

# Building Story (Creating effective narratives to talk about race and racism)

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## A Handful of Tips

- **Find common ground. Explain “shared fate” in racially-explicit terms.**

Point out that pain is pain: people of all racial backgrounds feel the same when we struggle to keep our housing, can't find jobs, or experience the high cost of health care. Many critical issues cut across race, ethnicity and class.

But at the same time, be explicit about race. Race has impact. It makes a difference. Our chances of finding work or renting an apartment depend, in part, on who we are racially. We share similar aspirations, but we do not always share the same realities.

- **Reframe victims and perpetrators. Take on the “race wedge.”**

An insidious aspect of institutional racism is how issues get framed. Stealing a cell phone becomes a heinous crime; stealing millions on Wall Street is “Oh well, that's how the game works.” By reframing our messages to make visible those structural biases, we can help people see “the thumb weighing down the scale.”

The “race wedge” is language that divides people by designating some groups as scapegoats. For example, when pundits or politicians talk about “illegal immigrants” or so-called “takers” of government resources, often the goal is to peel away some of us from the rest of us. By saying, “It's not about illegal immigrants, it's about all of us,” we pull back the curtain on a divisive, highly racialized tactic.

- **Keep your message clear and consistent.**

Whether we're talking to a TV camera or our best friend, a clear and consistent message works. That doesn't mean the race dialog is short and simple. There's *always* lots to say, but “clear and consistent” usually trumps “rambling and ever-changing.” (*Are we being clear on this? How about consistent?*)

- **Describe problems and solutions in emotional terms.**

Narrative trumps numbers. We respond to stories more than a list of statistics. Emotional language is *human* language – it touches us. Not only does it help the listener understand the issue more clearly; it also helps establish our own authenticity and credibility.

- **Focus on desired results.**

If our goal is to end institutional racism, then we should emphasize results. Telling our story means to share the pain, to acknowledge the real impact of racism, and then focus on the results we want to achieve. We need to know *what* we're working to change, but we also must help people see what change actually looks like.

- **Avoid moral superiority. Don't be a smarty pants.**

Achieving racial equity *is* a moral imperative. But that doesn't mean working to end racism elevates any of us to a higher moral plane. Moralizing doesn't build a movement – the best arguments to end racism are *practical*, not moralistic.

On a related note ... Achieving racial equity *is* smart policy. But that doesn't mean working to end racism proves we're smarter. All of us came to this work thanks to someone else. Whoever were the first ones were probably pretty darn wise. The rest of us are just lucky we heard from the right people at the right time. A little humility and love are definitely in order here.

*And finally, in everything we say and do, it's important to remember the perspective we bring to the table: our own personal identity. Are you a person of color? Are you a white ally? Remember to remember who you are and what that signifies.*