

Personal and Institutional Movement on Racism Now is the time Martin Luther King

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With so many others, I have struggled the last few weeks to sort out how to make sense of the [race-related strife I too often overlook](#) and I have pondered on what guidance to offer business and HR leaders on this difficult societal issue.

The cumulation of horrific and unjustified acts, widespread protests, and clarion calls suggest that *now is the time* (how Martin Luther King began his unforgettable *I have a dream speech*) for real progress in race relations. This opportunity compels me (and others) to make personal change and to encourage businesses and leaders to effect institutional change.

Make personal change

At a personal level, I abhor and denounce racism and recognize the pain of prejudice. As a white person, I have undoubtedly benefitted from white privilege throughout my life and career. My own experiences in coming to understand racism are meaningful to me, but these experiences are, of course, not reflective of the experiences of people of color.

No one I know wants to be considered a racist and everyone I meet wants to share their personal story.

I also have a personal story. When I was 12 in 1965, my father's job with the government shifted dramatically from being a forester to running a Job Corps Center in a rural community. Job Corps was then a newly established social program to help disadvantaged (mostly minority) youth aged 16 to 24 gain vocational and educational training by moving into a residential setting. With my dad as Center Director, we moved onto a Job Corps Center with about 200 Black and Brown people mostly from inner cities.

Residents of the rural community where the Center was located were opposed to the influx of people of color and our family became a symbol of racial intrusion. For a few years, I became a social pariah --- sitting alone on the bus, not being invited to social gatherings, and having few friends outside of the Job Corps residents. Of course, my personal experience doesn't come close to the experiences of the young people of color who left their homes and families to move to a rural, white community where they were distrusted and ostracized because of the color of their skin. Nevertheless, even decades later, the emotional scars of this time remain and have inspired us to engage in anti-racist work.

During that time, I became enamored with and followed Dr. Martin Luther King whose ideas and actions inspired me. In his letter from the Birmingham Jail, he wrote:

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. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial "outside agitator" idea

Given my painful young adult imprinting, like many, I like to think I am not a racist. But in light of stark current events, I have to more honestly face the reality that like all white people, I benefit from white privilege, regardless of my personal beliefs about equality. I find it too easy to recognize myself in Dr. King's depiction of "the white moderate," and it bothers me.

I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the . . . Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action" Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. . . .

Perhaps I was too optimistic; perhaps I expected too much. I suppose I should have realized that few members of the oppressor race can understand the deep groans and passionate yearnings of the oppressed race, and still fewer have the vision to see that injustice must be rooted out by strong, persistent and determined action. I am thankful, however, that some of our white brothers in the South have grasped the meaning of this social revolution and committed themselves to it. They are still all too few in quantity, but they are big in quality.

I hope that current events move me (and others) to deeply re-explore our personal unconscious biases. I worry that token, billboard-like proclamations make noise, but have little lasting impact. They raise issues but don't get to [root causes](#) or more enduring solutions. To get rid of weeds, mowing the weed above the ground is not enough; deep-seated roots need to be pulled up. How can we move beyond [tolerance, acceptance, and inclusivity](#) to more actively work to abolish racial structures and create communities of love?

Effect institutional change

Beyond personal ruminations, what guidance can I offer business and HR leaders on this sensitive and important social agenda? Many others (including Ibram X. Kendi, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Ted Childs, Barbara Whye, Kathleen Wilson-Thompson to name a few) have taught me by word and by deed about structural and institutional racism. Current events remind me that while some progress has been made, much more is required.

While I am not an expert on this specific topic, let me offer some thought starters for personal and institutional change.

1. **Be humble.** Many white people have been incorrectly taught that their beliefs about race and racism are just as valid as the actual research on race and racism. There have been decades of

research, most of it guided by people of color, on how race and racism operate. Be humble enough to look to research, not just personal opinion, for understanding of racial issues. Be humble enough to realize that you don't know what people of color experience. *Accept what you don't know.*

2. **Acknowledge that racism (and other ...isms) exist – even in us.** We have all grown up steeped in racist (and other) assumptions we did not personally fashion. Our unconscious biases need to be exposed and explored if we are to choose the values we want to live by now, and to more intentionally foster the societies we want to create. The goal of this self-exploration is not to shame ourselves for assumptions and values we did not choose, but to claim our values and actions from a place of greater self-awareness. *[Have a candid self-conversation.](#)*
3. **Recognize the harm of both individual and institutional racism.** Unconscious bias limits both thinking and action. Inclusion requires stretching and growth, but it ultimately increases both personal well-being and organizational creativity, innovation, and market-place success. *[Proclaim the benefits of diversity and inclusion.](#)*
4. **Hear each other.** The emotional angst many feel because of racism requires psychologically safe forums for not only listening but really hearing each other. As a teenager I experienced bias firsthand; now as a white adult, I need to accept my responsibility to learn about racism by studying, observing more broadly, and genuinely hearing. Hearing comes from empathic listening that goes beyond defensiveness or even kind words to feeling what others feel and mourning with those that mourn. *Provide [new forums](#) for candid, painful, and emotional discussions.*
5. **Appreciate the complexity of real solutions.** Aspen trees have a rhizomatic root system that connects above-ground trees to a complex inner-connection of intertwined roots. The roots of institutional racism are complex weaving through history, education, government policy, religion, church, economic inequality, family, and (fill in the blank). Systems theory teaches us that change requires system-wide solutions to sustain change. *Acknowledge the complex systems required to make lasting change happen.*
6. **Start small and start now.** Sometimes the complexity of solving intolerance inadvertently leads to inaction because no single action seems enough to move the needle. Such collective *inaction* reinforces the status quo. In contrast, many simple and seemingly isolated actions can combine to create a movement. Personal actions show up as attention with time, resources, and energy. Institutional actions show up in revised HR policies and practices. *Act now in small, specific ways as an individual and as an institution.*
7. **Have unrealistic hopes and realistic expectations.** Racism has deep roots and a long history. Yet progress has been made. In the 1960s, Martin Luther King called for open access for Blacks to restrooms and restaurants, genuine rights to vote and lead, and seats on busses and in classrooms. Hopefully, the current unrest will prompt further change and more widespread opportunity. But progress is a verb. Fully eradicating racism is a noble hope, *and* realistic expectations focus on traceable progress on specific concerns. *Recognize progress while aspiring to more.*
8. **Add your own ...**

I hope Dr. King's ending words offer continued hope:

I hope this letter finds you strong in the faith. I also hope that circumstances will soon make it possible for me to meet each of you, not as an integrationist or a civil-rights leader but as a fellow clergyman and a Christian brother. Let us all hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear drenched communities, and in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty.

Yours for the cause of Peace and Brotherhood,

Martin Luther King, Jr.

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