



Quickstart Guide: Beginning Steps for Companies to Stand Against Racial Injustice

Right now, during countrywide protests against systemic racism, the issues of racial inequity and justice are front and center. Employees, already feeling increased tension and anxiety due to COVID-19, are looking to their employers to respond to their need for safety, both physical and psychological. In response to the protests and the racial inequity they've highlighted, many organizations have set out to provide their employees with a safe environment to discuss these matters openly and honestly.

This guide offers some basic considerations and resources for employers who would like to have these discussions and show their support for racial justice.

Look to Your Company Culture and Values

Whether or not you have any formal written information about your company culture and values, they exist in practice. If your company actively works toward creating an inclusive and respectful culture, then your approach should be grounded in your company values and demonstrate commitment to inclusion. If your company hasn't thought a lot about diversity and inclusion, this is an opportunity to begin a conversation about how the company can support people of color in a time with a disproportionate burden on their families and communities.

Release an Internal Statement about Current Events

Many companies are releasing public statements about racial injustice and current events, and companies who haven't yet done so are considering what to say internally or externally. External statements are beyond the scope of this guide and should be considered in conjunction with your senior leadership and communications department.

Before issuing an internal statement, it is important to really consider your intention for doing so. Think about the tangible actions the company is willing to take to fight racism both internally and externally. If a company's statement is seen as hollow or self-serving, it will likely create mistrust and could do more harm than good. Leaders may be hesitant to make any type of statement about current events because they fear they will say something wrong. However, silence sends the message that the company doesn't care, which can contribute to a sense of alienation and detract from efforts to create an inclusive culture. Employers can opt to speak up in solidarity with the Black community and denounce racism in an internal statement. Your words may not be perfect—such statements should be heartfelt and focus on positive actions the company can take. If you're worried that you might say something offensive, you can be proactive by disclosing that and inviting feedback. Of course, if you invite feedback, you need to be in a position to receive feedback—no matter how critical it may seem—and take steps to address it. At the end of the day, employees are more likely to remember the actions the company did or didn't take to counter racial inequity than the words in your statement.

Make Room for Your Employees to Care for Themselves

While some employees may have the ability to “detach” from current events, this involves a certain level of privilege. It is important to recognize that some employees will be more impacted and less able to leave current events at the door when they come to work. Managers should check in with employees to see if there’s anything the company can do to support them, keeping in mind that people of color, and in particular Black employees, are shouldering a larger emotional burden at this time. We recommend that managers encourage employees to engage in self-care if needed and be clear that they will not penalize those who need to use PTO or take a mental health day. You should also consider approving reasonable requests for flexible hours or temporary workload reductions on an as-needed basis. And if the company offers an Employee Assistance Program, you should remind staff of its availability.

Facilitate Company Conversations about Race

Having internal conversations about race can offer the opportunity for employees to share experiences, learn together, and identify actions your company can take to support an inclusive and respectful culture. Done well, such conversations can demonstrate your company is taking a stand to seek racial justice, equity, and healing, both internally and externally. At the same time, it is important to be thoughtful about the person or people chosen to facilitate these conversations to ensure that they are done in a way that doesn’t cause additional harm, particularly to people of color.

It takes careful planning and facilitation to create safe discussion spaces. Conversations about race can bring up all sorts of group dynamics, and sometimes well-meaning employees will say things that can inflame trauma around systemic racism. White people are typically insulated from race-based stress, and they may experience feelings of denial, defensiveness, or guilt during conversations about racial inequity. While these feelings are natural, they can quickly derail the conversation. It’s important for the facilitator to be ready to navigate these dynamics. They should also be able to address any biased or racist comments in the moment. We do not recommend requiring attendance at informal company conversations. If people of color are not well represented in your workplace or there’s been little inclusion work done, you may not have the foundation needed to create psychological safety and trust. Black employees and other people of color may be more hurt than helped by listening to White employees process their feelings.

Hearing surprise or denial about systemic racial inequity and, in some cases, employees discovering the notion of White privilege for the first time may inflame trauma related to systemic racism. Also, it's possible that well-meaning White employees will ask Black employees to teach them about racism, which is not appropriate or helpful under the circumstances. While Black employees certainly should not be excluded from the conversation, you shouldn't hold it against them if they do not wish to participate. One option is to allow a separate dialogue space during that time if your Black employees indicate that they would prefer that.

Another downside to mandatory attendance at a conversation that is not professionally facilitated is that it may also result in racist behavior and language that you aren't prepared to control. If attendance is voluntary, those who would be angered by the discussion can opt out, reducing the likelihood of an incident. If you decide to later host professional anti-racism or social justice training, we would generally recommend that attendance be mandatory.

Depending on leadership's comfort level and experience with navigating difficult conversations about race, the company may want to consider hiring a facilitator skilled in leading this kind of discussion. If that's not feasible, prepare by reading about how to lead these kinds of conversations, learn about unconscious bias and the dynamics of White privilege, and research and fully understand current events and their history using reputable sources. As a starting point, a very accessible resource on talking about race can be found [here](#).

Don't Ask Black Employees to Educate

As mentioned above, it's common that individuals expect Black people, including their colleagues, to educate them about racial issues. This puts an unfair emotional burden on your Black employees; it is not their responsibility to educate about racism or their lived experience of inequality.

Unless it's already part of their job, it's important that Black employees not be put in a position where they are required to educate other employees about racial dynamics and systemic inequity. Likewise, be aware of the power dynamic that exists between employer and employee, and don't ask if Black employees would be "willing" or "okay with" or would "volunteer" to lead conversations or otherwise educate their colleagues.

Provide Employees with Guidance on Respectful Dialogue

If you don't have the ability or desire to facilitate conversations about racial inequity directly, you can at least take steps to help conversations between employees remain civil. Unfortunately, there is no perfect policy or approach that will guarantee that employees approach one another with open minds, compassion, and measured language. But that doesn't mean you shouldn't try to set the stage as best you can.

You can acknowledge that conversations about current events can grow heated and reinforce the expectation that employees treat each other with respect. You can reiterate your company's commitment to a workplace that is free from discrimination and remind employees that discriminatory comments will not be tolerated. You can also provide employees with some basic guidelines for respectful conversation, such as these:

1. Assume positive (or at least neutral) intent from other speakers.
2. Treat communication as a dialogue, not a debate; if you find yourself wanting to "win," pause the conversation and consider the other perspective.
3. Be an active listener; if you catch yourself mentally planning what you are going to say next while someone is talking to you, refocus on what the person is saying. This will help the other person feel "heard" and contribute to meaningful conversation.
4. Approach topics you don't fully understand with humility; allow yourself to be vulnerable and acknowledge you're out of your comfort zone.
5. Acknowledge that the concepts of "right" and "wrong" differ greatly and attempt to learn about perspectives that differ from yours.
6. Consider tough conversations as an opportunity for personal growth.
7. Be open to learning new things.
8. Use "I" sentences—speak from your own experience.
9. Avoid generalizations, such as "all _____ are _____."
10. Use respectful, non-inflammatory language in line with the company's professional standards and anti-harassment and discrimination policies.

These are useful guidelines in any setting and, if taken to heart, should help your employees engage in respectful and productive conversations.

Company and Matching Donations

Consider making donations to organizations working for racial justice. Donating can be a visible (and relatively easy) first step, but employees will likely want to see additional and longer lasting actions at the company.

Matching employees' charitable donations is a common employment benefit, and one that can be quickly implemented if you don't have such a policy already. If you already have a matching program, now is a great time to remind employees about it.

Provide Paid Time Off for Volunteerism or Activism

Many employers offer employees paid time off specifically for volunteering (e.g., 16 hours per year to volunteer with a local non-profit organization). You could include paid time off for activism, as well. You can pick and choose what type of activism is covered, but it may be easiest to simply state the goal of the activism must not contradict the company's anti-discrimination policies or stated values.

Start a Lending Library

Informal lending libraries are usually stocked with employees' books from home, but there's no reason you can't contribute a range of books on racial equality. You can also offer to reimburse employees through your expense reporting system if they want to purchase books for download onto mobile devices or if your office is still largely (or entirely) remote. A policy for this could be as simple as:

We encourage employees to educate themselves about racism. We will support that education by reimbursing you for up to \$30 in non-fiction reading materials (or audio books) on those topics per quarter. If you are unsure if a book would qualify for reimbursement, please check with Human Resources first.

Here are some reading lists you or employees may want to choose books from:

- » [New York Time Anti-Racist Reading List](#)
- » [Time's Books About Anti-Racism](#)
- » [Understanding and Dismantling Racism: A Booklist for White Readers](#)

If providing paid reimbursement for books would put a financial strain on the company, you can gather a list of vetted free articles and podcasts for your staff.

Required Reading and Company Training

Most of the suggestions above will encourage employees who are self-aware enough to know that they have learning to do about racial injustice and privilege to make positive changes. However, this is unlikely to impact employees who are intentionally causing harm or who are deeply entrenched in their own bias and don't believe they need to learn more or change their behavior. Because those employees likely exist in every organization, you may want to consider required reading for managers or mandatory unconscious bias training for all employees. Company-wide anti-racism training and education about how to play a positive role in an inclusive workplace are also suggested next steps.

Other Actions

The steps above are in no way meant to be an exhaustive list. A company that wants to put some substance behind a statement about racial equality should, at a minimum, audit its HR and employment practices through a diversity lens. This will allow potential bias to be removed from your processes and identify ways your workplace can be more inclusive and welcoming to people of color.

Please check integrityhr.com frequently, as we plan to add additional content to support employers in creating inclusive workplaces.



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877-753-0970 • info@integrityhr.com