

15

Top Questions on Becoming an Antiracist Leader Answered



Torch
+
Dr. A. Breeze Harper



Introduction

This year has brought a renewed visibility for the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States, and along with it, an increase in people’s willingness to do the work to become anti-racists.

On July 15th, 2020 Torch launched a public 4-week course on Becoming An Anti-Racist Leader: Strategies and Action Steps for a More Inclusive Workplace. Torch co-founder Dr. Keegan Walden and I led this initial training to a group of over 200 committed attendees from companies around the world.

In each session, participants showed up to learn about the work it takes to become an anti-racist leader and how to put that work into action now. While Keegan and I came prepared with our curriculum, our participants enlightened us through their questions in each session.

What follows are the top 15 questions from our course on how to become an anti-racist leader. We hope that they empower you to do the necessary work to create more inclusive and equitable organizations.

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What do I do when I notice biased thoughts?

When confronting bias it's important to be cognizant of what your body is doing and how it's responding. Challenge yourself to dive into the discomfort without being reactive.

[Practicing mindfulness](#) can help you stop and realize, "Wow, there are some major biases happening in my mind, and what I say next is going to be really important." Confronting bias is uncomfortable and you may go through feelings of shame and guilt, which is normal, but don't hold onto those feelings.

One exercise I recommend for my students and others is to journal these thoughts to unpack them fully. For example, "I realize that I thought this way about this type of person

because when I was growing up these things would happen, and now I'm realizing that wasn't objective. I need to figure out more about myself and how that's impacting my leadership that I thought was built with good intentions." Layla Saad's new workbook, [Me and White Supremacy](#), is a great toolkit for introspective exercises that unpack you and your role in upholding, but also dismantling systemic racism.

Don't take the standpoint of not dealing with biased thoughts because it's hard. Have the courage to challenge those biases and respond from a mindful place.



What is the White Savior Complex?

The White Savior Complex has its roots in scientific racism and the belief that Africans and other nonwhite people were child-like; that they didn't know how to save themselves and it was the moral duty for white men to dictate what was best for nonwhite people.

For example, fast forward 400 years later. As a white person, say I look up some statistics about black people. I see that they don't do well in this or that. So, as a leader, I'm going to tell them what I think they should do so they can thrive. I know what is best for them and can save them from themselves.

White saviorism has good intentions, because you want to help, but it comes from a place where you think you know better; it's like a form of paternalism. You feel as though you can solve the problem without intimately knowing about that community and how they've been deeply affected by a systemically racist system. This is the [White Savior Complex](#).

I actually suggest that a more productive and antiracist response could be, "What I should be doing as a white anti-racist ally is listening. I should understand what that community's problems are, what their needs are, and that community should take the lead while I offer resources and power to help."

What does it mean to divest from white privilege?

[Divestment of white privilege and power](#) means white people harness and utilize all their power: education, resources, money, relationships, etc in service of racial equity.

With this strategy, in exchange for letting go of the ability to dominate and control, white antiracists gain moving a nation (in the context of the USA) towards a functional and inclusive one for all. Divestment is about redistribution of power and resources normally used to uphold systemic racism.

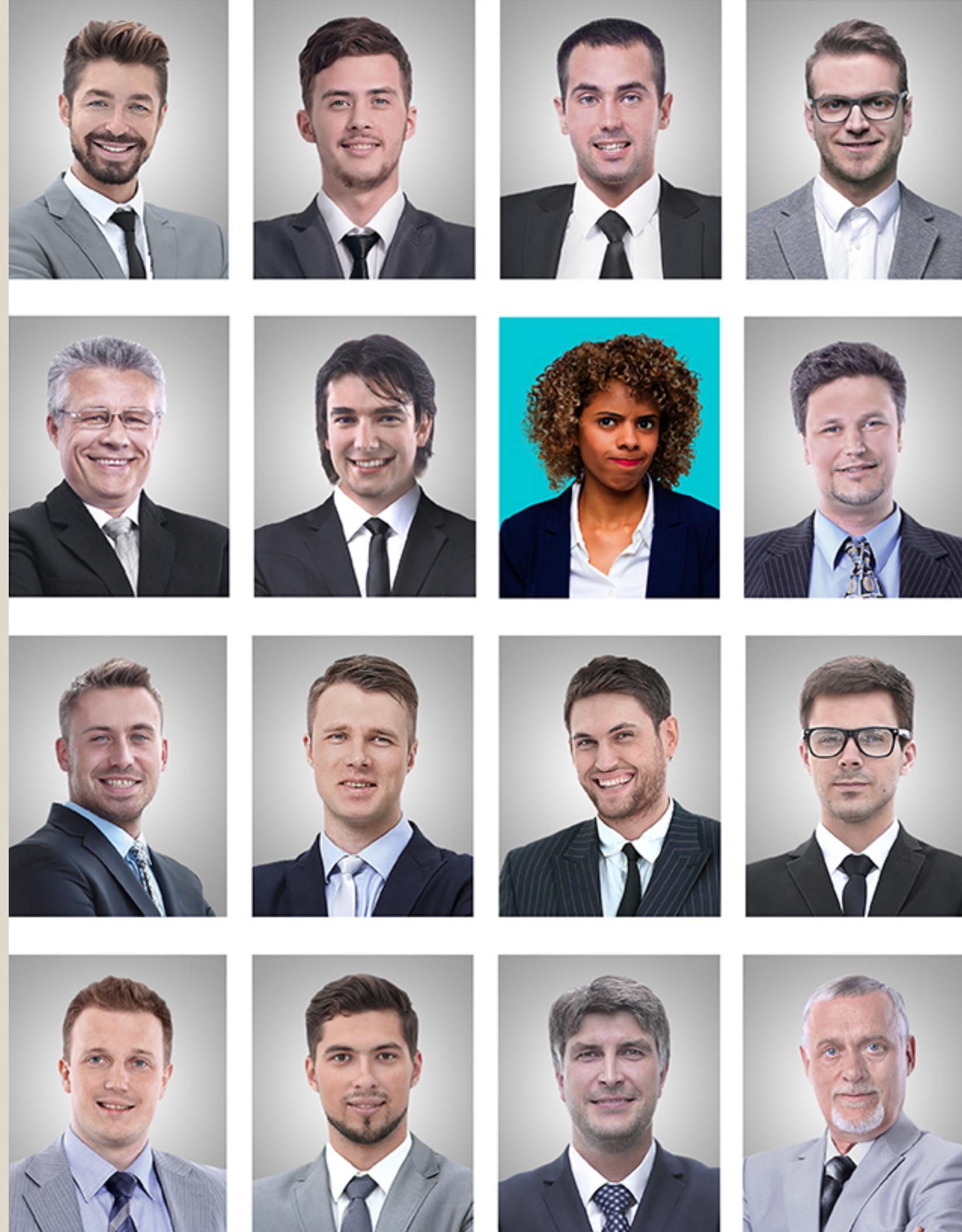
Does your organization contract services and supplies from companies that harm communities of color but your rationale for doing it is that it's cheaper? Consider contracting services and supplies from Black and Latinx owned businesses which will help close the Black-White and Black-Latinx racial wealth gap. Does your organization or company donate money or sponsor movements or causes that go against racial equity and antiracism? If so, consider not supporting them. Instead, redirect your profits towards sponsoring campaigns or organizations that centralize racial equity and antiracism.

What is Tokenism in the workplace?

Tokenism is having good intentions, but without doing the real work of anti-racism. For instance, let's say a company realizes their employees are mostly white, but they are based in a region with many African immigrants. So they ask themselves, "How can we have more African immigrants in our community in the workplace? Let's hire a few, and now we're a diverse company."

The problem with this scenario is that the company didn't change the structures and policies that got them there in the first place as a racially exclusive environment.

Great, you've hired African immigrants. So, what will you do to help with retention? Has a racial equity audit been conducted so you can create more antiracism practices, inclusion, and sense of belonging for your most vulnerable populations?



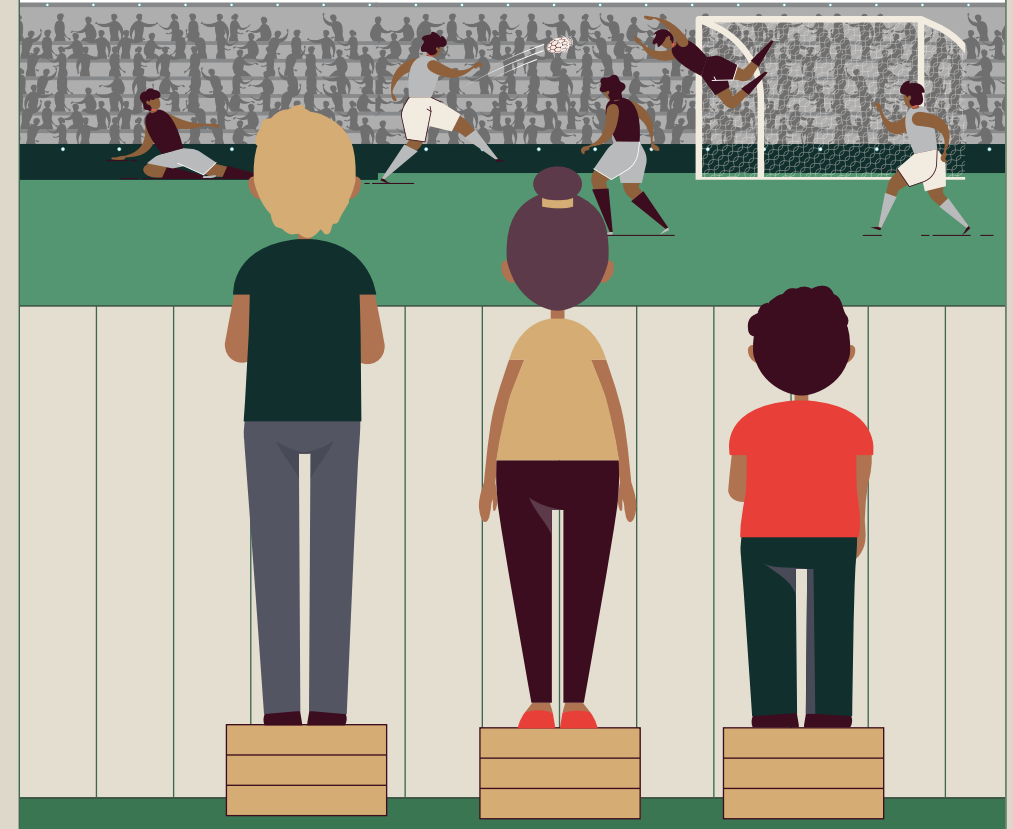
How is it anti-racist to **not** treat everyone as equal?

Equality and equity are two different concepts. You can't treat everyone equally when we live in an inequitable system. That's the difference.

For instance, let's say someone says to my twin brother, "I don't really see you as black. I just see you as a human being." This does not acknowledge the fact that my brother is a black man. It's great that this person sees him as equal, but a significant number of people in USA society do not. He lives in an inequitable system where he can't drive from home to work without being pulled over, or go to a store and be followed suspiciously.

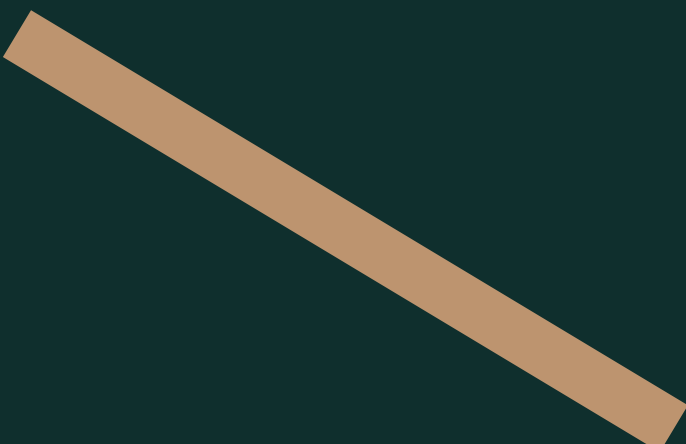
Before we can say we're all equal, we have to acknowledge that we're not in an equitable society. The rhetoric, when we're talking about anti-racism, is to focus more on equity than on everyone being the same, because we're not all the same and unique tools and resources are necessary so we can all thrive and feel included and valued.

EQUALITY



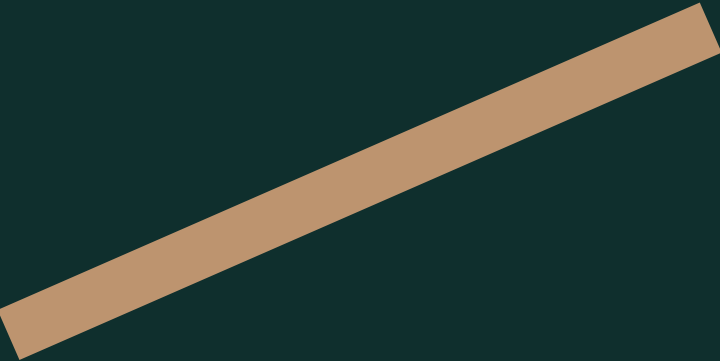
EQUITY





What's the best response to:

"I don't see color. I see everyone as equal"?



Sometimes this statement is shared with sincerity, but oftentimes it's said because people want to unconsciously protect their privilege and not acknowledge the ways in which they may benefit from a racist society.

Often people who say "I don't see color" don't have the education or the knowledge of what is meant by racism as a system. Whether you see color or not, we live in a systemically racist system, and that affects the way you interact with people. Plenty of research has shown that implicit bias, especially around race, is significant in how we live our lives, [especially in the United States.](#)

There's an underlying question here too. "Can't we all just get along and be human?" The answer, and a response to "I don't see color" is that we're not there yet. We need to understand our [collective history and how our consciousness has been developed by not just racist histories,](#) but sexist histories, ableist histories, and more.

People don't know what they don't know. Gently and proactively inspire people who feel [they don't see color to understand what racism is today.](#)

How do I respond to someone that says, 'All Lives Matter.'?

First and foremost don't judge or attack this person. Entering the conversation without that type of judgment is important to creating better dialogue. You can say something like, "I understand where you're coming from, but I don't agree. And here's why."

This is when it helps to be armed with materials about systemic racism, because you can speak to the facts. We see systemic oppression along [politics, economics](#), in the [educational system](#) and more. Sometimes people don't have the data that they may need to think about other framings, such as Black Lives Matter.

If they're in the workplace, they may need to see [data that shows understanding where minoritized racial communities come from creates a more inclusive and productive climate](#).

Help them build an understanding that there is oppression, and that not everyone is treated equally in our society.

It's also okay to acknowledge that it would be great if all lives matter and we were all equal, but we're not there yet. The point that we are at now is that black lives need to matter because they haven't in the past, in comparison to the [historical treatment of white people as fully human](#) (and black people, not). Systemic racism, violence against black people and more, these are the results of black lives not mattering.

Wrap it up with something like, "This is why I shared this data with you on systemic racism, so you can understand where I'm coming from and you know I come from a place of good intention as well. Here's [some more resources](#) if you want to learn more"



Is the practice of anti-racism different for white people than people of color?



Yes and I can even use myself as an example. I've lived my life as a black woman and I had to unpack the damages of internalizing racist notions about black people. This meant getting over the cultural racist messages that I learned about the inferiority of black people. A lot of non-white people have to deal with this process of [unlearning these racists messages about ourselves as well.](#)

One thing that would support white people in the practice of anti-racism, especially in the United States, is to acknowledge that they've been raced. [Accept that they are white and what that means.](#) Most non-white people already know we are raced and what it's meant historically. A lot of white people need to do the work to unpack what that means and how that's affected their consciousness.

For many people of color, we must risk retaliation or negative responses when stating that racism is a problem in the workplace, [as noted by Minda Harts of The Memo.](#) Navigating this process of anti-racism at work when you don't have the resources or support that you need is difficult. However, [for many white people \(especially white men\)](#), the risk in pointing out racial inequities isn't necessarily as high for people of color.

There is also a lack of understanding that whiteness provides the privilege to talk about anti-racism and that white people need to be [accountable in striving toward racial equity](#) vs. slipping back into the more comfortable nonracist mode.

Studies featured in [Race, Work, and Leadership: New Perspectives on the Black Experience](#), show that CEOs and

lower-level managers who are outspoken about diversity and inclusion are more likely to be penalized, **unless they are white men!** There are a few CEOs who have started company-wide discussions about race, such as PriceWaterhouseCoopers, Interpublic Group, Kaiser Permanente and AT&T. However, because of being perceived already as threats to white comfort and feelings, many young Black professionals on the path to top tier leadership positions make the difficult concession of being silent about racism as not to be stigmatized as a troublemaker.

So, as a white person- especially if you are a white man, use your racial and gender privilege to be outspoken and drive change. For many non-white people, we have to talk about racism because it's related to our survival, but when and how becomes difficult

when we're in the workplace, due to the power dynamics, the region we are located, etc. With white people, modeling anti-racist action takes some of the burden and risk off of people of color.

It's important to note that this white allyship needs to be done in a way that is not ensconced in saviorism. It's not something you wear as a badge that says, "Look at me, I'm woke." It takes deep internal work that may be challenging and will be transformative.

Confronting racism is something that non-white people, collectively, have been doing all the time. [White folk can also do this work all the time even when it no longer is trending.](#) You're always working hard toward becoming more and more anti-racist.

What advice do you have for POC leaders who have a responsibility to lead non-white teams through times like these?

I'd imagine that most of you have a lot of People of Color (POC) coming to you, more than usual, with the urgency to address racial inequities, microaggressions, etc in the workplace. I know a lot of POC were already doing the unpaid labor of doing that work for POC before COVID19 and the racial injustice protests.

Ask yourself:

- Is your company willing to give you what you need to help your POC employees?
- Are you feeling overwhelmed?
- Does your organization have ERG groups? If not, would there be support to form one?
- As a POC leader, do you have access to a mentor or coach to talk to, once a week, to help you through strategy but also the heavy emotional component and maybe dealing with racial battle fatigue?

I've found it helpful to connect with other POC leaders as we support each other and find ways to work through this as leaders, and support our own POC staff.

These are tough times, and a way to support POC is to urge leadership in your organization to not punish POC who are being dramatically affected by COVID19 ([which is hitting POC communities harder than white](#)) and racial injustice. It takes a toll and organizations need to strongly consider revamping their current policies and practices so it supports the care and help that their POC employees need to thrive.

If you are in a leadership position, please explain this to other leaders in your organization. Explain that the POC in your organization should not be taking on the extra burden of doing the racial equity work. Explain that many- especially Black, Latinx and Indigenous people- may need time off or assignments redistributed because of what the racial-emotional toll may be on them, and other factors. Refer to this article to get a great [blueprint](#) on how to tackle this and it would be useful to share it with them, as it lays out how and why taking antiracism steps would be productive and positive for your organization.



How do you affect company culture without making everyone 'go to school'?

It's true that not everyone can engage in training or effectively, "go to school" though training can be very helpful. Really integrating anti-racism into your company can take years. When I work with companies, we create a 3-5 year strategy. We often start with having leadership model anti-racist behaviors. Have them use terms and frameworks that show that there's going to be a shift in acknowledging racial inclusion and equity.

It's powerful for leadership to say something like, "We've revamped our values to include that we are going to be anti-racist. We know this change isn't going to happen overnight. We understand this is going to be challenging.

We understand that a lot of our employees are dealing with other time constraints and commitments within the organization. We're going to start working on ways in which you can become anti-racist in your own role, without it being overwhelming or difficult. We're going to take it step by step in a way that hopefully will give us the outcomes that we do want in our organization, which is for everyone to feel included and that they belong."

This is a great place to start affecting company culture because then there is more support for people who are in less senior positions to start doing anti-racist work as well.

How do I focus on anti-racism at work amongst my company's competing priorities?

This illuminates a need for competencies around intersectionality. You can't understand how racism affects your company and all its priorities if you don't understand how it intersects with other issues.

For instance, let's say your company doesn't understand how race impacts gender. Women of color will talk about not just racism, but sexism in the workplace. During the Me Too movement, a lot of the focus was just on gender and just on white women. The intersectional perspective of race and gender was left out.

If someone says, "This is distracting to our overall company's goals and values." Try showing a visual of how these things are all connected, with

racism as a gear in your organization. It could be what's causing things to break, because it's connected to other things that are important to make the organization work. So you're not going to have the productivity you need because systemic racism gears needs to be replaced with antiracist ones.

This might help people understand that this work is not going to take away from what you're trying to achieve, it's actually going to enhance it.

People don't have to think they're going to change the whole system overnight. It can be overwhelming. Start consciously making the small steps to avoid being overwhelmed.

How do you address these issues while working remotely?



Not everyone is working remotely, as frontline workers are not, so it's important to recognize this dynamic. The majority of frontline workers are actually people of color as well.

For those companies who are working remotely, you may want to conduct an online survey of your staff to get a sense of what discussions and actions need to happen around racial inclusion in the workplace. Hire someone to do this for you, assess the data, and they can formulate the best method in facilitating antiracism discussions. These should align with your organization's values and goals, as well as your organization's unique regional differences (if you have different locations, antiracism in Mobile, Alabama may look different than Greenwich, Connecticut). Discussions with 300 warehouse workers, in which the staff may be predominantly people of color, with white managers, in Los Angeles is going to be different than a tech startup company of 21 people, mostly white and college educated in Toronto, Canada.

I have a client right now that I'm working with remotely. We'll be doing assessments via surveys and later, we'll be doing workshops (online) to their staff in October. Their leadership wants to integrate antiracism and racial inclusion, but they know that not everyone is going to be at the same place with their literacy and competencies. They are a small company, under 35 employees, and have consulted with me about what books they all should be reading together. I suggested two books and we'll be having facilitated discussions online, after they read it; the key to this is that, with the exception of one employee, everyone is on board with doing this together as a work community.

This is a more effective project because it's community driven. One book they'll be reading is *Me and White Supremacy* geared more towards white people who want to understand anti racism and systemic racism. The other book is one designed more for people of color who understand racism better, through their lived experiences, but need resources that help them better articulate it to their white peers, called *The Minority Experience*. But, we came to this conclusion after we assessed their situation, employee demographics, and the specific challenges they have had with racial inclusion.

How does an organization start to build an **inclusive environment** for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC)?



One of the most powerful ways to achieve inclusivity, and retain the talent of BIPOC employees, is offering a [mentorship program](#). In a comprehensive 2017 report about mentoring and climate, [75% of employees of color said mentoring was vital for their career](#).

Having a mentorship program in your organization that understands the unique challenges that BIPOCs face can help them thrive. The key to successful mentoring programs is aligning the mentorship with racial equity oriented DEI goals. This means mentors, regardless of racial identity, should not ignore or avoid when BIPOCs speak of their challenges with racism.

Mentoring interactions can be described as providing two primary functions: career support and psychosocial support. Career functions include exposure and visibility, sponsorship, coaching, protection and access to challenging assignments. In contrast, psychosocial functions include role modeling, acceptance and confirmation of a person of color's racial experience, counseling and friendship.

What are some initial steps an organization can take in working towards anti-racism?



A great first step is to work with a third party for a racial equity audit. This usually consists of:

- Analyzing strategic plans, performance reviews, job postings, website, marketing collateral, and other materials to help assess the organization
- Interviews of staff and stakeholders.
- Creating a climate and inclusion survey to collect information from a larger group of people in the organization's ecosystem
- Analyzing and present findings
- Working with leadership to determine an anti-racism strategic plan





If being an anti-racist leader is a never ending process, how can we remain optimistic & engaged?

Think of being an anti-racist leader as an ongoing practice. At the end of the day, no one is 100% bias free. The goal is to be mindful and informed about issues of race, and to have it as a goal that you're always working towards being less and less biased each day.

There are levels to implementing anti-racism for diversity, equity and inclusion. It starts at awareness and leads up to innovation and breakthrough performance. You can assess where you're at in this process by collecting data from within your organization, through a [racial equity audit](#).

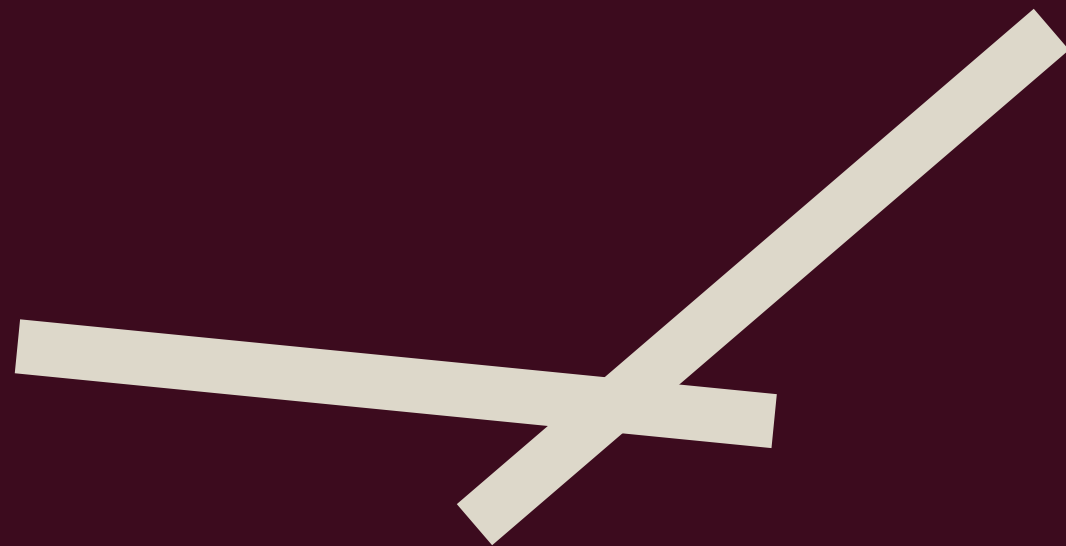
For example, an audit could deploy a diversity, equity, and inclusion survey, to show whether or not people

feel a sense of belonging or inclusion at your organization. What does that data from the audit reveal?

This concept of data to tell the story of becoming anti-racist is really important. Many people in positions of power might not understand the scope of work that needs to be done, or even the progress that has been made, data can bring light to that.

Once you have this data, you can use that to begin to build what an anti-racist workplace should look like. Then, you do another assessment in six months or a year and see what you can do to make it even better. That's the point. It's a continuous process of constant assessment and rebuilding, making your workplace more and more inclusive everyday

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