

# Facing the Challenge of Racial Inequity — or Avoiding It

[Jim Taylor](#)

There's an old saying that every great victory is the result of many smaller victories that went unnoticed. As we undertake our individual and organizational racial equity journeys, I would suggest we slightly modify this adage. I think it's essential that we do notice the small victories – victories that may seem inconsequential when they occur but are critical to our achievement of more significant wins on the road to positive change. As an example of what I mean, let me introduce you to a White male nonprofit leader that I've known for many years (let's call him "Bill").

Bill is the chief executive of a nonprofit that provides direct services to lower-income clients that are predominantly people of color. As a White leader who has decided (in partnership with the organization's board and staff) to implement an organization-wide racial equity strategy, Bill recently read a study on integrating racial equity into nonprofit organizations. After reading the study, Bill sent me the following note that summarizes his reflections:

**For me, I can't get very far from this question I scrawled in the margins toward the bottom of pg. 3: "Are we/have we**

**ever held ourselves accountable to those affected by structural racism?”**

**And by posing the question, I don't think we have.**

**Then toward the bottom of pg. 8 I scrawled, "If we are going to ask the question (i.e., what does our data tell us), then we need to be ready to hear and act on the answer.”**

**Both were "ouch!" moments as I read.**

When I read Bill’s note, I immediately recognized his message as a “small victory” for this reason: this was a clear, encouraging example of a White nonprofit leader who was investing his time and taking the initiative to read, reflect, and engage on the issue of racial inequity – in other words, he was preparing as an individual and as a leader to face the challenge of racial inequity rather than avoid it. I found small wins in his willingness to educate himself on the topic; to pose the kinds of uncomfortable questions that White leaders are often reluctant to ask (or answer) themselves; and to acknowledge feeling the actual pain (the “ouch”, as he put it) of recognizing past and present racial inequity in our country and the challenging - but worthwhile - path ahead if we intend to eradicate racial inequity in the future.

Bill’s note was brief but it prompted me to reflect on my own beliefs and experiences as a Black leader in the sector. I’d like to

share my reflections on three parts of Bill's message that stood out to me.

## **Structural Racism: The Question of Accountability**

Bill asks whether White people in our society have ever held themselves accountable to those affected by structural racism (and then he answers his own question by stating that the answer is no). My interactions with White leaders in the sector are consistent with Bill's observation; while some leaders acknowledge a certain level of accountability, on many occasions I have heard White leaders say something like this: "I believe in an equitable society but I'm not responsible for the historical inequities that occurred in the past. I wasn't even born yet, so why should I be held accountable for them now?"

I've never been too successful in convincing White leaders who express this perspective to see the world another way, to shift their perspectives to be more aligned with those of people of color, but Isabel Wilkerson, author of the outstanding new book *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*, offers a thought-provoking, persuasive response that might cause some White leaders to reconsider their positions.

In the book (which focuses on the "caste system" in our country that, Wilkerson argues, has been and continues to be the framework for racial inequity), Wilkerson addresses the issue of accountability

for creating an equitable society through this analogy: she describes all of us as homeowners who have inherited a house on a beautiful piece of land, but the soil is unstable and cracks have begun to develop in the foundation. Then Wilkerson writes this:

**“And, yes. Not one of us was here when this house was built. Our immediate ancestors may have had nothing to do with it, but here we are, the current occupants of a property with stress cracks and bowed walls and fissures built into the foundation. We are the heirs to whatever is right or wrong with it. We did not erect the uneven pillars or joists, but they are ours to deal with now.**

**And any further deterioration is, in fact, on our hands.”**

On the issue of accountability, I ask boards to consider following questions:

- How does your board view its accountability to the marginalized communities that it serves? Is the board actively engaged in helping to repair the “cracks in the foundation” of our society that are damaging to your audience?
- Does your board have an understanding of the historical inequities that have been in place for generations – and does it understand its role in helping to stop “further deterioration”?
- Is your board willing to use its power and voice in service to those who have historically been disenfranchised? Is your board willing to share power with audiences that have

traditionally not been included in the boardroom?

- What are you willing to do to make your board more accountable to the communities it serves?

## **Readiness to Hear and Act**

Bill's message warns us that if we are going to ask the question about the extent of racial inequity in our society, then "we need to be ready to hear and act on the answer". Bill's focus on awareness and action especially resonates with me – at BoardSource our overarching objective regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion is to amplify these issues by raising awareness and urging the sector to transform its increased awareness into tangible, impactful actions. I think we've made considerable progress in raising awareness, but our data indicates that the sector has a long way to go concerning board-level action. Our upcoming Leading with Intent 2020 study indicates the following:

- 87% of nonprofit chief executives are white
- 78% of nonprofit board members are white
- 19% of nonprofit boards are entirely white

This data tells us that the sector's leadership is not nearly as diverse as it should be – a lack of diversity that can result in "blind spots" that make the sector's leadership especially ill-suited to address the vast inequities across various aspects of our lives. The U.S.

Chamber of Commerce's June 2020 study, [America's Opportunity Gaps: By the Numbers](#), offers an in-depth look at the scope of these

inequities, which include but are not limited to the following:

## **Education**

- 60% of Black students attend a high-poverty, “majority-minority” school
- Average per pupil spending in high-poverty, non-White school districts is \$1,500 less than the national average

## **Employment**

- For the past four decades, Black unemployment rates have been consistently twice as high as White unemployment
- White applicants receive 36% more callbacks for interviews than similarly qualified Black applicants

## **Entrepreneurship**

- Black-owned businesses are less than half as likely to obtain financing as White-owned businesses
- Economic fallout from the pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on entrepreneurs of color; from February through April 2020 we’ve seen the following impact:
  - 41% decrease in Black entrepreneurs
  - 32% decrease in Latinx entrepreneurs
  - 17% decrease in White entrepreneurs

# **Criminal Justice**

- Black Americans comprise 13% of the U.S. population but 34% of the incarcerated population
- From 1995-2005, Black Americans comprised:
  - 13% of drug users
  - 36% of drug arrests
  - 46% of those convicted for drug offenses

# **Health**

- Black Americans comprise 13% of the U.S. population but 22% of coronavirus cases, with a significantly higher rate of hospitalization and death
- In 2018, the percentage of individuals with access to employer-provided health insurance varied drastically by race/ethnicity:
  - White – 74.8%
  - Black – 54.4%
  - Latinx – 49.6%

# **Wealth Disparity**

- The net worth of a typical White family is approximately 10 times greater than the net worth of a typical Black family
- 21% of Black Americans live below the poverty line; 8% of White Americans live below the poverty line

On the issue of readiness to hear and act, I ask nonprofit boards to consider the following questions:

- Does your board have a clear understanding of how racial inequity directly applies to the organization's mission?
- Does your board recognize its responsibility to leverage the power of advocacy to support the marginalized communities it serves? Does your board recognize how adding more diverse board candidates representing communities most impacted by inequity would significantly enhance the board's performance and effectiveness?
- Is your board ready and willing to acknowledge the facts on racial inequity, and then take action? If not, what are you willing to do to help your board “face the facts”?

## **The “Ouch Moments”**

The final sentence of Bill’s message contains perhaps the clearest indication of his willingness to engage on the issue of racial inequity. By confessing to feeling "ouch moments," he shows vulnerability. He demonstrates a willingness to work through the discomfort and “pain” of acknowledging the powerful evidence of racial inequity and its devastating impact on people of color through the generations. I understand why many White leaders would prefer to “side-step” difficult, painful conversations (as we all would in our daily lives when given a choice), but I’d like to share a recent example of how, on this specific topic, this response can lead to overwhelming feelings of frustration for people of color.

A month ago I participated in a small group conversation with nonprofit leaders (equally divided between White leaders and leaders of color) that focused on our individual reflections about the challenge of dismantling racism. We all acknowledged White leaders' reluctance to discuss racial inequity as a recurring behavior that we have often observed in our work. After a lively, supportive group discussion that lasted for approximately 15 minutes, there was a brief lull in the conversation. Then one of the Black leaders in the group broke the silence by asking the following question to all of us:

**“Why is protecting White people’s comfort always prioritized over alleviating Black people’s pain?”**

It was a heart-felt lament that felt entirely authentic and it landed so “heavily” that no one ever answered his specific question out loud, but the question provided a “breakthrough moment” that made the rest of the discussion (in my opinion) even more open and candid.

This experience further underscores this point: conversations about racial inequity are painful but necessary if we are going to be successful in this work; the uncomfortable conversations are an essential part of the work, and any effort to avoid these discussions undermines our ultimate objective of addressing and resolving racial inequity in the sector and in our society.

On the issue of "ouch moments," I ask boards to consider the following:

- Does your board discuss racial inequity in relation to its mission? If so, does your board experience “ouch” moments during those conversations? If it does not experience “ouch” moments when discussing racial inequity, are you ever concerned that your board isn’t engaged enough?
- In what ways is your board engaging with the marginalized communities it serves that are experiencing the most pain from racial inequity? What steps is your board taking to "put purpose first" to reduce the communities’ pain?
- What are you willing to do to ensure that your board will not intentionally avoid racial equity issues in its conversations and will center racial equity in its work?

## **Conclusion**

Bill’s message raised significant, genuine concerns about the current state of racial inequity in our sector and society, but I found inspiration in his “clear-eyed” view of the accountability of White nonprofit leaders in this moment, and I hope that you – and your board – will find his example inspirational, too. I hope that White leaders, in particular, will achieve the small victories of holding themselves accountable to being strong allies for positive change; asking and answering the uncomfortable questions they might prefer to avoid; and changing their focus from protecting their own comfort to alleviating the pain of the marginalized communities of color that they serve. The first step in this process is to make a conscious decision to face the challenge of racial inequity rather

than to avoid it. It is an essential first step – because in the words of the late great Black author, playwright, and activist James Baldwin:

“Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.”

### **Additional Resources & Tools for Boards:**

[Taking Action on Board Diversity: Five Questions to Get You Started](#) (BoardSource)

[AWAKE to WOKE to WORK: Building a Race Equity Culture](#) (Equity in the Center)

### **More from BoardSource:**

[BoardSource's Commitment to Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity: For Ourselves and the Social Sector](#) (March 2017)

[Recruiting for Board Diversity -- Without Disrespecting People of Color](#) (August 2020)

[The Value of Lived Experience](#) (August 2020)

[A Message to My Fellow White Board Chairs](#) (July 2020)

[A Moment to Change](#) (June 2020)

[Now That We Know Better](#) (June 2020)

Reflections on Trust and Its Relationship to Racial Inequity on  
Nonprofit Boards (May 2020)