

RACE

Restructure Your Organization to Actually Advance Racial Justice

by [Evelyn R. Carter](#)

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Klaus Vedfelt/Getty Images

The U.S. is at a turning point, and the world is watching. The murder of George Floyd — preceded by the murders of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and many, many others — has sparked an outpouring of grief and activism that's catalyzed protests in all 50 states and around the world. For Black people, the injustice we feel around the murder of another unarmed Black person is not new — but the scale of recognition of systemic racism and the allyship we are feeling from others is.

For diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) practitioners like me, the influx of interest we're seeing from organizations that want to both support their Black employees and upskill their workforce around racism, bias, and inclusivity is unprecedented. Plus, all of this is happening in the middle of the coronavirus pandemic, which is also having an outsized impact on Black people in domains ranging from health to employment. Just a few weeks ago the constraints of the pandemic were even threatening corporate DEI efforts.

Many organizations have made their donations. Sent their tweets. Hosted their town halls. DEI budgets that had disappeared are now back. What should come next? Companies can do a few virtual trainings and default back to the status quo — or they can recognize that the racial bias driving the injustices they and the majority of Americans now care about also plays out within their own companies. Organizations that choose the latter then must answer an important question: How will they restructure their workplaces to truly advance equity and inclusion for their Black employees?

It is tempting to think that the broad recognition of inequity and resulting activism is enough to bring change to organizations. But meaningful and long-lasting action to create an anti-racist workplace requires strategic vision and intent.

Organizations that are truly committed to racial equity — not only in the world around them, but also within their own workforces — should do three things:

Invest in (the Right) Employee Education

The U.S. has a complicated history with how we talk about slavery and how it contributes to disparate outcomes for Black people (including wealth accumulation, access to quality health care and education, and equity in policing) and the persistent homogeneity at the highest levels of corporate organizations. One consequence of avoiding this painful, yet foundational, part of American history is drastically different perceptions — particularly between white and Black Americans — about how much progress we have made toward racial equality. And yet, study after study shows that educating white Americans about history *and* about Black Americans' current experiences increases awareness of bias and support for anti-racist policies.

But far too often, the responsibility of doing this education falls to Black employees (who are, to be clear, far too exhausted from navigating the events of the last several weeks, in addition to the lifelong impacts from systemic inequities, to answer all your well-meaning questions). White employees and others can take individual responsibility for their own education by tapping into the wealth of resources others have compiled. Organizations must also take seriously their role in educating employees about the realities and inequities of our society, increasing awareness and offering strategies for the individual accountability and structural changes needed to support inclusive workplaces. There's no one-size-fits-all answer to what kind of training or education will work best. It depends on the goals of the company and where it is on its journey to racial equity.

Here are some areas of focus companies can consider. First, training on **allyship** can motivate employees to be more effective at calling attention to bias, which can lead to a more inclusive environment for their Black colleagues. Next, leaders ask me every day how they can authentically discuss these issues with their teams and how they can meaningfully show their support for Black Lives Matter internally and externally: For those executives, it's important to discuss how to **advance justice as a leader**. Finally, while the protests have drawn attention to the systemic racism and injustices Black people face in the U.S., we still have a lot of work to do to shed light on the insidious biases that undermine the everyday experiences of Black Americans in the workplace. **Unconscious bias** training is another tool to have in the organizational toolbox. Designed effectively, unconscious bias training can equip people with skills for reducing the role of bias in their everyday decisions and interactions.

There are many other topics and approaches to this kind of education, and organizations will need to find the right partners and experts to develop the content and delivery method that will yield progress.

Build Connection and Community

People do their best work when they feel a sense of belonging at work, and 39% of employees feel the greatest sense of belonging when their colleagues check in on them. But conversations about race-related topics are notoriously anxiety-provoking: Non-Black employees may navigate these feelings by avoiding conversations about the protests and

then miss out on ways they could show support to their Black colleagues. This avoidance is magnified by the fact that so many organizations that are now mostly, or entirely, remote due to the pandemic.

For Black employees who may have already felt like the “others” in organizations where those in power are primarily white and male, this failure to address and discuss the current moment and its implications may cause irreparable harm. To counteract this, organizations should prioritize authentic connection across all levels: Leaders need to directly address the company and explicitly support racial justice. Managers need to be empowered to have conversations with their Black team members. Individuals need to be equipped to be effective allies. And companies need to do all of this on their Black employees’ terms.

Going Beyond Recruiting and Hiring

Education and creating community are immediate actions companies can take to create more inclusive environments, but for actual equity, those companies also need to evaluate and change their organizational processes to close gaps Black employees face compared to their counterparts.

Recruiting and hiring are often the first places organizations start when thinking about racial equity. While figuring out how to get Black employees in the door of your organization is important, focusing on how to keep them there and grow them into leadership roles is even more important. Organizations should be measuring the outcomes of all of their people practices — from recruiting and hiring to promotions, compensation, and attrition — to evaluate where racial disparities exist.

Two examples are particularly salient right now: assigning work and performance management.

Even under normal circumstances, **assigning work** is fraught with racial bias: Employees of color are expected to repeatedly prove their capabilities while White employees are more likely to be evaluated by their expected potential. Now, as many organizations look

to give Black employees new flexibility and space to process trauma and take care of themselves, they need to be careful not to let those biases reemerge around who gets what assignment. Managers should not make unilateral decisions about which projects their Black employees should and should not do during this time, which would risk an entirely new lopsided situation where Black employees need to once again “prove” their value or readiness in order to earn high-visibility opportunities. Instead, managers should collaborate with their Black employees, giving them a choice around how they want to be supported in the coming days and weeks.

Critically, organizations need to be sure not to penalize those choices when the time comes for **performance reviews**. The uncertainty caused by the shift to remote work had already caused a lot of unstructured changes to performance management processes, and it remains to be seen what further changes this social movement might bring. However, without *any* structure, managers and organizations may find that, come time for performance reviews, they have forgotten about the outsized impact this time is having on Black employees. What organizations should be considering right now is how they can map their approach to performance management at a similar pace to how the world is changing. Instead of annual or biannual check-ins, setting weekly or monthly goals (that may vary by employees’ needs) may be better approaches to ensuring success for Black employees.

While some of these changes may seem incremental, educating employees on concepts like allyship and justice, embracing authentic communication and connection, and re-designing systems and processes to reduce racial disparities are still radical changes for most organizations. And this is just the beginning of re-envisioning how to create a diverse, equitable, and inclusive workplace that truly supports Black employees.

Much like the U.S. itself, organizations are facing a turning point: Use this time to evaluate what foundational changes are necessary to address systemic inequities and barriers to inclusion, or let this moment pass with little more than positive intentions and

thoughtfully-crafted emails. Those that are truly moved by the injustices that have been laid bare will not only support protestors and stand with the Black community — they will also take concrete and swift action to advance justice in their own companies.



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Stephanie rider 9 days ago

I feel like you could substitute black/white for female/male in this article. Women have had to fight similar issues in workplace over the last 50 years. Can we learn anything from that? It's a long road, and we've made advancements but nowhere near 'successful' - both implicit and overt biases and inequities clearly remain. How do we educate the white male and recreate corresponding structures to support change?

As a white female, the first thing I would expect is for senior leaders to engage directly with the white females to listen and learn. The last thing I would want would be to discuss this with any white male. It is personal, this is me. We should ask the employees who we need to support, in this case Black employees, how each would like to start these conversations.