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Tackling racial justice: Why, how and so what? The story of one group of local grantmakers

Jennifer Lockwood-Shabat was in New York City on December 3, 2014, when the grand jury decided there was insufficient evidence to charge Police Officer Daniel Pantaleo in the death of Eric Garner. When Lockwood-Shabat, president of the Washington Area Women's Foundation, contacted me, she said, "I was standing in the crowd, a white woman, committed to social justice,

standing with those who felt this was a clear injustice. I could stand, but I didn't know what else to do."

That sentiment of not knowing what to do had started to resonate in the metropolitan Washington, D.C., philanthropic community in 2013, after the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the death of Trayvon Martin. A full house of philanthropists and foundation staff had taken the time to hear Dr. Gail Christopher of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation talk about unconscious bias and the Kellogg Foundation's work on racial healing. "If it's unconscious, what can we do?" some asked. "The whole issue of racial healing suggests that there is a racial wound. I don't know how we

By Tamara Lucas Copeland

would talk about that," was a sentiment voiced by many in various ways.

This sense of the massiveness of the issue, the minefield of deep-seated feelings and the need to respond to other issues for which the responses seemed more immediate and apparent effectively silenced any conversation on racial justice.

Then Michael Brown was killed in August 2014, Tamir Rice in November 2014 and Walter Scott in April 2015.

In my role as president of the Washington Regional Association of Grantmakers (WRAG),¹ an association of foundations and corporate-giving programs committed to the Greater Washington region, I started *(continued on page 9)*



challenging grantmakers
to strengthen communities

Tackling racial justice

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getting phone calls from funders. These foundation and corporate leaders were concerned about what was happening to black people across the country. The headlines about Brown, Rice, Scott and many others were both chilling and becoming routine. Though many were concerned, there was no clarity about the appropriate role of the funding community.

Then it happened in Baltimore. After being arrested, Freddie Gray died from injuries suffered in a police van. The protests that followed, 40 miles from D.C., drove home for WRAG and our members that, though we may lack clarity, it was not an excuse for inaction.

INACTION WAS NO LONGER AN OPTION.

WRAG called a meeting of the leaders of the major foundations in the region. ...

“Could this happen in the Washington area?” Of, course.

“Could we agree on a collective statement about the incident and the aftermath?” No, we didn’t think we could.

At that meeting, it became evident that language about race and justice was being used differently, that the philanthropic executives who were in the room felt that their trustees might not agree on the need for a collective philanthropic response, and just what that response should be was not clear. What the group did agree on, however, was that, at a minimum, the unconscious bias that Christopher had discussed over a year before was key, and, more likely, there was a larger issue at play: racism. Once that word was said, the floodgates opened.

These philanthropic leaders said they didn’t want to give grants without understanding the role that race and racism were playing in what was happening across the country. They didn’t want to rely on their business-as-usual mode of supporting education reform or workforce development or affordable housing. There was an understanding that

all of those needs are symptoms of a deeper, systemic problem that had to be acknowledged face on.

But still the question was, “What to do?”

LET’S TALK ABOUT RACE.

That’s when Nicky Goren, president of the Eugene and Agnes E. Meyer Foundation, reminded the group of a quote from John Gardner, founder of both Common Cause and the Independent Sector: “The first step of leadership is not action; it’s understanding.” That’s when we knew what to do. That quote launched the D.C. philanthropic community on a profound learning journey called “Putting Racism on the Table.”²

“Putting Racism on the Table” started as a six-month lecture series with a single aspect of racism being explored each month. The series covered structural racism, white privilege, implicit bias, mass

incarceration, which was explored as an example of the confluence of the previous three topics, the “racial mosaic” of America and, lastly, the role of philanthropy.

WRAG was working to enhance knowledge about racism while also building a cohort of philanthropic leaders who could, and would, lead on this topic in the Greater Washington region. To make sure that the information was heard and digested, several factors were key: who led the conversation, where that conversation occurred, how the conversation was formatted and who attended.

Speakers. Professor John A. Powell, in his talk on structural racism, set the tone. He said, “Discussions about racism are like exercise. We want you to feel the burn, but not get hurt.” The speakers were all like Powell, grounded in research, individuals who had been exploring their subject for decades. They were passionate about racial justice but not so impassioned that the facts were lost in emotion.

Location and format. We wanted familiarity with the location and with the process. The thought was that if we could create comfort and routine with the location and the process, these would contribute to comfort among the group and with the topic. So the location was always the same, and the format was always the same: a brief facilitated reflection on the previous session, a one-hour presentation by the topic expert, brief Q and A with the speaker, then a one-hour facilitated discussion that occurred in small groups and then with the group as a whole. One facilitator guided the group through all of the sessions.

Participants. We wanted to focus on the top leaders at each WRAG member institution. We knew that enhanced understanding among CEOs and their boards was critical for organizations to make the necessary internal shifts to address racial equity. Limiting par-

“The first step

of leadership

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it’s understanding.”

– John Gardner,
founder of Common Cause
and Independent Sector

“We will not remember the words of our enemies
but the silence of our friends.”

—Martin Luther King, Jr.

ticipation also allowed us to build a cohesive leadership cohort across the local philanthropic community, so initial participation was limited to CEOs and trustees. For some time, CEOs had been convened under the WRAG umbrella for other learning opportunities. Strong familiarity and a sense of trust had developed among them. Now, with “Putting Racism on the Table,” trustees were being brought into that existing safe space in an effort to build a larger cohort of leaders in the region with a shared understanding of racism.

WE FELT THE IMPACT IMMEDIATELY.

In June, the learning series ended, but the evidence of an impact didn't wait until then to emerge. It started almost immediately.

First, even though each program was three hours long, a significant time commitment for any leader, these leaders made the commitment to the learning journey. Our desire had been for attendees to participate in as many sessions as possible. The topics were not superficial. Attendees needed to hear what was being said, think about it, talk with others and find their place relative to the topic. Seventy-two percent came to two or more of the sessions.

Following each session, we asked for feedback. The value of the sessions in opening minds and expanding thinking quickly became clear. These comments are illustrative of what we were reading every month as we reviewed the commentary afterward:

- “After the session on structural racism, I realized how little I know about racism.”

- “The systemic nature of racism is more pervasive than I had previously understood.”
- “I think there are situations where white privilege is so ingrained that I am not even aware of the impact I am having just by being present or in casual conversation.”
- “Having been through the session on implicit bias, I better understand the strong and powerful way our subconscious influences our thinking and actions. What can we do?”

It wasn't far into the six-month series that the “what can we do?” sentiment became pervasive. The attendees wanted to continue the learning because they were realizing how incomplete their knowledge was and they wanted to act on what they had already learned.

THERE WAS A CLAMOR FOR MORE.

From this desire emerged “Putting Racism on the Table: The Training Series.” WRAG quickly moved, following the lecture series, to coordinate programming with a clear focus on action. We began coordinating training sessions for the local philanthropic community, including program officers, to help them understand how to use a racial equity lens in their grantmaking regardless of the issue areas that form their philanthropic focus. We will also conduct trainings on how to communicate about race and racism with friends and colleagues who have not had the type of extensive learning opportunity afforded to the WRAG community.

WE ARE STARTING CONVERSATIONS ACROSS THE COUNTRY.

While the audience was limited to local philanthropic leaders, WRAG wanted the “Putting Racism on the Table” experience to have a broader reach; thus, the one-hour lectures were filmed. The response to the videos has been overwhelming. The videos are being used as learning tools by other regional associations of grantmakers and as discussion starters with the staffs of local philanthropic organizations. Local business leaders who experienced the lecture series in their role as philanthropic trustees are now asking how other business leaders can be exposed to the learning series. Talk is underway about how to adapt the videos into teaching tools for high school students in the area, and soon the series will be available as podcasts.

It's too early to know the ultimate outcome of this work, but, remarkably, this community is no longer silent. A true conversation exists where there wasn't one before. An understanding of the depth and breadth of ways that people are advantaged and disadvantaged due to their race is growing across our region. And, most importantly, leaders who have demonstrated their ability to be change agents on so many issues are now tackling a topic that has been hidden or ignored for far too long. WRAG has put racism on the table. ■

Tamara Copeland is president of the Washington Regional Association of Grantmakers.

Notes

1. To learn more about WRAG, visit www.washingtongrantmakers.org.
2. Visit www.washingtongrantmakers.org/putting-racism-table.