Why Should I Use This Tool? Productive conversations about race are difficult to have. This is particularly true for a focus on embedded racial inequities. 1 Based in communications research, this tool makes such conversations more likely to achieve results everyone can embrace. 2

What Will It Accomplish? It will help you:

- Frame conversations about embedded racial inequities in ways that keep others engaged and on point.
- Get through predictably sensitive moments that typically arise when people talk about race.
- Think about communications strategies for advocacy work.

How Is It Used?

1. Before you have conversations: If you’d like an overview of the kinds of issues that typically arise in conversations about race - and advice about how to handle them - read the tool ahead of time to prepare yourself for promoting effective discussion.

2. After you have had conversations: If a particular issue leaves a conversation “stuck” or participants uneasy, review the questions and advice below to troubleshoot how to move forward.

3. For advocacy messages: See especially Q1, Q3, and Q4 below.

Q1: How can I get people to talk about race when they always want to change the subject?

A: People are more willing to talk about issues when conversations:

- Stress values that unite rather than divide (e.g., “opportunity” “community” instead of “to each his/her own”)
- Bundle solutions with any problem description, in order to avoid “compassion fatigue” and helplessness
- Focus on situations that someone might find themselves in (e.g., loss of a job)
- Use images that offer a shorthand for complex issues (e.g., competing in a race but having to begin it from behind the starting line as an image suggesting unequal opportunity and ongoing disadvantage)
- They are also more likely to turn off conversations that:
  - Criticize people instead of policies, practices, and proposals (e.g., It’s better to focus on Policy X rather than Senator Y)
  - Use too many numbers without a storyline for understanding them (e.g., It’s better to focus on the harm to children from under-resourced schools rather than a stand-alone litany of numbers reflecting inequitable resources.)
  - Use a rhetorical rather than practical tone (e.g., up-front accusations of racist intent make people defensive and unwilling to reason with you)

Q2: Race is always so sensitive to talk about. How can I keep a conversation focused and productive?

A. Our recommendation is to keep the conversation focused on the results people want to achieve (e.g., all children graduate from high school) rather than who’s to blame for present inequities. Of course, figuring out how to get the desired results will require a focus on what’s to blame; that discussion can be directed to policies, programs, and practices that need to be changed. We recognize and respect that some in their work against racism give priority to racial reconciliation, whose processes require personalizing the issue. Nonetheless, our approach stresses opening the conversation around shared goals and values as a way to begin the process of reconciliation. Our approach prioritizes the reduction of racial inequities. In turn, we believe such results have the potential to build the sort of trust that can contribute to the deeper personal process of racial reconciliation.

Q3: When people do talk about race, and they use the dominant model of thinking, how can I get them to focus on policies, programs, and practices as sources of racial disparities?

A: Don’t try to persuade people that their beliefs are wrong. Instead, find a value focus that is equally dear and compelling to them. The one value that research shows as promising is “opportunity.” Framing issues in terms of opportunity for all:

- Avoids an either-or debate about whether personal responsibility or systems are to blame, since opportunity goes hand in hand with personal responsibility. Since this debate is off the table, the focus can be on barriers to opportunity, and the evidence can highlight how similarly situated individuals encounter very different circumstances in terms of opportunities. (E.g., white children with college-eligible academic performance enter college at higher rates than African American and Latino children with college-eligible academic performance.)

Q4: Data make a strong case about embedded racial inequities, but some people still don’t get it. Why?

A: Research shows that “narrative trumps numbers.” That is, if people see numbers that don’t fit the model they use in thinking about race, they’ll reject the numbers. For example, suppose you present statistics about disparities in juvenile detention that show that even when youth of different racial groups behave the same way, African American, Latino, and Native American youth are disproportionately detained compared to their white counterparts. People wed to the dominant model of the self-making person will attribute the explanation for those numbers to some unspecified fault of the youth of color themselves. Their dominant narrative trumped your well-researched numbers. Your goal is to provide an alternative model they will embrace as a prelude to providing numbers. Your model must contain a value that trumps the dominant model (i.e., people embrace it) and must present that value first before presenting the data so that they can “hear” the data with a storyline that prepares them for it. For example, “All youth should have the same opportunity to pay for their mistakes. Yet that isn’t what we see when we look at...”

Q5: Could you give me an example of how to apply all of these points?

A: See if you can catch all of the advice above in this example, and decide if you think it represents effective communication.

“Parents should have the main responsibility for raising young children and whatever training they need to do their job well. But we see some troubling statistics from our state child welfare agency. Not all parents are given the same opportunity to learn. White families are twice as likely as other families referred for the same reason to be given home support services to improve their parenting skills. In contrast, the African American and Latino families referred for the same reason are more likely to have their children removed from the home and put in foster care. We know how to remove the barriers to these troubling differences in how families are treated. When caseworkers are allowed to devote more available resources to prevention and have objective criteria for determining how to allocate those resources - criteria that understand family and community assets - these disparities decline dramatically. This approach also saves taxpayers over a million dollars a year by giving priority to helping families do a better job of raising their own children rather than expecting strangers - no matter how well-meaning -- to do that job for them.”

Q6: No matter what I do, people don’t understand. Help!

A: Frameworks Institute offers a Checklist for effective communication (see pp. 33-34 of “Framing Public Issues,” www.frameworksinstitute.org). If you are able to say Yes to every item on their checklist, then:

- The higher order value you used as a frame must not have succeeded against another strongly held higher order value of your audience. Try a different higher order value.

- Try another audience! No important proposal for change has ever engendered 100% support.