



# Ten Lessons for Talking About Racial Equity in the Age of Obama



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Experience from around the country shows that discussing racial inequity and promoting racial justice are particularly challenging today. Some Americans have long been skeptical about the continued existence of racial discrimination and unequal opportunity. But with the historic election of an African American president, that skepticism is more widespread and more vocal than ever. President Obama's important political victory, in other words, threatens to eclipse the large body of evidence documenting the continuing influence of racial bias and other barriers to equal opportunity. The current economic crisis, moreover, has fostered a welcome discussion of socioeconomic inequality, but often to the exclusion of racial injustice.

This memo sets out 10 principles that can help facilitate productive communications on racial justice problems and solutions. It is intended for communications with "persuadables"—that is, audiences who are neither solidly favorable nor unfavorable on these issues, but are capable of persuasion through the right approaches. This includes large segments of the U.S. public, as well as many journalists, policymakers, and opinion leaders who influence the public debate. The recommendations are derived from public opinion and media research as well as practical experience over the last year.

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*Building the National Will  
to Expand Opportunity in America*

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1. **Lead with shared values: Opportunity and the Common Good.** Starting with values that matter to most Americans helps audiences to “hear” our messages more effectively than do dry facts or emotional rhetoric. It is important for advocates to communicate the change they are working for and *why that change matters*.

**EXAMPLES:**

In discussing racial equality, the most important values tend to be...

- **Opportunity:** Everyone deserves a fair chance to achieve his or her full potential.
- **Community:** We are all in it together and have a shared responsibility to protect “**The Common Good.**”
- **Mobility:** Where we start out in life should not determine where we end up; everyone who works hard should be able to advance in society.

Together, these values help to counter the “on your own” mentality that can erode support for social policies. Our research also shows solid support for the notion that freedom from racial discrimination is a basic **Human Right** that all people should enjoy. The ideals of **Fairness** and **Equality** are also important in this context, but should be combined where possible with **Opportunity** and the **Common Good**.

2. **Show that it’s about *all of us*.** A winning racial justice message is not just about the rights and interests of people of color but rather about our country as a whole and everyone in it. It explains that it’s not in our moral or practical interest as a society to exclude any group, community, or neighborhood, or to tolerate unequal opportunity or discrimination. And it backs up that premise with practical as well as symbolic facts and arguments.

**EXAMPLE:**

Federal regulators allowed predatory subprime lenders to target communities of color, only to see that practice spread across communities, putting our entire economy at risk.

3. **Over-document the barriers to equal opportunity—especially racial bias.** Many audiences are skeptical about whether racial bias still exists in America, and believe (or want to believe) that equal opportunities are open to all. Be specific about the mechanisms that deny equal opportunity; gather comprehensive and reliable data and prepare a stable of examples to make a convincing and compelling argument. Instead of leading with evidence of unequal outcomes alone—which can sometimes reinforce stereotypes and blame—we recommend documenting *how* people of color frequently face stiff and **unequal barriers to opportunity**.



**EXAMPLE:**

*DON'T* begin by discussing the income gap between whites and African Americans; *DO* lead with facts like the 2003 California study that found that employment agencies preferred less qualified white applicants to more qualified African Americans;<sup>1</sup> or the Milwaukee and New York studies demonstrating that white job seekers with criminal records were more likely to receive callbacks than African Americans with no criminal records.<sup>2</sup>

4. **Acknowledge the progress we've made.** With an African American in the White House, it's especially important to acknowledge that our country has made progress over the years regarding race relations and equal opportunity. Doing so helps persuade skeptical audiences to lower their defenses and have a reasoned discussion rooted in nuanced reality rather than rhetoric.

**EXAMPLE:**

We have made real progress on equal opportunity in our country, from the major gains in college enrollment made by women of color over the last 30 years to the substantial increase in people of color elected to offices around the country. But, unfortunately, many barriers to equal opportunity remain, and it is in our nation's interest to address them.

5. **Present data on racial disparities through a contribution model instead of just a deficit model.** When we present evidence of unequal outcomes, we should make every effort to show how closing those gaps will benefit society as a whole.

**EXAMPLE:**

The fact that the Latino college graduation rate is 32 percent of the white rate<sup>3</sup> also means that closing the ethnic graduation gap would result in over one million more college graduates each year<sup>4</sup> to help America compete and prosper in a global economy—it's the smart thing to do as well as the right thing to do.

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<sup>1</sup> J. Bussey and J. Trasvina, "Racial Preferences: The Treatment of White and African American Job Applicants by Temporary Employment Agencies in California" (Berkeley, Calif.: Discrimination Research Center, December 2003).

<sup>2</sup> D. Pager, "The Mark of a Criminal Record," *American Journal of Sociology*, 108, No. 5 (2003), 937-75.

<sup>3</sup> National Center on Education Statistics, Digest of Education Statistics, 2007 and 2008, Table 9; available at [http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d07/tables/dt07\\_009.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d07/tables/dt07_009.asp).

<sup>4</sup> This calculation refers to the data from footnote 3, and is based on the premise that the Latino population ages 25 to 29 would be graduating college at the 2008 white rate of 37.1%, as opposed to the 2008 Latino rate of 12.4%.



- 6. Be thematic instead of episodic: Select stories that demonstrate institutional or systemic causes over stories that highlight individual action.** Compelling human stories can inspire action and capture the attention of reporters, lawmakers, and other audiences. But research shows that individual stories—be they positive or negative—also drive audiences toward “personal responsibility” and individual action as the causes and solutions of social problems (ignoring root causes and systemic policy solutions). We recommend prioritizing human stories—preferably in groups—that are inherently systemic or thematic, backed by strong research and statistics.

**EXAMPLES:**

- To demonstrate racial bias in the criminal justice system, interviews with a drug treatment professional, a public defender, and people of different races recovering from addiction can be combined with an Amnesty International report finding that 71 percent of crack cocaine users are white, but 84 percent of those arrested for possession were African Americans—fewer than 6 percent were white.<sup>5</sup>
- Native American leader Elouise Cobell was the lead plaintiff in groundbreaking litigation challenging federal mismanagement of trust funds belonging to more than 500,000 individual Native people.<sup>6</sup> Her story and those of representative families in the lawsuit helped to tell a compelling human story with systemic cases, solutions, and implications.

- 7. Carefully select vehicles and audiences to tell the story of contemporary discrimination.** Modern discrimination still includes some old-school bigotry, but more frequently it involves nuanced and less visible forms, such as covert, implicit, and structural bias, and the continuing effects of past discrimination. What’s more, our national diversity extends far beyond the traditional black-white paradigm that anchored 20<sup>th</sup> century racial discourse. It is important to communicate the modern face of discrimination, yet many audiences have no frame of reference for such a conversation. We recommend carefully tailoring the depth and detail of the message to the medium and audience. Educating reporters and policymakers on background before big stories break is also time well spent.

**EXAMPLE:**

A TV news sound bite is too little time to explain structural bias to a general audience; an op-ed, public hearing, or speech may provide a better opportunity to do so. By contrast, a TV press event can be a good place to show the racial diversity of our nation through visuals, backdrops, and spokespeople.

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<sup>5</sup> Amnesty International, *Threat and Humiliation: Racial Profiling, Domestic Security, and Human Rights in the United States* (New York: Amnesty International USA, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> Files, J. (2004, April 20). One Banker’s Fight for a Half-Million Indians. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/04/20/us/one-banker-s-fight-for-a-half-million-indians.html?pagewanted=1>.

8. **Be rigorously solution-oriented.** Audiences who understand that unequal opportunity exists may, nonetheless, believe that nothing can be done about it, leading to “compassion fatigue” and inaction. Wherever possible, we should link our description of the problem to a clear, positive solution and action.

**EXAMPLE:**

Asian Americans often face particularly steep obstacles to needed health care because of language and cultural barriers, as well as limited insurance coverage. Reforms like better training for health professionals, English language learning programs, and community health centers can reduce those racial barriers while improving the health of all.

9. **Link racial justice solutions with broader efforts to expand opportunity.** For most of us, racial justice is one essential aspect of a broader social justice vision. Linking our goals to broader solutions that directly touch everyone can engage new audiences and build larger, more lasting constituencies.

**EXAMPLE:**

Research points to a number of strategies for promoting quality, inclusive education for all children. They include investing in early childhood and universal pre-K programs, as well as creating attendance zones and strong schools to promote a diverse learning environment.

10. **Use Opportunity as a bridge, not a bypass.** Opening conversations with the ideal of Opportunity helps to emphasize society’s role in affording a fair chance to everyone. But starting conversations here does not mean avoiding discussions of race. We suggest bridging from the value of Opportunity to the roles of racial equity and inclusion in fulfilling that value for all. Doing so can move audiences into a frame of mind that is more solution-oriented and less mired in skepticism about the continued existence of discrimination.

**EXAMPLE:**

It is in our nation’s interest to ensure that everyone enjoys full and equal opportunity. But that’s not happening in our educational system today, where children of color face overcrowded classrooms, uncertified teachers, and excessive discipline far more often than their white counterparts. If we don’t attend to those inequalities while improving education for all children, we will never become the nation that we aspire to be.



## Applying the Lessons

### **VPSA: Value, Problem, Solution, Action.**

One useful approach to tying these lessons together is to structure opening communications around a **Value, Problem, Solution, and Action**. For example:

**Value:** Your opportunity to get a home loan on fair terms shouldn't depend on what you look like or where you come from.

**Problem:** But research shows that people of color are significantly more likely to be given high-interest, subprime loans than are white borrowers, even when those borrowers' incomes and ability to pay are the same. In fact, the racial gap is greatest among *upper-income* borrowers. That racial bias hurts us all by driving up foreclosure rates, reducing tax revenues, and ravaging neighborhoods, and it violates our values as a nation.

**Solution:** We can address these destructive practices through a federal consumer credit agency with the authority to prevent discriminatory and predatory lending schemes. By ensuring access to fair credit on fair terms, we can save thousands of homes, prevent thousands of bankruptcies, and help get our economy going again.

**Action:** Tell your member of Congress to support a consumer protection agency with strong equal opportunity enforcement authority.

*The Opportunity Agenda is a communications, research, and advocacy organization dedicated to building the national will to expand opportunity in America. The Opportunity Agenda is a project of Tides Center.*