All
- Zero Tolerance

"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."

Martin Luther King

LEADERSHIP RESOURCES

LEADERSHIP TIP

- As a leader, building strong relationships with your people is in your, the organization's, and employees' best interest.
- Business-wise building these relationships aren't "nice to haves," rather they're "need to haves."
- Trusting and empowering relationships between leaders and employees lead to greater motivation, satisfaction, efficiency, productivity, and organizational justice.

Ask Yourself...

- Does your organization support its leaders through skill development, knowledge acquisition, management tools, systems, and processes, to embrace a people-centered approach?
- As a leader, do you understand what your people need and want, and are you meeting these?

Step 1

Education

Personal experiences impact how people learn to see and relate to themselves, others and the larger social world. Even well-intentioned people may not be aware of their own racist or discriminatory behavior—a form of "unconscious bias." In order to change, we need a common understanding of the problem.
The steps to educate on, and understand, racism include:

Acknowledge that racism and discrimination exist in varying degrees, in yourself, your community and your organizations. It's not easy and will feel uncomfortable but we need to name this truth;Education programs cannot undo racism, but can build understanding about racism and discrimination, and to help you learn about the role of allyship; *Expand your perspective and explore the larger context.* Understand, contextualize and articulate the origins of this current crisis. Explore the devastating effects on individuals, organizations and communities; *Develop person-centred change* processes and start learning from others! There are many forms of data collection such as surveys, discussion groups, or conversations. Take the time to learn about others' perspectives and experiences and incorporate this data into change-management processes; *Take responsibility and self-educate.* Do not put the burden on people of color to explain racism;Learn the history. Bigotry is grounded in ignorance. We must educate ourselves. It is important to know how and when the systemic oppression of people of color started and why it has continued. Reading and understanding history, the civil rights movement, and current events are critical;

"Managers do things right. Leaders do the right thing."
-Warren Bennis, Leadership Author and Consultant

*Author Christina Torres, in the August 14, 2019 Education Week article **The Urgent Need for Anti-Racist Education**, said "We must acknowledge that we have all been shaped by a system built on inequality and racism—one that consistently bombards us with stereotypical images of certain cultures and excludes voices from different backgrounds.Understanding racism and its roots, questioning our own privilege and biases, and slowly dismantling those systems and beliefs...is a life-long process.*

LEADERSHIP RESOURCE
(clickable)

TED Talk: Racism has a cost for everyone, Heather McGhee

Book: Me and White Supremacy: Combat Racism, Change the World, and Become a Good Ancestor, Laayla F. Saad

Article: U.S. Businesses Must Take Meaningful Action Against Racism, Lara Morgan Roberts and Ella F. HBR, June, 2020

LEADERSHIP TIP

- Hold conversations acknowledging and seeking to understand what's happening on the topic of racial justice.

- Express an appreciation for existing disparities and how to address them.

- Role- model empathy.

ASK YOURSELF...

- How are you handling this moment in terms of racial justice?

- Are you able to empathize with the victims of racial injustice?

- Are you communicating your support for efforts to achieve racial justice?

Education (cont'd)

Ask meaningful questions and explore the racial impact of programs and policies. Begin with developing the knowledge and confidence to ask hard questions, such as:

- What aspects of our organization actively work to create inequities?

- What are the power dynamics at play?

- Whose voices are at the table? Whose are not?

- What is the cultural lens through which policies, practices, and experiences are interpreted and determined? Is it one lens or many?

- Who benefits from the way things are done?

Embed racial justice into all processes and your own leadership style. Don't wait for crises! Incorporate racial justice training into leadership strategies. Invite your teams to share and learn from the different ways they exercise collective, action-oriented stewardship; and talk about implicit racial messages and meaning.

LEADERSHIP RESOURCES

Podcast: **Momentum: A Race Forward Podcast Book**: **Automating Inequality—How High-Tech Tools Profile, Police, and Punish the Poor,** Virginia Eubanks. **Article**: **First, Listen. Then, Learn: Anti-Racism Resources for White People,** Julia Wuench, Forbes, June, 2020.

ASK YOURSELF...
How can I make my employees' lives better?

How can I remove obstacles so my employees, of all races, achieve success?

Inclusive Leadership

Actively involved, inclusive, and flexible leadership are the most critical factors in making meaningful change. Without these factors, 70% of organizational change efforts fail. Changing deeply embedded views on a topic as complex and sensitive as race requires leaders who serve as role models, practicing inclusivity, engagement, and mindfulness. Nothing is more important for achieving a racially-just workplace.

Some steps for practicing inclusive leadership:

Empower Others
- Empower all to drive change and achieve racial justice. **Let go of some power and perfectionism;**
- Motivate others through encouragement and compassion;

Define the Problem and Create Support Systems
- Employ a **racial impact assessmen**t to analyze and build connections needed to tackle structural racism;
- **Form a coalition** representing all/diverse levels, views, and geographic locations. Change is strongest when it is driven at every level, not top—down;
- Dedicate **resources to support the change**—human, financial, and technological;
- **Break down rigid hierarchical** structures, lines of authority, divisions of labor, task specialization and routinization.

The University of Toronto's Sarah Kaplan, in her 2019 book The 3600 Corporation, wants organizational leaders to consider both the financial and ethical implications of all their decisions.

ASK YOURSELF...

- Are you empowering others?
- Are you creating and providing needed support systems, tools and resources?
- Are you communicating your intentions clearly?
- Are you taking accountability for outcomes?
- Are you being a mindful leader?

LEADERSHIP RESOURCES

TED Talk: **How to overcome our biases? Walk boldly toward them.** Verna Myers
Book: **Inclusive Leadership: The Definitive Guide to Developing and Executing an Impactful Diversity and Inclusion Strategy: - Locally and Globally,** Charlotte Sweeney, 2016.
Article: *The Key to Inclusive Leadership,* Juliet Bourke and Andrea Espedido, HBR, March, 2020.

A 2015 McKinsey report on 366 public companies found those in the top quartile for ethnic and racial diversity in management were 35% more likely than others to have financial returns above the industry mean.

Inclusive Leadership (cont'd)

Communicate Your Intentions & Plan Clearly

- Make it clear you're here and ready to listen;
- Understand how your organization's commitment to racial justice is reflected or inhibited in its structure. **Explicitly communicate your commitment through concrete planning, diverse staffing, and inclusive policies to racial justice;**

Provide Access to Tools and Resources

- Support managers in making racial justice a conscious part of planning and decision making;
- **Reframe to align racial justice efforts with organizational values, mission, relationships, and trust;**

Be a Mindful Leader

- Pay full attention, be present, and open to diverse views, control your own responses, and don't feel threatened;
- Put the needs of employees before your own and prioritize altruism (It will feel so good!). Be a role model, a steward, and a positive influence. **Walk the talk, be self-aware, transparent, and reflect a high ethical standard.** Be hopeful, optimistic and resilient;
- **Acknowledge and reward** contributions and performance which reflects racial justice;
- Do not back away from **difficult conversations!** Lead and model how to navigate challenging situations and conversations with confidence and grace;
- Lead the organization through racial justice efforts instead of relying solely on "experts." **Practice understanding, acknowledge your power, show humility, ask questions, listen, and don't be afraid to be wrong!**
- Use your power and influence to take a stand, make a statement, and support the sentiments of employees of color.

Listening & Communication

When asked, most people say that they are good listeners and communicators. If that is the case, why do so many people struggle with hard conversations and conflict? Leaders often face organizational pressures that trigger overly bureaucratic, legalistic and tactical communication. While relevant in certain contexts, such communication can also limit the understanding of complex problems and developing strategies that drive sustainable solution. Learning how to listen and communicate well, are essential to successful change and involve skills that we must develop (it's not innate). With practice, leaders can harness the skills necessary for next-level communication.

Steps to better communication:

Are you grounded?

Effective communication begins with you. Check-in with yourself and ensure you've taken care of your mental and physical needs.

What are you thinking? If thoughts are critical or negative, stop and ask yourself, why? And then reframe and identify other possibilities.

How does your body feel? If your heart is racing and you feel nervous, go for a walk and calm down before speaking to others. Remember anxiety or nervousness is normal. It's how you behave in response to it that matters.

What emotion are you experiencing? If you are experiencing fear, shame, or anger, take a minute to understand why? How does this emotion direct your attention? What is your action impulse? Is it aligned with your intention, how you want to behave and the impact you wish have on others?
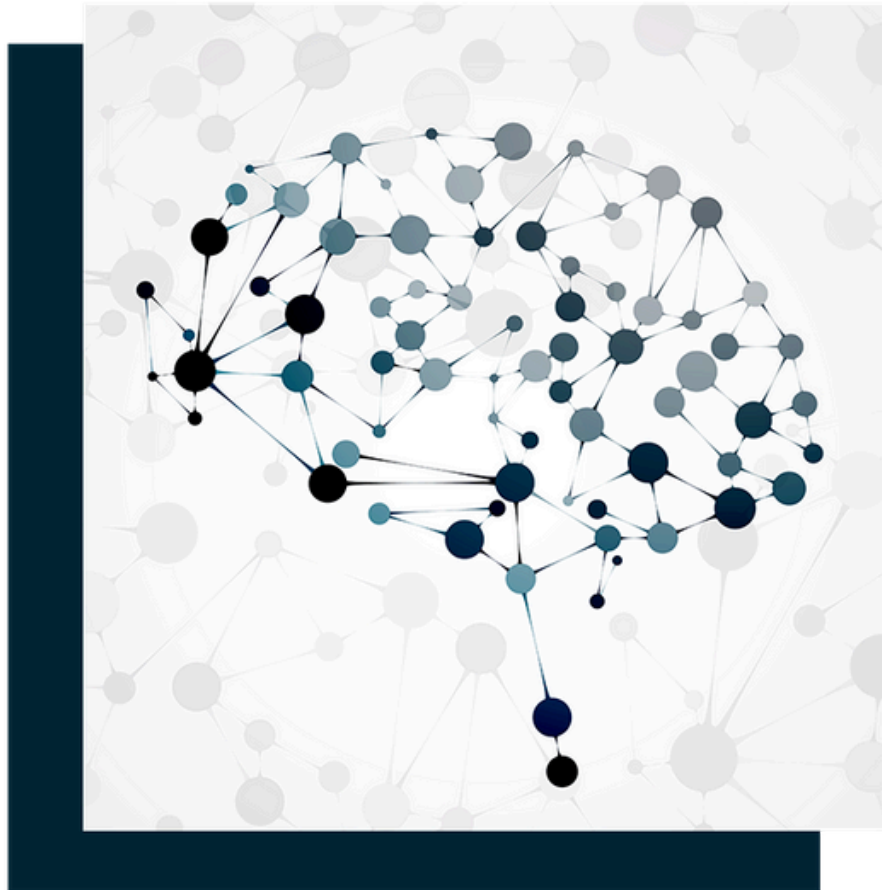
Leadership Resources

Ted Talk: Dr. Amanda Kemp talks about **holding space for healthy conversations about race**

Podcast: **How Can I Say This...,** Beth Buelow

Book: **Non-Violent Communcation: A Langauge of Life,** Dr. Marshall Rosenberg

Article: **Good Communication Starts with Listening,** Nancy Foster, Mediate.com.

Listening & Communication (Cont'd)

If you are experiencing any of these emotions, take a time out before you embark on a conversation with others. **Strong emotions, especially the negative ones, affect our tone, openness to ideas, and capacity to solve problems.** If you are experiencing any of the following emotions, take a minute. Catch your breath. **Try a breathing exercise**.

Fear (anxiety) in response to uncertainty – Fear is a defensive emotion that is focused on threat, urgency, and action. You may feel blood flowing into your legs (should I run?), freezing in parts of your body (should I hide?), rapid heart rate (should I fight?). Shame in response to not having the answers as a leader.

Shame usually blends several emotions like anger and anxiety. It's linked to your leadership identity and how you think of yourself as a person. If you have a strong fear of failure or criticism, you may experience shame as you struggle to find solutions to our humanitarian crisis.

Anger in response to feeling helpless, thwarted or blocked – Anger is a powerful defensive emotion. When mastered, it mobilizes our resources for powerful action. However, when left unhinged, it can trigger excessive rumination (How dare they do that?) and perpetuate harmful aggression.

Are you curious?

Expectations and assumptions are conversation killers, instead of learning and deepening our understanding of each other and complex problems, the goal becomes proving a point. This is not dialogue.

Leadership Tip

Stop intellectualizing, defending, telling, explaining, or rationalizing!

Ask questions like:

Wait, what?!
That's interesting, say more?
Help me understand?

Listening & Communication (Cont'd)

Psychological Safety

Provide a safe space, time, and process for listening, talking, and learning about race and racial/ethnic identity. Talking about race and dealing honestly with conflict provides people the opportunity to learn, transform their thoughts and feelings, and heal. Effective listening requires hearing, understanding, self-disclosure, remembering, interpreting, evaluating, exploring all sides, and responding.

How to begin.

- **When you don't understand, say it!**
- Commit to regular check-ins with your teams.
- Communicate regularly, frequently, and transparently;
- Transparent communication is direct and respectful and is key, to earning and sustaining trust. **Don't leave any room for rumours or assumptions!**
- Amplify the voices of people of colour. **Hold people up!**
- When you see racism, do something about it! **Do not stay silent in the face of racism, address it.**
- Have real interactions with people of color. **Speak to and learn from people who may be different from you.** Ask them to share their stories and then listen with an open heart.

"Leadership is not about titles or the corner office. It's about the willingness to step up, put yourself out there, and lean into courage. The world is desperate for braver leaders. It's time for all of us to step up."
Dr. Brene Brown

Leadership Resources

TED Talk: Psychology Safety, Amy Edmondson
TED Talk: The Power of Vulnerability, Brene Brown

Build Engagement

Engagement is the measurable degree of employees' emotional attachment to the organization and it influences their willingness to learn and perform. Research has shown levels of engagement are, at best, inconsistent. Worse, levels of engagement remain generally low across many work sectors. Low engagement causes inefficiency, ineffectiveness, and has a negative impact on the bottom line. Lack of engagement on the topic of achieving a racially-just workplace results in a difficult to overcome obstacle to change. It is not enough leadership sees the need for a racially-just workplace; that view must be shared by all.

Communicate the Why

Communicate that engagement is Important
- Express empathy for human needs and values, they are essential in creating the desired change;
- Highlight, anchor, and embed changes in core values and mission;
- Share a **sense of urgency in creating the vision, solving problems, and creating change;**

Foster a Collaborative Environment
- Nourish the need for autonomy, competence, and relationships. Motivation and performance are strongest in this environment;
- Make **meaningful connections and friendships with people of all backgrounds;**
- Check your own privilege. Look at yourself in the mirror and ask yourself whether you engage in deliberate or unconscious racism;
- Do not "morally exclude" anyone by creating boundaries around justice. Practice fairness within and outside the group;
- Foster corporate social responsibility and citizenship, improving society.

Leadership Tip
Building engagement starts with an engaged leader. You should demonstrate why and how engagement is important to you as a leader, your leadership team, and the entire organization.

Ask Yourself...

- Am I communicating that engagement is important?
- Am I fostering a collaborative environment?
- Am I soliciting and accepting "out of the box" ideas, no matter the source?
- Am I ensuring the organization is continuously adapting, in a gradual way, to an ever-evolving environment?

Build Engagement (Cont'd)

Generate Ideas

- Employees, with unique insights and capacity, are vital change agents and should participate in crafting their organizational environment;
- Practice "ideation," **inviting all to collaboratively contribute ideas, empower employees as originators, and validate their competence;**
- Avoid "groupthink," or unanimous agreement, and encourage reasoned problem solving. Avoid overconfidence (the illusion of invulnerability and inherent morality), closed-mindedness (collective rationalization, and stereotyping), group pressure (pressure on dissenters, self-censorship, and the illusion of unanimity);
- **Solicit ideas, counterproposals, bring in "outsiders," encourage "devil's advocates," assess dangers and setbacks, and avoid isolating anyone;**

Continuously Adapt

- Continuous, agile adaptation is needed to thrive in an ever-evolving organizational environment. **Change should be continuous, not a series of stand—alone projects;**
- Change should be accomplished gradually, in small increments, by voluntary "nudging" toward desired outcomes without cutting off other options, rather than by applying pressure. Short-term wins motivate and increase momentum.

Leadership Resources

TED Talk: The Way We Work, Michael C. Bush, 2018.
Book: Rules of Engagement: Building a Workplace Culture to Thrive in an Uncertain World, Carolyn Swora, 2017.
 Article: 10 Simple Ways to Build Trust and Boost Employee Engagement, Daniela McVicker, June, 2020.

Zero Tolerance

Racism, like any other form of discrimination, is unacceptable. It has been a major blight on society for centuries, and is unacceptable in the workplace. Leaders must enforce a zero—tolerance policy toward racism.

The steps to achieve a zero—tolerance approach include the following:

- Anticipate, avoid and overcome the "threat-rigidity response" (the tendency of leadership to behave rigidly in the face of change). This can include restricting information, power, and "circling the wagons" to protect established practices;
- Resisters to change should be listened to, invited into the process, and appropriate process adjustments made;
- When someone does something racist at work, call them out, don't tolerate it and don't let others tolerate it. Whatever you do, don't just look the other way;
- It is important for leadership to **understand resistance (implicit or explicit)** to the goal of racial justice, as well as how this goal aligns or conflicts with institutional and inter-institutional goals and dynamics. Failure to understand and address such issues can undermine the effectiveness of leadership in general, but especially in matters of race;
- **Put in place safe avenues for people of color to give honest feedback about their experiences;**
- Consider establishing a position (reporting to the Chief Operating Officer or another senior executive) to advise senior leadership and take steps to achieve racial justice in the workplace.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

LEAD IN A WAY THAT YOU WILL BE PROUD OF ONE DAY

Your people are your greatest resource. They are essential to providing goods and services. They are the face and nurturers of the organization. Motivated employees make a significant difference in achieving the organization's objectives, and are major contributors to organizational profits and worth. One way to be sure your business will succeed is to look after your employees. As human beings, we all search for understanding and empathy from those we surround ourselves with. In the workplace, this can mean the difference between an employee just picking up a paycheck versus a committed and loyal employee who truly wants success for their company.

Given recent world events, the organizational desire to support employees of color, dig into and educate meaningfully on racism, overcome bias, and achieve inclusivity is unprecedented. It is clear that the established route of issuing positive and thoughtful emails, conducting training, dealing with complaints, and issuing internal policies is not enough. We are at a turning point, and we as leaders need to lead these changes. We must each take accountability and lead change in our organizations as never before. The good news is—you are not alone in this monumental task. We at Synapse Consulting are skilled at making these changes and are ready to help you achieve your racial justice objectives. That is why we created this Toolkit. We are humbly here to help with this critical and complex topic.

With Gratitude, Ira and Tatijana

Get to know
the contributors

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Tatijana holds a Ph.D., From the University of Toronto, Applied Science and Human Behaviour. As a clinical and organizational psychologist, she marries the art and science of human emotion and behaviour to how individuals, dyads, and teams think, feel, relate, and behave, at home and at work. She's a trauma expert and has guest lectured in organizations, universities, and hospitals on the psycho-biology of stress and change processes. She's a published author in career psychology and has been featured in media outlets such as HBR. Her graduate research focused on the career experiences of immigrant professionals in Canada.

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