



Moving Past The Silence
A Tool For Negotiating Reflective
Conversations About Race

*Moving Philanthropy Closer
to Racial Equality and Social Justice*

By

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MOVING PHILANTHROPY CLOSER TO RACIAL EQUITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Working Drafts of Tools to Assist Progress

Introduction and Overview to Three Tools to Assist Progress

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Moving Past the Silence: A Tool for Negotiating Reflective Conversations About Race

By Vanessa McKendall Stephens, Ph.D.

Becoming a Catalyst for Social Justice: A Tool for Aligning Internal Operations to Produce Progress

By Betty Emarita

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By Steven E. Mayer, Ph.D.

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MOVING PAST THE SILENCE: A TOOL FOR NEGOTIATING REFLECTIVE CONVERSATIONS ABOUT RACE

One of three tools from
Moving Philanthropy Closer to Racial Equity and Social Justice
Effective Communities, LLC

By
Vanessa McKendall Stephens, Ph.D.

Purpose

This tool provides a framework to structure conversations about race which contribute to progress toward racial equity and social justice.

Who Can Use This Tool

The tool is designed for nonprofit leaders, staff and board members interested in confronting and reducing racial inequity.

Description

This tool presents a framework to guide entry into reflective, productive conversations that address racial equity and social justice. It defines four conversation stages with key questions for each. The tool then offers considerations and guiding questions for philanthropic staff, board and leaders to answer at each one. At each stage, the conversation should begin with internal reflection and discussion within the organization. The conversation should then move out to a broader audience through a participatory, democratic process where all involved are listeners, learners, sharers and problem solvers. A case study of a fictitious foundation provides examples of how the tool can be applied.

Instructions: Using the Tool

Racism and its negative impact on racial equity is a complex reality. Work to reduce racial inequity and make progress toward social justice is supported by productive conversations that explore and define issues of race and inequity. When conversations are productive, they inform potential strategy. In our journeys, we've heard how groups structure and facilitate a range of conversations for multiple purposes. Embedding capacity in organizations for reflective, constructive dialogue about race is essential.

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Case Study

The Oliver Foundation primarily funds arts, economic development and education as a way to achieve social justice. During a staff meeting with the executive director, a new Latino officer with responsibility for diversity grants in the education portfolio mentioned the recent citizen's report identifying issues of racism in the schools. Many were surprised at the findings and the group wondered how the foundation could be responsive to the issues raised.

One officer suggested they should ensure grantees they fund have the cultural competence to work with the ethnically diverse students, and suggested including cultural competency as a requirement on the next RFP. Another asked what that requirement would mean. The executive director noted they had not had conversations as a group about connections of race and schooling; that was the responsibility of the diversity officer. Another officer wondered about the implications for their convening work and grantmaking. They occasionally heard reports from the diversity officer, but never spoke together of challenges structural racism grantees reported. A program officer suggested that they should talk more.

The executive director agreed and offered to hire a consultant so that all could participate equally in the dialogue. Others suggested asking a respected community activist who worked closely with the foundation on a number of education initiatives. At the first meeting, they talked about how the foundation addressed issues of race. All agreed the current approach was silence and unspoken assumptions with conversation focused on programming and initiatives. They agreed their future effectiveness depended on their clear insight into issues and root causes. The group decided to continue to meet and create the space needed to improve their ability to talk about race and its impact on the community and their work.

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The framework suggests four stages of conversation with key questions to guide thinking about where you are, and where it would be most helpful to begin your conversation. At each stage, begin with your lived experience, then invite others in as you clarify purpose and possibilities. This suggests a duality of work both inside the foundation and outside.



1. ***Scan and Gather Information.*** Pose questions about your current knowledge about racial equity and related practice in your organization and in your context. This provides a data-based foundation for dialogue and reflection.
2. ***Listen and Learn.*** Examine data related to racial equity in your internal organizational practice and in your work contexts, and interpret data through multiple lenses.
3. ***Make Decisions.*** Use what you learn to make decisions about your internal work and process, and determine how to influence decisions in your work contexts.
4. ***Negotiate Change and Impact.*** Strategize how to use what you learn about racial equity to change how you work inside your organization and negotiate focused change and support for progress toward racial equity in your areas of expertise.

Using this Tool to Move Forward

Begin with asking basic questions about what you know and what you need to know in the first stage. Each stage progresses in the level of time commitment, intensity and difficulty. Many organizations are not ready to start with fourth stage conversations that address leveraging change for racial equity in their contexts. They may not understand the history that contributed to current conditions or know what fuels racial divides. They may not have thought deeply about how their own internal practice may silence inside voices that point out racism. They may not have considered how decision-making may exclude others based on race and power.

Considerations

Begin Where You Are. Start with your “lived experience,” both individual and organizational, and build the capacity to move from there.

Negotiate Safe Space. Having difficult conversations about race requires that foundations create a “negotiated space” to support productive conversations. Understanding self, negotiating a common space and building capacity for dialogue must occur at each stage. Trust, transparent leadership, investing time and resources, and building relationships create the space for challenging conversations about race, both internally and externally. This space supports honesty

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and commitment over time. People must feel safe enough to put themselves in a position of risk. Identifying norms and principles for interaction helps.

Breaking the Code of Silence. Having conversations about race is challenging for individuals and organizations. Some directly unpack and examine useful definitions and the effects of institutional racism on social equity. Others choose silence rather than potential discomfort in conversation. Still others adopt a less frontal approach and “back in,” imbedding race discussions in other contexts or using more “palatable” terms. In the last two cases, code words are employed that often have ambiguous meanings, which can contribute to a climate of distrust and discomfort.

Addressing Power. Entering discussions about race requires paying attention to power distribution and expectations for participation, both inside and outside the foundation. Individuals of color and their communities often are asked to contribute to opportunities for others to learn, with no reciprocal exchange. Their experiences are harvested, but their presence is only advisory with no opportunity to influence process, decisions, direction or outcomes. Conversations representing institutionalized powerlessness foster resentment, distrust and often limit progress toward racial equity. Examine the extent to which you are ready for power shifts and willing to share or even yield power in discussions and practice.

Honoring Pain and Healing. Pain associated with racism remains part of an individual’s experience. Denial or avoidance of that pain creates toxic environments that erodes trust and limits problem solving. Acknowledging the pain and need for healing attends to the “human detail.” Recognize the importance of supporting participation, nurturing relationships, and establishing and maintaining trust.

Getting Started

1. ***Initiate the process.*** Identify a small internal group that will prepare for the conversations and determine where to enter. The group should be representative of the characteristics of the foundation staff and leadership, including race, gender, position, leadership, function and others.
2. ***Plan an inclusive, intentional process.*** Identify your purpose and what you think you want to accomplish. What motivates you to participate in this conversation? Estimate the resources and time you are willing to invest and how you will tap into the experience of foundation leadership, staff and board. What are you asking people to do, and to what end? What skills/capacities do you need to develop, invest in, invite into the conversation?
3. ***Extend the invitation.*** Identify who will begin the conversation, who will join you and how they will participate. Have you excluded anyone? How will you facilitate engagement and inclusiveness throughout the process?
4. ***Clarify the process.*** Identify how the conversation will be led and/or facilitated. How will you share leadership responsibilities? Establish your principles for how you will do this work together and who will decide what to do.

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5. ***Attend to “human detail.”*** Determine how you will negotiate a safe space for the conversation, make sure all voices are heard and respected, and monitor power issues. How will you build trust and understanding among participants? What are your initial thoughts about the language to use in talking about race and social equity?
6. ***Determine the stage of conversation you will enter.*** How will foundation leaders demonstrate the importance of the conversations and your commitment to them?
7. ***Establish a communication process.*** Determine how you will share information during the process among your group and with others. How will you keep people connected?

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Case Study

At the second meeting, the group agreed to take a closer look at the school racism report, the first of its kind done in their community, to learn more about its content and what it might mean for the foundation's work. Members also noted other smaller reports and discussions that might help inform their understanding. They soon discovered that there was more available to examine than they originally thought. The executive director agreed to use some of the new intern's time to continue to scan available information and organize it for further study. Members agreed to hold themselves accountable to read the material, and to continue their monthly discussions.

At a subsequent meeting, members decided it was time to move beyond the internal conversation and take it "outside" in order to deepen their understanding. They explored the possibility of having community forums about race. The executive director invited representatives from the study group to present their ideas to the board members who expressed interest in learning more. The board formed a subcommittee, which included staff members, to further explore the issues and ask questions about how best to proceed.

The committee suggested two strategies to support learning and inform decision-making: racism training and facilitated dialogues. They contracted with a community organization based in the South to conduct the training, and board members and leaders voluntarily participated. They described it as, "recognizing racism in oneself, in practice and in institutions." It was often a painful process, but necessary to create space, language and willingness to talk directly about race and facilitate self-examination using a racism lens.

The executive director hired a local consultant with experience in facilitating community dialogues. Representatives from the education advisory board were invited to work with the consultant and staff in designing the dialogues to talk about race and the impact on local schools. The groups were small, with individuals chosen to bring diverse perspectives. Those who attended were asked to return to "synthesis sessions" to talk about what this meant for the community and the foundation. The foundation realized the relationships they developed through the education initiative supported their ability to convene the dialogues and created mutual benefits for participants and the foundation.

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Negotiating Reflective Conversations About Race: Moving Through the Stages

	Key Questions	Starting Inside	Moving It Out
Stage 1 Scan and Gather Information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What do we know about racism and racial equity in our context? ▪ What do we know about how we address racism and racial equity in our organization? ▪ What do we need to know? 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Who among leadership, staff and board can guide? 2. What work has already been done? 3. What conversations were conducted? 4. What can you learn from how you currently talk about race and issues of racial equity? 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What do you know about issues of race in your community? 2. What contextual information is available? Reports? Research? 3. What additional information do you need?



Stage 2 Listen and Learn	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ How will the information gathered deepen learning about internal conversations? ▪ How will the information deepen our learning about racism and racial inequity in our context? ▪ How will we sustain the learning? 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What process(es) are used to support learning among leadership, staff and board? 2. Who is involved in the listening and learning processes? 3. What can you learn from those processes? 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How will you use the data to frame a listening and learning process? 2. How will you invite in, listen to and benefit from experiences with the legacies of racism and inequity? 3. How will you address the pain caused by racism and move toward healing? 4. How will you include and learn with a cross-section of stakeholders – staff, board, community, etc.? 5. How will you share what you learn? 6. What resources are needed to sustain the interaction and learning?
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	Key Questions	Starting Inside	Moving It Out
Stage 3 Make Decisions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ How will we use what we learned to influence decisions in our organization? ▪ How will we use what we learned to make decisions in our larger context? 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Is decision-making participatory? 2. How will you use what you learned to influence grantmaking? 3. How will we use what we learned about connecting issues and programming to influence and inform strategy and direction? 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How will you use what you learned to identify or frame issues? 2. How will you use participatory practices and effective partnering to inform strategy? 3. How will you allocate resources? How will you leverage resources? 4. How will you build leadership and capacity? 5. How will you communicate your commitment?



Stage 4 Negotiate Change and Impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ How will we use what we learned to change how we work inside our organization? ▪ How will we leverage our work to negotiate focused change and support strategic progress toward racial equity? 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To what degree are you willing to change what you do based on what you learned? 2. How do you build internal coalitions and support? 3. What do you do inside to create productive conversations outside? 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How will you move your strategies to action? 2. Who will be your partners? How will you negotiate work? 3. How will you share progress with others? 4. How will you support trusting relationships across racial divides? 5. How do you maintain focus on transformation and change to increase racial equity, including identifying restrictive policies and structures, and distributing power equitably? 6. What results will you be accountable for?
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Case Study

A deeper interest in more directly addressing race emerged from the foundation's internal work and the dialogues with allies. The board executive committee decided to examine how the foundation's organizational practices influenced its work, strategies and grantmaking. The executive director hired a consultant to examine mission, vision, goals and policies using the racial equity lens. They discovered that race was not mentioned in any documents and "social justice" was only vaguely discernable. The executive director, with the board's support, worked with a consultant who facilitated board/staff dialogues to clarify language in guiding documents.

The executive committee also wanted more information about existing grants and strategies from broader perspectives. The executive director, with the consultant's assistance, moved the conversations out to a cross-section of foundation grantees, their participants and allies.

At the same time, staff members began a review of their grantmaking process using the new lens. While they agreed that organizational capacity remained an important factor to consider when making grant decisions, they found the capacity requirement often eliminated small community-based organizations with the essential perspective and expertise necessary for their education work. In addition, they were not always sure the grants they made had the most potential to impact social justice.

Continuing their learning meetings, the staff led data synthesis discussions and presented findings to the board. Board members, along with staff, used the information to develop a more cohesive "theory of change" for their work and to identify more effective strategies to make progress toward racial equity and social justice.