

Leading with an Intersectional Racial Equity Lens – A Brief

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Context

This movement moment requires organizational leaders, capacity builders and philanthropy to respond to historic inequalities and to create new narratives about leadership, movement and political possibility. As racial equity emerges as a core social change issue for our time, the question of how to cultivate leadership that contributes to equity is alive. Social change leaders are increasingly called upon to integrate a racial equity lens into programmatic priorities and organizational practice. This brief captures the work *so far* of the Racial Equity Intersectional Lens (REIL) Learning Team in partnership with the Flexible Leadership Awards Program leadership¹, to reflect on the question what it means to lead in ways that advance racial equity including in intersection with other dimensions of equity².

Our insights about that question are intended to encourage leaders to deepen their understanding about what more they might do to move towards racial equity in their practice. First, we share our working definition of what it means to lead with a racial equity lens -- *leaders acknowledge and address the impact of race and the damaging effects of structural racism on individuals, organizations, and communities.*

Readiness Factors³

What we've learned from FLA partner organization in the years of our partnership is that *readiness* for significant organization change of any kind is cultivated by leaders over time. And so, it becomes less useful for leaders to think of their teams and organizations as being "ready or not," but rather in terms of, "ready for what now?". *Getting ready* is a part of the process of doing racial equity work. Here's are some key things we learned from our grantee partners about what matters in advancing equity:

¹ Flexible Leadership Awards Program (FLA) shepherds grants to Haas Jr. Fund grantee partner organizations so they can invest in their own leadership and organizational development. The FLA is a project of the Tides Center, supported and sponsored by The Haas Leadership Initiatives of the Evelyn and Walter Haas Jr., Fund

² A scan of grantees between 2012 and 2015, identified 8 organizations that made significant, explicit investments in integrating an intersectional racial equity lens into their leadership development work. The REIL Learning Team did a deep dive into these 8 organizations, and an additional four whose work was illustrative, developing "snap-shots" to identify the successes, barriers/challenges and learnings from these engagements. The Learning Team also reflected on the lessons for practitioners for working with a racial equity lens. A fuller discussion of this research is available upon request.

³ With appreciation to Laurin Meyeno for her blog post, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Work: Eight Questions for Building Readiness and Steering Clear of Pitfalls Posted on Dec 29, 2015 in [Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, Lessons from the Field](#)

Leaders Make the Connection to Strategy and Impact

Leaders see this work as part of their jobs. If leaders see the work on racial equity as extraneous to their 'real jobs', they are not likely to take responsibility and work through the inevitable resistance or set-backs that accompany any organizational change effort. In the absence of real commitment from leadership, people of color in the organization may be expected to carry the full weight of the work (often without the necessary resources). Unless the connection to strategy and impact is clear, equity work may raise expectations that cannot be met.

Equity Work Is Understood as Organization Change and Leadership Commits to The Change Process

Racial equity work is organizational change work and requires a commitment to a process that is not always linear or predictable. Leaders that expect a single workshop to change culture are likely to be disappointed by the limited effects of a single intervention or frustrated by the strength and range of what comes up in response. Organizations may use single-episode trainings to introduce concepts, create shared language or fine-tune analysis, but training is often most effective as one aspect of organizational change, not the sole intervention. Raising expectations without real commitment to change, including leadership's commitment to self-reflection and behavior change on an individual level, can engender resentment and disillusionment.

Leaders Perceive and Address Various Forms of Resistance to Change

Because racial equity is organizational change work, it is inherently non-linear, iterative and sometimes unpredictable. Defensiveness, micro-aggressions, sub-grouping, and resistance are common responses to equity work. Unless leaders are prepared to weather the storms of change, the commitment may be jettisoned when the work hits a rough patch.

Senior Leadership is Stable and Skilled and have the Capacity for Courageous Conversations

Work around racial equity amplifies organizational challenges. Organizations that have strong practices around honest dialogue, healthy debate, and withstanding 'discomfort', are more fertile ground for racial equity work. Organizations that are experiencing internal conflict may not be in a strong position to weather the (expected) storms that naming and addressing racial dynamics may bring. Racial equity work requires taking risks to speak and listen with intention and care. Practice in giving and receiving feedback, working through conflict, and taking responsibility for impact serves leaders and organizations well. Strong relationships among the senior team, between the ED and their staff, and among staff are critical.

There is Willingness to Examine and Address Larger Systematic Issues

Specific challenges, like hiring more staff of color or resolving an interpersonal conflict between two senior leaders, often reflect larger, systemic issues. An organization that has a shared structural analysis is more prepared to name the contribution of institutional and structural factors to system failures. Looking at issues in isolation may result in band-aid fixes, reinforcement of inequalities, and lack of real change.

Leaders Are Committed to Their Own Transformation

The adage (attributed to aboriginal activist Lila Watson,) is relevant here: "If you have come here to help me, then you are wasting your time...But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together." Leaders, both people of color and white, who are committed to their own transformation are more willing to look at their blind spots and the impact of their behavior on colleagues and on the organization as a whole. Leaders who engage critical self-reflection and are willing to *learn out loud* will catalyze change.

Leadership Development and Organizational Transformation are Understood to be A Team Effort

'Leadership development' that focuses only on those with highest positional power (executive directors, board chairs) and which does not include heightening the self-awareness of leaders about implicit and explicit bias, is increasingly inadequate. It also risks reinforcing the structures of inequality and foreclosing inclusive leadership. The FLA's underlying assumptions—that executive directors should not shoulder the burden of leadership alone, that senior staff work together as a team to set direction, that the board is a significant asset, that leadership development is most effective when focused on the leadership *team*, and that leadership development serves organizational strategy and impact – reflect a transformational approach to leadership development.

Critical Tensions

Power and Authority

Racial equity work in organizations inherently means addressing issues of power and authority in organizations. It means challenging unspoken assumptions and stereotypes about who is in leadership and what leadership looks like. In some cases, it means shifting toward more shared models of leadership, either structurally or in terms of how people work together across role and responsibility.

Trauma and Emotional Labor

People of color often carry a disproportionate load in racial equity work. People of color take risks to speak out about racism and its effects while at the same time they are expected to be experts in equity, diversity and to support outreach efforts to engage communities of color. People of color are simultaneously dealing with micro-aggressions from well-meaning colleagues and navigating the macro-inequalities of violence against communities and economic injustice. The question of healing of historical trauma, and accounting for the toxic impact on people of color, often goes unaddressed in racial equity efforts. Leadership development that acknowledges the impact of internalized oppression and historical trauma,⁴ can create space for people of color to speak frankly and freely about their experience, to express anger, pain and sadness, and to genuinely grapple with the challenges of building trust and sharing risk across racial lines.

Beyond Leadership Development

As grantees integrate racial equity into their organizational planning and practices, they are doing work that moves outside of the historic boundaries of developing new leadership and managerial practices and into policy and process shifts. Organizations that begin to focus on organizational culture may soon uncover the need to address organization structure and equitable compensation practices.

Observations from the Field: FLA Grantee Partner Approaches to Racial Equity

Some Cross-Cutting Themes

- 1) Training: Effective Training (even one to two-day events) was experienced as valuable for certain purposes – energizing staff, introducing concepts, and team building. The most effective training was tailored to the needs and interests of organization, not ‘off the shelf’, included follow-up, and was part of an ongoing effort in support of change.
- 2) Strategy and Culture: Embodying racial equity values requires intention, space and practice. We saw the importance of organizations “walking the talk” on racial equity and the work that is required to live into the organizational values. It was through deep investment in staff-led teams and task forces that provided space to practice to name and address racialized dynamics in real time. Culture (still) eats strategy for breakfast. Bold strategic moves can amplify the need for culture change to create the conditions for people of color to lead within the organization and for authentic collaboration between organizations, the community and new partners.

⁴ Perry, Mehan and Reinelt, 2009.

- 3) ED Coaching and Development: Coaching that is explicit about the dynamics of race, authority and leadership can be powerful. For leaders of color, coaching provided a safe space to reflect on the personal aspect of leadership, examine patterns related to internalized racism and sexism, and strategize about working through resistance. For white leaders, coaching offered an opportunity for applied and personal learning about the habits of dominant culture, working through conflict, and being an ally. Having a feedback loop is key, so that leaders receive real-time feedback on how they are showing up and their impact on the organization. Additionally, race-specific affinity groups and leadership development were cited as supportive of individual transformation and community building around racial justice.
- 4) Board Development: Building a diverse board, and specifically recruiting and retaining qualified people of color to board service, has been a challenge for some of our FLA organizations, particularly those not already led by people of color. For some of our partners, board development efforts aimed at advancing equity initially focused on diversifying membership and addressing the implicit bias and structural barriers that negatively impact staff and board members of color. For others, it was staff and strategy development that drove the board's actual evolution about racial equity matters. As the staff became more comfortable naming and addressing issues of race, and as racial equity emerged as a strategic priority for the organization, the need to ensure that the board was prepared to support the new direction became a greater priority.

Not surprisingly, the equity work took shape through the common approaches that the FLA supported: Training for Staff and Board, Coaching and Leadership Development, Strategy Development and Culture Change. What else did we notice from examining these approaches?

- Leadership Transitions Were Key Moments When Intentions to Become More Aligned with Values Could Be Realized.
- There Are “Many Paths Up the Mountain”⁵—there were various ‘on-ramps’ to the work taken by our grantee partners, and no one size fits all approach. Neither was there one specified sequence used to become an organization that more consistently considers race equity and holds that lens in leadership and management.
- Developing the Capacity of the ED for Self-Awareness and Managing Change Was Critical.
- Strategic Priorities Evolved as Commitment to and Understanding of Racial Equity Deepened.
- Equity Work Was Both Iterative and Developmental.

⁵ Thank you to the Movement Strategy Center www.movementstrategy.org for the concept of many paths up the mountain!

Reflections and Appreciation

This document reflects a powerful journey of inquiry for the REIL Learning Team and the FLA Team. We are nowhere near the end and have already learned so much along the way. We named our numerous teachers, mentors, guides and partners in this work, and honored the wisdom and struggle that we have inherited.

All of us committed to continuing to learn from and with one another both within and beyond our roles as Plan Consultants. The FLA Leadership team - Linda Wood, Holly Delany Cole, Julia Ritchie, Christine Wang, and Rachel Baker - has accompanied the REIL Learning Team on this inquiry, as partners, resources and co-inquirers.

We offer deep appreciation and partnership for their enthusiastic and engaged support of this initial inquiry. The rigorous commitment to attend to the needs of our grantee partners and strategic approach to prioritizing racial equity in our work.