

OPINION

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6 Steps Foundations Can Take to Advance Racial Equity

By Valerie Jarrett and Keecha Harris
Presidents' Forum on Racial Equity in Philanthropy

In many ways, the election of President Obama in 2008 felt like a hopeful sign of progress in American politics and racial equity.

President Obama's vision for America was one that focused on all we have in common rather than our differences. And he called on us all to ensure that all young people grew up with an equal opportunity to attain their goals.

In hindsight, it is now apparent that an ugly undercurrent was resurfacing. Those who fueled lies about President Obama (that he was a Muslim or that he was not born in the United States) with the intent of stoking fear and hate have led to broader examples of racism and intolerance in our country. Since President Obama left office, we have seen the acceleration of hate and white supremacy unleashed by a climate of divisiveness.

Throughout the world of philanthropy, we have seen renewed attention to curbing racism and hate. But as two black women who work closely with foundations, we know that far more needs to be done. The momentum must come from the trustees and CEOs of America's thousands of



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foundations, large and small, if we expect to succeed in turning the tide away from intolerance and divisiveness and toward inclusivity and respect.



AN UPHILL CLIMB

Leaders of color at nonprofits and foundations speak out about being underestimated, breaking barriers, and whether things are getting better.

- Nonprofit Leaders of Color Speak Out About Struggles and Triumphs
 - Advice for Young Nonprofit Professionals of Color From People Who Have Been There
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That's because it takes all of us, as Ta-Nehisi Coates reminds us in *We Were Eight Years in Power*. He recalls thinking of racism as a tumor that could be isolated and removed from the body of America and believing that the success of one man could really alter history, or even end racism.

Economic Clout

But the mantle of overcoming white supremacy could never rest solely on the shoulders of one man, nor should it. The rest of us maintain a responsibility to use our collective power to move forward with the fight.

Philanthropy should be at the center of leading that change. After all, it is the organized way we finance collective action. But it's also a powerful part of the economy, with more than \$860 billion in assets held by more than 86,000 grant makers. Foundation spending creates jobs, adds significant long-term employment, and spurs economic activity.

All of this economic clout is concentrated in the hands of the presidents and CEOs of foundations and the boards that govern them.

We might expect that this status quo power would not be easily surrendered, but in the past year, a group of foundation chief executives has been meeting together to explicitly address the need for philanthropy to work to stomp out racism as part of the newly created Presidents' Forum on Racial Equity in Philanthropy.

Philanthropy's lack of accountability comes up as a frequent discussion topic among these leaders. Given the way foundations are structured, they do not need to worry about pleasing customers or alienating voters. Apart from some very modest requirements to give their money to charitable organizations, they are free to choose what to work on and how to work on it. Given that freedom, each foundation can operate independently and freely.

Six Steps

That being so, how can philanthropy make progress on issues as fraught as race and racial equity? Based on the conversations at the Presidents' Forum, we offer six essential steps for what philanthropic leaders need to do now to advance racial equity and tolerance from their positions of privilege and power.

Be courageous. We are at a pivotal moment in history, and philanthropy cannot shy away from stepping up. Philanthropy leaders are uniquely qualified to identify the impact they want to have and how they want to lead on a range of critical issues. We need as many good people as possible loudly proclaiming that diversity is a strength. This is not a time to be faint of heart.

Stay hopeful. Ordinary people can do extraordinary things. Think about the Parkland, Fla., students, whose biggest worries two years ago may have been as simple as passing a geometry exam or crafting the perfect prom-posal. After suffering from horrific trauma, these young people have not retreated or backed down. Instead, they are on the front lines registering people to vote and recognizing those who live in trauma every day, putting the spotlight on them. They have hope that things can be better.

Speak out. We are interrelated, which means sometimes we must consider the good of the whole rather than what affects us singularly. The white allies who stood alongside black civil-rights leaders used their privilege to bolster the movement and help get legislation passed. What affects one of us directly affects us all indirectly. And we should stand up for each other because it is the right thing to do. We need leaders of all ethnicities speaking out when they see racism, homophobia, or xenophobia. White Americans can do a lot to help ensure that those who have suffered from racism get justice.

Create courageous cultures. You do not just have to be willing to create a safe environment for all staff members; you must actively work at it. Who better than the CEO, the one who ultimately controls the organizational purse strings, to encourage the behavior and facilitate the conversations,

both inside their own organizations and in the world in general? Try creating steppingstones for people to change, safe spots for people to move from one place to the next. The challenge of leadership is to create constructive safe zones to skillfully have difficult conversations.

Be comfortable with the thought of being uncomfortable. Creating a racially just society is not only about institutions; it is about each of us as individuals and all of us as a whole. It makes us uncomfortable because it is personal. The CEO's goal should be to get people outside of their comfort zone and into safe but uncomfortable conversations. The cost of doing business as the leader, unfortunately, often means absorbing pain.

Pay attention to who is not at the table. CEOs need to be mindful of who has traditionally been excluded and make it clear both to the excluded and to the people already seated at the table that everyone belongs. People bring negative and positive experiences to every encounter, so it is essential to promote a positive and welcoming tone for everyone. Foundations can be effective as conveners and sources of funding to break down the barriers to inclusivity.

The voices of philanthropic leaders are more important than ever, and foundation CEOs have a responsibility to act now. People will follow their lead, and even though change will come slowly, together we can create a more equitable society.

Valerie Jarrett serves as a senior adviser to the Obama Foundation, and Keecha Harris previously served on the board of the Jessie Smith Noyes Foundation.

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