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3 Ways Foundation Heads Can Lead on Racial Equity

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In a moment when white-supremacist rhetoric has been unleashed into the mainstream, Valerie Jarrett and Keecha Harris issued a powerful call to action for philanthropic leaders, foundation CEOs, and trustees to make the best use of their philanthropic assets to dismantle racism in all forms.

As the CEO of Living Cities, a collective of 19 of the world's wealthiest philanthropic and financial institutions, I enthusiastically accept this challenge. At Living Cities, we are striving to embed racial equity in our culture, which means becoming more accountable to the communities we serve and addressing the root causes of inequality.

For many years, Living Cities took a race-neutral approach to its grant making. However, we didn't see the gains we'd hoped for in the lives of low-income people and their communities. Racial gaps across all indicators — income, wealth, health, and more — continued to widen. During the past decade, we took a critical look at our approach and realized that if we truly hoped to improve the well-being of all people, we must put race at the center of our giving strategies.

Jarrett and Harris offer six powerful principles for foundations as they embrace racial equity. But so often, I hear from my peers that they don't know where to start in building the "courageous cultures" that Jarrett and Harris encourage. Although we at Living Cities don't have all the answers, I believe the following actions, derived from our experience, are vital for success.

Understand history and target root causes. As grant makers, we can't simply respond to conditions in the world around us. Our actions must be grounded in an understanding of the root causes of poverty to address them.

We must acknowledge that much of white America's wealth has its origins in stolen land and free and forced labor. We must admit that structural racism embedded in our political, economic, and social systems for hundreds of years has enabled white people to continue amassing income and wealth, often at the expense of people of color.

We must reckon with the origins of our institutions, which are a part of that national history and the economic systems that gave rise to inequality. To close the racial wealth gap and advance justice, we cannot simply ameliorate unjust outcomes. Our solutions must defy our history, get as close to these root causes as possible, and right structural wrongs like "redlining," the systematic denial of public services to people of color who are forced to live in segregated neighborhoods.

How does this play out? Recently we designed a plan to create jobs by promoting businesses started by people of color. We acknowledged that most new entrepreneurs seek investments from friends and family, yet households led by people of color trail white-led households significantly when it comes to wealth. To combat a root cause of disparities, we repurposed our \$40 million loan fund to get capital into the hands of early-stage entrepreneurs of color. To date, \$1.4 million has been committed to that end.

It also plays out in smaller, day-to-day decision making. When we hire a consultant we haven't worked with before — rather than one we already know, who is likely white and has access to our network based on a shared history — we take extra time to search for consultants of color. When we open staff meetings, rather than diving right into the agenda, we often create space for staff to reflect on how their families either overcame or benefited from social, economic, and cultural forces to enable them to be working at Living Cities. We remain open to learning more and committed to uprooting the causes of the disease of racism, not just the symptoms.

Work from the inside-out. Living in America means that messages about race are ingrained in our subconscious. Using a framework promoted by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Person-Role-System framework, has helped our staff members and others we work with deepen their ability to see, understand, and stop the ways that racism shows up in each of us. Training such as Undoing Racism, individual coaching opportunities, and Employee Resource Groups have been invaluable tools for our staff.

Through these experiences, I have developed competencies that have allowed me, a white man with tremendous privilege, to see in ways I couldn't see before how structural disadvantages and racist dynamics play out within Living Cities.

I am now more capable of advancing racial equity when handling procurement, hiring, and investments for Living Cities, and I am continually learning and being challenged. One way I am breaking out of old habits and checking my assumptions — which are deeply rooted in my life experience as a white man — is to incorporate "equity pauses" into my days to identify any potential unintended impacts of my actions.

Change the "how." To end racism in the communities where we live and work means we must uproot it within our own institutions. Doing this has required all of us at Living Cities to understand and transform the elements of white institutional culture that shape our norms, policies, and practices and perpetuate the status quo.

For example, we have integrated arts and culture into our events with grantees to reinforce the interconnectedness of all people, created space for staff and stakeholders to heal and reflect, prioritized quality over quantity when evaluating our progress, and pushed ourselves to engage in conflict and experience discomfort.

White institutional culture rose out of inequitable conditions. To change it, we must learn how to redefine ourselves as learners, not experts; as partners in change, not the source of change. A article called "Paying Attention to White Culture and Privilege: a Missing Link to Advancing Racial Equity" explains more about how to make these kinds of changes.

Doing work this way can seem "risky" because it's different, but I am certain that the risks of ignoring our shared relationship to race in America are even greater.

As the great Maya Angelou challenged us: "Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better."

I invite others to join Living Cities in the work of transforming ourselves to transform our sector.

Ben Hecht is president of Living Cities, a collaborative of 18 foundations and financial institutions committed to promoting economic security in U.S. cities by closing racial gaps in income and wealth. He is the author of "Reclaiming the American Dream: Proven Solutions for Creating Economic Opportunity for All."

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