



THE BLACK RESPONSE

TELLING THE RIGHT STORY ON RACE DURING COVID-19

A guide for effectively advancing racial justice: communicating about the realities, causes and solutions related to current attacks on our health, economy, democracy and future.

RASHAD ROBINSON
President, Color Of Change
@rashadrobison

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Telling the Right Story on Race builds on Rashad's 2018 white paper, [Changing Our Narrative About Narrative: The Infrastructure Required for Building Narrative Power](#), which was originally commissioned by the Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society at UC Berkeley and later featured in [Nonprofit Quarterly](#).

WE CAN GET THIS RIGHT

RIGHT NOW, THE NEED FOR **INTERPRETERS & GUIDES IS GREAT.**

Anyone who communicates regularly with large numbers of people is being called upon to help them make sense of what's going on during this pandemic, and to help them discover the different roles they can play in changing its long course.

This is true for every organizational leader, media figure and social media influencer I know. This is also true for every communications staffer and consultant. And it's true for that special person in every family, friend group, neighborhood, professional and social network whom everyone else turns to for wisdom, guidance and truth.

It is our job to give people—millions of people—a better lens through which to look at the realities they are seeing. In particular, we must be able to influence how they interpret and respond to the deeply unjust and exploitative distribution of suffering along racial and class lines. We must provide a racial justice lens.

It is our job to introduce ideas about race and racism that advance racial justice—not just making the facts about race present, but making the movement for racial justice powerful.

It is also our job to help people redefine their relationship to this reality: we must enable them to see themselves as active agitators and agents of change within the story of COVID-19. On top of that, we must also help people become effective interpreters and guides for the many people they reach and influence across their own networks.

In the end, we must be able to help people gain clarity: developing a strong conviction about what needs to be done and about their own agency and role in making change. *What can they do that will actually matter?*

There are many different audiences and constituencies of people that each of us reaches. If you're reading this, you likely regularly communicate (or influence communication) to important groups of people through many different channels: posts and ads on social media; emails to your members or subscribers; presentations to partners; comments in meetings; signs and T-shirts at protests; trainings for organizers; rap sheets for organizing; talking points for press releases; appearances in broadcast and online media; and private conversations with decision makers, your team and peers, influencers and others.

How you think affects how other people think. What you say affects what other people say—and do. But right now, there is too much messaging taking place across these channels that undermines our ultimate goals for racial justice and for building power for people of color, even taking us backwards. How can we do all of this better?

Whether talking to the public at large, to our own members or even among ourselves, how we communicate matters. While we may have specific objectives when we communicate to different groups of people, and while different channels of communication have their own rules and conventions, we must move toward the same overall goals whenever and wherever we are communicating and engaging people.

// The purpose of this guide is to help us let go of some our defaults and embrace a new narrative approach, especially for racial justice. Its aim is to help us move in the direction we need to go, and bring a lot more people there with us. //

This guide is not intended to be a comprehensive handbook for messaging about race. There are many, many issues this short overview does not address, and many important concepts from other thinkers that it does not incorporate. For now, it is focused on several striking problems related to the story about race that are gaining traction during the coronavirus pandemic. Even on that topic, it is simply Version 1.

BEFORE WE CAN EVEN START, WE NEED TO BE HONEST ABOUT OUR STARTING POINTS.

There is plenty of healthy disagreement about how to communicate effectively in any given moment and for any given objective. But there should be a lot less disagreement about the kinds of communication—and the kinds of underlying ideas—that take us backwards. Sometimes we face choices about undermining long-term efficacy for short-term responses, and those are hard choices. But other times, we are just starting in different places.

When it comes to racial justice, we each need to take a hard look at where we are starting. What are our defaults? Where is our default orientation, instinct, response or language coming from? Is it coming

from the social service sector, for instance? Is that orientation premised on fixing people instead of systems—especially on fixing Black people, Black culture or some other kind of intrinsic Black deficit? Is the language that comes from that sector implicitly reinforcing the assumption that something is wrong with Black people that needs to be fixed? As another example, is our training and experience coming from a legalistic framework? Does that lead us toward the kind of thinking that frames every fight as a fight over passing laws rather than a fight over winning freedom? Does it lead to thinking that Black people need representation, someone to speak for them?

Is that starting point simply not having direct experience with the issues you're talking about? Or perhaps not having something more directly at stake when it comes to the way people think about race, talk about Black people and talk about the issues that affect Black people (or the specific ways they affect Black people)?

The purpose of this guide is to help each of us assess our starting points for how we are communicating about everything related to COVID-19, particularly when it comes to Black people and communities. To be honest, this guide also aims to encourage some people to choose a different path than the one they may be on right now.

This is less a comprehensive narrative framework than it is an assessment tool: pointing out some of the defaults in communication related to race that have become far too prevalent for us to succeed. Quite simply, we will not get what we want if we do not disrupt those defaults, because those defaults are working against what we want rather than working in our favor. To turn that around, we need to reset our defaults on race.

To be effective guides, we also need to earn people's trust.

We cannot just say that society can and should be different, we have to say how, and then show people a viable path to that future. We cannot just point to the people who are responsible, we have to hold them (and their enablers) accountable. We cannot just say who should be removed from power, we need to elevate and promote people who are ready to take over and do better. We cannot just tell stories of pain, we have to tell stories of power.

And we cannot just say we need people to act. We have to give people the means and direction to do so in a way that feels more impactful than what they're already doing: measurably turning the situation around for the people they love and the reality in which they live.

Then, we have to communicate—constantly—about what we've won, which we do not do nearly enough. We must create a deep association between what we put into activism and the real value we get out of winning.

Some people don't have time for activism. But most people simply don't have time to waste. How do we make activism a meaningful part of their experience of COVID-19? How do we guarantee time well spent? How do we use messaging to draw people toward action, and brand ourselves as the winning team they want to join?

The changes taking place during this crisis are not going away. We are not going back to the way things were. We will create something worse or create something better; we are either going to lose ground or gain ground.

Our outcomes depend entirely on whether we can drive more people to act, and drive the people who are already acting to do so more strategically.

People are seeing mass suffering. But they are also seeing mass kindness. They are experiencing personal suffering, but they are also experiencing mutual aid. People see the injustices of the moment as connected to long-standing injustices, but they also just want it to be over.

Our biggest challenge is to effectively tap into people's feelings, and channel their energy into the type of strategic action that can change the rules that shape society. People can help one another at the individual level along the way, but this must result in changing norms: the priorities that politicians and corporations address, the people they listen to, the policies they make, and standards of success and accountability.

We have to ask ourselves this: How is every word we say, graphic we share, story we tell and action we take driving toward this outcome? If it's not, how can we change our approach?

FACTS DON'T MATTER AS MUCH AS THE TRUTH

Moments of disruption make way for experiences of reorientation. We can move people to a more radical analysis in a moment like this. But we can also make big changes in society feel easier, obvious and inevitable.

We can't fool ourselves, though: the changes that people more easily accept during a crisis can be either regressive or progressive. There isn't inherent momentum toward justice—it's a contest. It's a contest with other interpreters that we need to win.

We will win only if we change people's orientation:

- About who we are and what we offer as a movement, an organization or an identity of people
- About what we want and how it benefits everyone
- About people's role in making change

We can change people's orientation if we change our own approach to messaging. This requires us to focus on confidently and unapologetically telling a truth with which people strongly identify, and which is strongly motivating. We can't speak from a position of weakness, or beg for a journalist's attention. We must be welcoming, accessible, relatable and positive. And we must tell the truth.

For example, emphasizing the mere fact that “Black people are suffering/affected/dying at disproportionate rates” does not in itself motivate people to demand change, or even feel invested in the decisions leaders are making. It may make people feel sympathy, feel outrage, feel loss or feel that it’s really unfortunate, it’s really a shame, but it’s just the way it is. The default lens through which people see that fact determines their reaction.

Telling the truth is about introducing a different lens.

It’s a lens that makes people feel they’re seeing what’s real, connecting to something deeper. It helps them see the status quo as a threat, priming them to fight for change.

The truth is always a story.

Black people are not dying. We are being killed—killed by bad policies, corporate irresponsibility, racial bias and all those who profit from racism. And it’s killing America, too.

The truth raises questions that create popular tension.

We must raise these questions in a way that also increases people’s motivation to resolve that tension: *Are we really going to watch Black people being treated as disposable and not do anything to respond?*

As many have said: we don’t need messages that respond to the polls, we need messages that change the outcomes of polls. That starts with telling the truth.

There's a lot at stake in breaking bad practice.

As we highlight stats of suffering, we could be reinforcing the very ideas and norms that produced the disasters of health, economy and democracy we're facing. As we explain the injustices we see, we could be propagating a kind of defeatism—educating people on how this crisis is the product of systemic racial injustice, but doing so in a way that leaves people feeling there is no way out of it, essentially giving them permission to throw up their hands to fate and forfeit their agency. As we champion our demands, we could lose the faith of people who don't see a credible path to winning them.

Any of these outcomes could lead to people of color living in permanent crisis for a decade (or generation) more than we already have been, ruining millions of lives. We could lose the momentum of the 2010s.

We must also remember that the wrong ideas about race, even if well-meaning, have life-and-death consequences. They can legitimize and authorize violence against Black people and other people of color: from organized white nationalists to everyday white voters (and all voters). Right-wing populism at the polls, let alone white nationalism and vigilante violence on the streets, is rooted in distorted and dehumanizing understandings about Black people that we cannot afford to reinforce.

Beyond policy fights, the real contest is over culture: we must establish new ways of thinking about people of color and race in general. But we cannot establish new norms, or hold people accountable to them, if we are defaulting to old ways of thinking and communicating ourselves.

This paper offers a set of guidelines.

It aims to help us avoid the messages that enable the outcomes above, and create messages that produce the results we need instead. What are the results we need?

OUR **STORYTELLING** *must do* **THREE THINGS**

INSTILL AND REINFORCE BELIEFS THAT DRIVE BEHAVIOR

Beliefs about the causes of what we're experiencing; beliefs about race and the 'brand' of black people; beliefs about what we'll get from the changes we win; and more.

01

RALLY PEOPLE AROUND REAL SOLUTIONS

Solutions they can believe in, not just problems to point at.

02

MOTIVATE PEOPLE TO CONNECT AND ACT TOGETHER

Making people feel they are on a winning team.

03

CAN WE WIN BIG RIGHT NOW?

AN EXAMPLE: PRISONS & JAILS

For more than a decade, we have battled against the expanding footprint of jails, prisons and detention centers in society. We've spent a lot of energy convincing an increasing number of people that mass incarceration, and the industry built around it, lead to dire and intolerable racial injustice and racial inequality.

Racism is baked into every part of the system: from who's incarcerated and why, to how incarcerated people are treated, to the freedoms they are denied once they get out, to the economic exploitation of incarcerated people's families.

We've convinced a lot of people that prisons and jails are racist institutions. But right now, during the coronavirus pandemic, we can convince an even greater number of people of something simpler: they're stupid.

There are too many people in prison, jail and detention who should not be there.

Those places are a health hazard: they make society more dangerous, not safer. They are terribly run: we cannot trust the people who run them to be responsible.

They keep people trapped who should be free, and keep people away from their families and communities who need them. They are also completely racist. We should dismantle them now.

In this moment, we can spark a surge in people who will express this belief, and leverage that surge to put the prison industry in an indefensible position and greatly accelerate the progress we want.

But we have to be clear about the messages, messengers, mode of delivery, timing, targets and other factors that determine whether we can convert a moment of opportunity like this into a moment of major progress: ending mass incarceration.

NARRATIVE POWER

comes from

NARRATIVE CONFIDENCE

COLOR OF CHANGE IS CLEAR ABOUT WHAT'S HAPPENING RIGHT NOW

Corporate and government leaders' failed and corrupt response to COVID-19 is killing Black businesses, killing Black jobs, killing Black votes, killing the school year for Black children, and killing Black lives and futures in every single one of our families and neighborhoods across the country—far more than in other communities.

It's clear what would end this disaster (for our health, our wealth, our votes), and free us to build the lives and futures we want. It's also clear that when Black people win freedom, everyone in America wins progress.

But no matter how many factories shut down, one thing America continues to produce is massive racial injustice.

If we want to disrupt and restructure the systems that continue to manufacture a permanent state of crisis for people of color—and force people of color to carry the disproportionate burden of every financial crisis and health crisis we face—we need to disrupt the media environment that enables it to go on. Each of us can be part of that disruption.

Every word we say and story we tell in the media, and through our content, can either move us forward or set us back. The challenge is to know the things that will keep pushing us forward.

BLACK PEOPLE ARE NOT “VULNERABLE”

Government leaders and corporate executives are attacking us—whether by unchecked exploitation, neglect or discrimination. Anyone targeted by that same kind of attack would experience the same outcomes, and several other communities do. These are neither unfortunate conditions, nor conditions that can be blamed on Black people’s decisions, which is what failed leaders are trying to do to avoid their responsibility. What we’re seeing is caused by willful acts of injustice that are possible because we have allowed structural racism to persist.

But what we’re also seeing is that Black people are leading the way, and should be celebrated. We have to achieve balance. We must be careful about promoting more and more associations between Black people and negative things (even if better framed), and focus just as much on the contributions Black people are making.

IT’S NOT THAT

Black people are always some kind of problem.

IT’S THAT

Black people are creating solutions and doing life-saving work that Americans cannot live without.

Again, what’s at stake for Black people is life-and-death. Reinforcing the deeply held belief that *Black people are always the problem* is far more impactful than whatever the surface-level communication may be. That deeper story—that people of color are generally a problem—enabled the disaster of 2016. We cannot let those beliefs persist, especially now, when the drive among politicians, nationalists and corporations to control Black people’s bodies, lives and communities is already so strong. We cannot authorize them.

BLACK PEOPLE ARE NOT “DYING”

Government leaders and corporate executives are killing us with every decision they make: to force us to work in harm’s way; to force us to stand at the end of the line for support; to ignore what we need to survive and prevent loss; to deny us the resources for rebuilding our lives and life’s work that other people are getting.

IT’S NOT THAT

Black people are dying at higher rates than others.

IT’S THAT

Politicians are preventing Black people from surviving, denying us the care and attention they give to others.

This crisis is different for Black people because living in America is different for Black people. The way that employers, people online, people in the media, doctors, lawyers, corporations, police and others can get away with treating us, without consequence, is different. It’s abusive. It’s destructive. And deeply unfair and wrong.

The coronavirus doesn’t attack people by race, but American society does.

We need a counter-attack—a plan to address our history of unequal protection and care.

And it’s your voice, and all the things that you can offer to this fight—together with the voices of everyone who cares—that can make that happen.

BLACK PEOPLE DO NOT NEED HELP, WE NEED JUSTICE

We need the investment, support, care and respect that make any community secure and strong, and make any person successful. All of America needs help right now, and Black people are contributing as much or more than anyone else, as we always have. There should be equal recognition, respect and reward for equal work.

Black people are not the problem. We are the solution.

We are showing what America needs right now, and how America can change to achieve the best for all of us. But if we are held back then America will be held back, too.

Across American history very few Black people have ever gotten back from society anything close to what we put in. Now, Black workers are saving America.

They, along with many other workers, are being denied the protections and rewards they have earned by the corporations and politicians we let take those things away from them.

Black voters are saving the promise of voting in new leadership. Black celebrities are saving our spirits. Black leaders are saving their cities and states from the widescale harm of more bad decisions. But no reward. That is what needs to change.

MEETING THE MOMENT

In the 2010s, we made enormous progress in getting people to see society through the lens of race. Today, more people believe that racism exists, that it's deeply embedded in all parts of society, and that it explains the disparities and inequalities we see in the world. We moved people from viewing Black people as personally flawed to viewing society as systemically unjust. We must fortify that progress, and continue to reinforce the understanding that structural racism and those who defend it are the direct cause of the suffering we see.

We also have to continue building on that foundation. During this pandemic and in the decade ahead, we must get millions more people to be as invested in driving forward big solutions for racial justice as they are in talking about the problems of racial injustice. That means motivating millions more people to become as committed to action as they are to analysis. It also means being super clear: channeling that energy toward the most important changes to make right now, and the most strategic actions to take to achieve them.

We must instill the belief—and normalize the behavior—that people can show up in a way that turns our culture and our politics in the direction of major change. We can force a major reset of our systems and standards, and catalyze a major renewal of our society. But we have to be smart about how we win the story.

We know we're at an inflection point when both the potential gains and the potential losses are unusually high. This is one of those moments.

There is a lot of hope that the magnified life-and-death crisis of COVID-19 will prompt a scathing, collective assessment of how society fails Black people and so many others, and advance measures to rewrite the rules of all of our systems. But we know that hope is not a strategy.

We have a lot to lose, and we are already losing a lot. It's our health, it's our wealth, it's our voice and it's our freedom. During Hurricane Katrina, the moment in which Color Of Change was born, we saw how far Black people had come and how far we had to go. We're seeing that assessment again right now, on a national scale. And we're seeing what it will take to change course.

We have to get the story right.

INSTILLING & REINFORCING BELIEFS

EVERY TIME WE SPEAK OR EXPRESS OURSELVES IS AN OPPORTUNITY **TO REINFORCE OUR BELIEFS.**

We must make those beliefs more accessible, convincing and intuitive for others to embrace. Right now, we must be especially conscious and careful about the beliefs we are instilling.

We must instill the right beliefs about the causes of what's happening, and what people are being forced to endure: who's responsible for how we got here and how we get out of it. That starts with not blaming the victim, even implicitly.

We must instill the right beliefs about the "brand" of Black people as a character in the story of America, and in the story of COVID-19. That starts with not reinforcing the idea of Black people as the problem, even implicitly.

We must instill the right beliefs about the nature and type of solutions that we need, and the standards we have for what meeting our needs looks like. That starts with not allowing false solutions to steal attention or become acceptable.

HERE ARE **THREE GUIDELINES**



**SAY WHAT WE BELIEVE,
AND NOT WHAT WE DON'T**



**BALANCE THE STORIES WE
TELL, AND THE ASSOCIATIONS
WE PROMOTE**



**ADVOCATE FOR JUSTICE,
NOT MERELY CHARITY**



SAY WHAT WE BELIEVE, AND NOT WHAT WE DON'T

When we explain or tell stories about what's happening in the world, we need to make sure we're actually expressing what we believe, rather than reinforcing default beliefs that keep the status quo going.

The way we define a problem determines how people think and feel about solving it (and whether or not they participate in solving it through their actions, donations, etc.), so we need to be especially clear and disciplined when it comes to the way we talk about problems.

If we believe that racism in America is the real pre-existing condition that's responsible for the racial injustice, inequality and suffering we're seeing (from people's physical wellbeing to people's financial security), and if we believe that defining the problem in that way leads more people to rally for the changes we want, then we need to act accordingly.

If our characterization of the "anti-lockdown protests" is that it's a case of white people showing up with guns at state capitol buildings and ordering Black people (and other people of color) back to work, and that it's connected to the same system that forces essential workers into harm's way without protection, and sends people of color off to die in endless wars, and that all of that is connected to the deep history in America of corporations using Black workers disposably for profit, then we need to speak and act accordingly.

We need to convey and embed these beliefs in a host of different ways (through different stories and explanations, different actions and images), but we must sustain unwavering focus on this central idea. We can use different

words to express what we believe, but we should not change what we believe, or say things that make it seem like we have.

Too often we have tried to appeal to the results of (often very limited) polling by changing the meaning of what we actually say, rather than changing our words to better express the meaning we intend to convey.

Choosing more effective words to elicit the reactions we want, or to better convey our meaning, is good. But once we've decided what we want to say, we have to stick with it. If we want to facilitate people to develop clarity, conviction and commitment in what they believe and how they take action, we need to be clear, confident and convincing about our own beliefs. People can detect insecurity, hedging, doubt, internal conflict and inconsistency a mile away, and it degrades their trust and faith in whoever is speaking. And that makes it hard for them to follow our leadership and become leaders themselves.

WHO'S RESPONSIBLE

We need to be clear about who and what we believe is responsible for the injustices we see. If we believe that the system is responsible, or that certain policies are responsible, or that certain decision makers are responsible, then we need to say that.

An example from another context: we may think that unequal pay is a systemic injustice, but that is not what we are saying when we say, ***Women make less than men.*** Instead, we should be saying what we believe: ***Employers pay women less than men.***

The first—conventional but dangerous—way of describing the situation begs the question, ***What's wrong with women? We should fix them.***

The second—and strategic—way of describing the situation begs the question, ***What's wrong with employers? We should fix them.*** And that's what we want: to create pressure on employers and those who regulate and influence them to change the rules and norms for what and how people get paid.

In this same way, we're doing the wrong thing on race all the time.

For instance, we often say: *Black kids are struggling to graduate high school, and in [name a city] 25% of Black children never graduate.*

This make it seem like the problem is Black kids themselves. The school and its policies aren't even the story—they have been erased as characters.

We should not be surprised that people think we need to fix Black families, instead of fixing our schools, if we're not saying what we believe:

Schools are making it so much harder for Black kids to succeed than anyone else, and are refusing to give them the learning opportunities that other kids get.

When it comes to COVID-19 and race, we need to do the same thing.

Black people are not dying from coronavirus. Our health system is killing Black people. Our leaders are killing Black people. Don't look at the condition, look at the cause. We have to say what we believe, and we certainly cannot play into the narrative that blames Black people for their own suffering.

Another example:

Instead of saying: *As the coronavirus crisis continues, a growing number of reports are confirming the expected result: Black communities are suffering its effects at an extreme and disproportionate rate.*

We can say: *All the reports illustrate the predictable results of past and present choices about policy. For decades, those policies created racial inequality in work, health, wealth and education. And those policies are now allowing the coronavirus to attack Black people—and disrupt Black community life—at far greater rates than for anyone else.*

Or even: *Consistently, evidence shows that our society fails to protect and nurture Black people the way it cares for others. Many politicians have neglected us, and many corporations have exploited us.*

And let's be honest, many doctors have been incentivized to ignore and refuse to care for us the way they do for others. It should be no surprise that the people in charge at the federal level are doing the same, and that the death toll—which is even higher than being reported—has their name all over it.

It's simple math: destroying government destroys people. And cutting off investments in people destroys their communities and destroys the country as a whole. The death toll is no accident: it keeps going up for every dollar that radical and reckless conservatives have cut from the investments in community health, science and medical infrastructure that we needed.

Conservatives and health care don't mix. They deny diseases exist, and people die. They deny health insurance, and people die. They deny the needs of the people they have mistreated and withheld investment from for decades, and they die. Their policies kill, so we must kill their policies.

We have to interpret the reality people are seeing: Black suffering is not the result of Black people's individual decisions but the result of unchecked and unchallenged decisions that have been made for us and forced on us by those in power—corporate executive who gain profit, and government leaders who gain political advantage, by scapegoating Black people and controlling our lives and stealing the wealth and resources we've earned.

Instead of saying: *Black people are more likely to be uninsured, be in poverty, lack access to health care and have higher rates of underlying diseases and poor health.*

We can say: *Corporate employers could not make a profit or stay in business without Black workers, but those same corporate executives encourage the spread of the coronavirus and increase its death toll for Black people by denying Black people health insurance, artificially depressing our wages to truly un-livable levels, and denying us sick time—the exact opposite of what enables people to survive.*

Governments have let polluters target our communities and weaken our lungs, and let hospitals treat our health and our lives as less important and take away the supports all people need. These conditions attack people's health, and have helped the coronavirus ruin people's lives.

We will not allow essential workers to become sacrificial workers. Black people have always been willing to risk their lives to save others, but no one should be forced to risk their life to save profits.

We cannot allow a corporate takeover of the recovery because it will only make more people sick.

In all these cases, the default makes it seem like Black people are the problem, rather than illustrating how our health and wealth systems, and those in charge of them, are manufacturing the problem. It would be preventable if different people were in charge and different policies were in place.

One critical point: If we believe in solutions rooted in changing corporate practice and policy, and holding political leaders accountable for the laws they pass and the way they manage government, then we must first root the problem in the very same place. We need to say, very clearly and consistently, that corporations are cheating Black workers and we need to stop them. And that corporations cannot be trusted, especially when it comes to race or the welfare of working people.

We cannot shy away from talking about corporations that have stolen or stymied Black wealth, or put Black workers in harm's way, or exploited Black people in a moment of need, especially in not giving Black people the same breaks or opportunities that other people are getting. Those are practices, for example, that we are seeing with the big corporate banks right now: refusing to serve Black small businesses equally, or at all, with respect to the recent federal loan program.

These are the problems that are turning this crisis into a generational blow to racial justice and to Black people's security, opportunity and survival. We must talk about the people who are responsible for these decisions and these policies, whether corporate leaders or political leaders. Playing nice, and not naming names, is one of the biggest threats to losing what we have and failing to win what we need.

“THE MOST VULNERABLE”

Talking about “the most vulnerable” is not helpful. Black people are not vulnerable. Politicians, corrupt media, corporations and others malign, target, exploit and neglect Black people and Black communities. People in power keep the system rigged against Black people and then blame them as a way of distracting us from what they are doing. That is not about vulnerability we should pity, that's about injustice we should change.

“Vulnerable” is a personal trait that most people associate with weakness, pity and charity—not an issue of justice. And yet we keep slapping that label on Black communities. When we say “vulnerable” we're branding Black people as people whom Americans should always expect to be weaker or in trouble in some way. That is, we're branding Black people as an inherent problem. It makes people feel less invested in solutions for injustices that ensnare and exploit Black people because it positions Black people as hopelessly in need.

It also encourages the pattern of blaming Black people for everything that's wrong in society, and for being weak. Instead, we must focus attention on the politicians and other actors who deny Black communities the resources and support that make all communities strong. They are the people who are weak and fatally flawed, and not up to the challenge of being in charge.

The coronavirus doesn't attack people by race, but American society does. Only big ideas that address our history of unequal protection and care will make this crisis a turning point for racial justice rather than a point of exacerbation for racial inequality. Black people are not vulnerable, we are under attack, and our freedoms are under attack. We are fighting and winning them back.

An example of telling the story we want to tell:

Instead of saying: *To truly conquer this crisis and emerge stronger than before, we need an agenda that finally provides dignity and stability to all of us, starting with our nation's most vulnerable.*

We can say: *To overcome the corrupt and incompetent decisions that create this crisis, and to emerge stronger and better than before, we need an agenda that enables security and stability for each of us, especially the people whom corporations and politicians routinely exclude from the prosperity and relief other people get, and from the opportunities and freedoms that all people should enjoy.*

“INTERCONNECTEDNESS”

We may believe that we *want* to build a world that is interconnected, but is COVID-19 really showing us that we’re all connected now? And do we mean interconnected or interdependent? Is either really true?

Plantation owners were dependent on slave labor. Was that interdependence? There is nothing inherently equal or equitable about interdependence. What we actually believe is that the consequences for some should be shared by all: shared consequences means shared fate, and shared fate should mean shared investment—no one denied the opportunities everyone deserves, and no one sacrificed as a means for others to succeed. As both the rewards and responsibilities of society are more evenly shared, society grows stronger and better.

One fundamental problem in society is that we are fundamentally disconnected. Wealthy and powerful people are disconnected—in any real way—from what happens to people who aren’t like themselves. Right now, certain people’s lives are treated by society as expendable. The most privileged feel immune to what happens to the many, and this pandemic is reinforcing that idea, not challenging it.

There are four groups of people in this pandemic: people who are profiting, people who are fine, people who are deeply inconvenienced, and people who are in danger. The problem is that these tiers largely break down by race and by class. They represent hierarchy rather than balance.

That doesn’t show how we are interconnected, it shows whose lives are defined by service and servitude and whose lives are defined by choice and privilege. Allowing that deep level of disconnection and imbalance to exist is a root of the inequality we are facing, and have been facing.

Instead of saying:

We're all in this together.

This crisis reveals how interdependent we all are.

We can say:

Most Americans will continue to lose what they have, and suffer, if we continue to let our essential workers die and suffer.

Inequality created this crisis, and so ending inequality is the only way out of it.

There's a real way and a fake way to end this crisis and rebuild our country to become stronger than it ever was before. The only real way to rebuild is to support and reward the Black workers and others who are keeping America going right now. They are making it possible to respond to this crisis, but they are also the only people who can power our ability to rebuild.

This is a major opportunity for Americans to become more connected: to see the bonds we share and create the future we want. The power of human togetherness, if we truly stand with and support one another, is the greatest power there is. If we stand together and work together, we will all get better.

The true crisis is inequality, which we have talked a lot about over the last twenty years, but largely failed to do anything about. We need to continue to promote that problem as the problem we need to solve.

CELEBRATING ESSENTIAL WORKERS

We want to encourage those who identify with essential workers—a workforce that would not exist without the Black people who make up such a large share of it—to celebrate them. But we must influence what that celebration means politically, and make sure it's driving toward the political outcomes we want.

We want to encourage that *feeling* of connectedness, as long as we convert that energy into fighting for *policies* of connectedness that lead to racial equity, and into supporting Black leadership and Black communities who are leading these fights.

Reliably and predictably, we will see more applause, more fundraisers, and eventually, statues to fallen nurses. We could even see a National Health Worker Day added to the national holiday calendar, celebrated in Post Offices and public schools, at churches and through PSAs. What will those manifestations of appreciation amount to, given the course we're on? They'll likely have just as much impact on the decisions we make about our health care system as war memorials and Memorial Day impact the decisions we make about war.

This is a classic “presence versus power” moment: the saturation of conversations about essential workers will not necessarily translate into the power to implement changes that help them. This is the time to force the hand of fate in our direction, building on the energy and ideas that are emerging, but never thinking that they will get us what we want on their own, i.e., without strategic and smart intervention.



BALANCE THE STORIES WE TELL, AND THE ASSOCIATIONS WE PROMOTE

We must also avoid talking about Black suffering incessantly, without ever talking about Black power, Black leadership, Black contributions and Black brilliance. In organizing, Color Of Change created a program that brings people together in environments that celebrate and create bonds over Black joy, even as we focus our organizing on solving the problems and pain caused by injustice.

It's the same thing in the narrative realm: if we constantly associate Black people with negative things, even if we are correctly talking about injustice, then we will reinforce the idea that there's something wrong with being Black, or with being raised in a Black community or family. If we think of Black people as a brand, this idea becomes a lot clearer: we must rebrand Black people as people who will save America, not people who need saving.

Black people working in health care, food, education, transportation and so many places across the country are saving lives, coming up with innovative solutions to end the crisis, and giving us all hope.

We must make Black people, and all people of color, the face of essential workers and the heroes of the COVID-19 story. That's part of telling the truth: being clear about who is doing the work that will save people's lives and save this country. We must do this, however, in a way that enables that image to accrue to the overall brand of Black people and people of color in America, and shift attitudes and perceptions about these identities.

An outcome of this shift: large numbers of people instinctually ascribing the fact of Black people getting sick both to the role Black people are playing in the essential work of the front-line workforce (from health to transportation to food systems) and also to the structural racism in our health care system, economy, etc.

We must root our story in a position of strength, power and positivity, even as we talk about how opportunists unfairly attack Black people for their own gain.

We have to tell the truth, and the truth is balanced: Black people are the solution, not just the problem. Stories of Black leadership and problem-solving are exceptionally important to highlight in this moment when most stories in the news feature Black people in positions of weakness and pain.

Building Brands

Promoting organizations and leaders, or workers and families, who are solving problems. Building the brand of individuals and organizations, or even entire neighborhoods, is one way to advance a redefining of the brand of Black people overall.

A handy rule: whenever talking about a problem, talk about an organization or person who is promoting ideas or doing the work to solve it. That is what will help people start to develop imagined relationships with our different people and organizations, which we can then convert into real and valuable relationships.



ADVOCATE FOR JUSTICE, NOT MERELY CHARITY

If we talk about what's happening as unfortunate, people will feel sympathy but not necessarily see the need for real change. If we talk about what's happening as unjust, i.e., the direct result of unjust decisions and unjust policies, then we can create the demand we need for change. In everything we say, we need to make that connection.

We may not always need to use the words “unjust” or “injustice” to elicit that response. But we must convey and embed that thinking: orienting people to seeing these realities as unjust, not unfortunate.

Statements that suppress outrage will ultimately set us back. Empty gestures toward recognizing “unfortunate conditions” are not helpful, nor is anything else that turns Black people's suffering into a cause for charity and alleviation rather than systemic change.

Rather, we need people to believe that contributing to charity does not create change, only contributing to justice does. It's not about attacking charity, but rather focusing attention on fighting back—and supporting the leadership of people who are fighting back—online, in their city, at the state and federal level, and at the consumer/corporate/workforce level.

We also need to set the standard for what we want: fundamentally rebalancing society, not making it more tolerable to be oppressed. How we communicate about outcomes—and making sure that we are being outcomes-focused, in addition to being values-focused—sets the standard for what real solutions look like, rather than allowing fake solutions to become satisfying excuses for the changes we need to make.

RALLY AROUND SOLUTIONS *not just* PROBLEMS

There are two aspects of how we can most effectively promote solutions: reinforcing the range of interconnected solutions that are necessary (i.e., breadth), and instilling confidence in the viability, effectiveness and incredible universal benefit of those solutions (i.e., faith).

While the current version of this paper doesn't expound on the second point, it's worth emphasizing it. It is incredibly important to be intentional and effective when it comes to issues like the brand of our solutions (including how we name them), the brand of the people promoting them (whether individuals, organizations or movements), and the articulation of the incredible value that everyone will get out of them.

One of our objectives must also be promoting the need for a combination of remedies and actions, never reducing our demands to a single issue. This is another one of the most important ideas we need to convey. The failed response to COVID-19 is tearing apart the lives of Black people, families and communities on several fronts. It will take interventions that are integrated across all of those fronts to change what's happening and change our future.

The graphic on the next page presents one way of thinking about the range of issues people are facing, and the range of solutions we need to address them. In discussing any combination of these issues, it's important to project belief and confidence in the ability of our solutions—and us—to be game-changing in terms of saving Black lives, enabling Black futures and rebuilding communities across America. As mentioned above, we must set the bar high in terms of the real-world outcomes by which we judge success and progress.

Of course, all of the ways we talk about the realities, challenges and injustices we're seeing and experiencing must set up these solutions as the best and necessary answer to them. For example, we may need to leverage the resources that corporations have built or have access to, but that doesn't mean we should position corporations as independent actors who can and should save us—trusted (so given a pass on oversight), heroes (so given a pass on how they're making problems worse), capable (so given a pass on how deeply they fail us). If we are not engaging corporations in the context of a transfer of

power, then we are just setting them up to build and exercise greater power against us.

Lastly, we must also talk about our ideas in ways that motivate people to connect and act together. And that means talking about our past wins in a way that demonstrates confidence in our ability to win more. Winning begets confidence. Stories of winning—not just the fact of winning, but the value and impact of the win—are unbelievably important. Part of what we are doing when we talk about solutions is conveying our own value as organizations and movements. What can you deliver? How we communicate tells people whether or not we're the team worth joining, what they'll be part of if they join in the fight, and what they'll miss out on if they don't.

One related question (also to be developed in another version of this paper) is how well we are communicating our value, and whether we're doing that as often and as "big" as we need to. We need to put much more behind doing so.

COLOR OF CHANGE

THE BLACK RESPONSE TO COVID-19



1 GOV'T OVERSIGHT

- TRACKING THE FUNDING
- VIGILANCE OVER POLICING
- ENDING THE TARGETING & CRIMINALIZING OF BLACK PEOPLE

2 PRISON SYSTEM

- FREE PEOPLE: LET THEM OUT
- MAKING PHONE CALLS FREE
- MAKING PHONE CALLS FAIR
- ENSURING HEALTH & SAFETY

3 WORK LIFE

- ENDING HARRASSMENT ONLINE
- ENSURING SAFETY, SEAL WAGES & SUPPORT FOR ESSENTIAL WORKERS

4 PERSONAL LIFE

- FORGIVING DEBT
- SUSPENDING COLLECTION + REPORTING
- TELLING BLACK STORIES
- BRINGING PEOPLE TOGETHER IN JOY

5 HOME LIFE

- FREEZING RENT, MORTGAGE, UTILITIES, AND EVICTIONS

6 SMALL BUSINESS

- ENSURING BANKS PROVIDE EQUAL ACCESS TO FED LOANS + SUPPORT
- ENSURING TURBOTAX MAKES FILING FREE

7 HEALTH CARE

- VIGILANCE OVER HOSPITAL BIAS
- VIGILANCE OVER PHARMA GOUGING
- ENSURING ACCESS TO TESTING + CARE
- PREVENTING CORPORATE PROFITEERING

8 DEMOCRACY ACCESS

- ENABLING REMOTE VOTING & TRACKING
- MAKING IN-PERSON VOTING SAFER
- COMPLETING THE CENSUS

RASHAD ROBINSON

@rashadrobinson

Rashad Robinson is the president of Color Of Change, where he designs and implements winning strategies to build power for Black communities. Among the successes under his leadership: forcing corporations to stop supporting Trump initiatives and white nationalists; winning net neutrality as a civil rights issue; holding local prosecutors accountable to end mass incarceration, police violence and financial exploitation across the justice system; forcing over 100 corporations to abandon ALEC, the right-wing policy shop; changing representations of race and racism in Hollywood; moving Airbnb, Google and Facebook to implement anti-racist initiatives; and forcing Bill O'Reilly off the air.

Rashad is widely consulted on strategies for corporate accountability, transforming the criminal justice system, media and tech reform, narrative infrastructure, and building Black political power. He is a sought-after keynote speaker at events across the country, and appears regularly as a quoted source, interview guest and opinion writer **in major media**. In addition to media appearances, Rashad has been profiled by *The New York Times*, *Wired*, *The Root*, *The Washington Post*, *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*, *Fast Company*, *The Huffington Post*, PBS, BET and several other outlets. Under Rashad's leadership, Color Of Change has been named three times in *Fast Company's* Most Innovative Companies list—in 2015, 2018 and 2020—and was profiled by the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. Rashad is the proud recipient of awards from organizations as varied as ADCOLOR, the United Church of Christ, the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Foundation and Demos. Previously, Rashad served as Senior Director of Media Programs at GLAAD.

This paper is a continuation of Rashad's leadership in the areas of culture change, narrative strategy and infrastructure, media, brand and communications. It builds on his 2018 white paper, ***Changing Our Narrative About Narrative: The Infrastructure Required for Building Narrative Power***, which was originally commissioned by the Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society at UC Berkeley and later featured in ***Nonprofit Quarterly***.

COLOR OF CHANGE

@colorofchange

Color Of Change is the nation's largest online racial justice organization. Driven by over 1.7 million members, we are building power for Black communities and leaders across the country. Color Of Change enables Black people to challenge injustice wherever our lives and wellbeing are at stake: Silicon Valley, Wall Street, Hollywood, Washington, corporate board rooms, local prosecutor offices, state capitol buildings and city halls around the country. By holding corporate and government decision makers accountable—and advancing systemic changes across both culture and politics—Color Of Change is creating a more human and less hostile world for Black people and all people in America.

In addition to Color Of Change **campaigns and initiatives** focused on criminal justice, big tech accountability, economic justice, anti-Black violence and discrimination, and **a new approach to organizing** in Black communities, Color Of Change runs several key projects:

The Black Response (theblackresponse.org) is an information and activism portal for ensuring racial justice during COVID-19 and its aftermath: holding corporate and government leaders accountable for their actions and inaction, and providing resources for Black people to protect themselves and fight for what we all need.

Our Count (ourcount.org) is a national initiative to ensure that every Black person, community and vote counts in both the 2020 census and 2020 elections, overcoming and ultimately dismantling the system of exclusion and suppression we see today.

Winning Justice: The Prosecutor Project (winningjustice.org) is a national initiative to transform the criminal justice system by redefining the role of city and county prosecutors, with the understanding that prosecutors have more influence over criminal justice than any other single actor in the system. We work to advance alternative practices and to hold prosecutors accountable for changing the way they use their power. We are making progress ending the most unjust, unconstitutional, destructive and racist practices that

prosecutors control: money bail, over-charging, over-sentencing, over-policing, the drug war, attacking immigrants, sending our kids to adult prisons and keeping secrets about what's really happening in their offices and in police departments.

Color Of Change Hollywood (changehollywood.org) collaborates with like-minded insiders and influencers to change representations of Black people, and of the issues affecting black people, across the media landscape. We consult regularly in TV writers' rooms and with industry executives; partner on the release and rollout of new series, movies and other content; produce content with celebrities to rally participation on issues such as criminal justice and voting; lead accountability campaigns to change industry practices; and conduct original research to expose critical problems in the industry and to build momentum for industry change.

Tell Black Stories (tellblackstories.org) is a podcast series on **Apple** and **Spotify**, as well as an ongoing conversation ([#TellBlackStories](https://twitter.com/TellBlackStories)), focused on amplifying the stories of Black lives and Black experiences across America. It also a platform for convening people across the entertainment industry to openly and honestly discuss issues of representation in different media and work conditions in the industry, to build power for Black writers and producers, and to increase diversity in writers' rooms—all in service of creating more accurate, authentic and balanced representations of Black people across the media landscape.



THE BLACK RESPONSE

TELLING THE RIGHT STORY ON RACE DURING COVID-19

A guide for effectively advancing racial justice: communicating about the realities, causes and solutions related to current attacks on our health, economy, democracy and future.

RASHAD ROBINSON
President, Color Of Change
@rashadrobison

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