INSIGHTS FROM THE FIELD:
Learnings from Organizational Journeys in Centering Racial Equity

PART 3: AN ANTHOLOGY OF THREE PAPERS

OCTOBER 2023
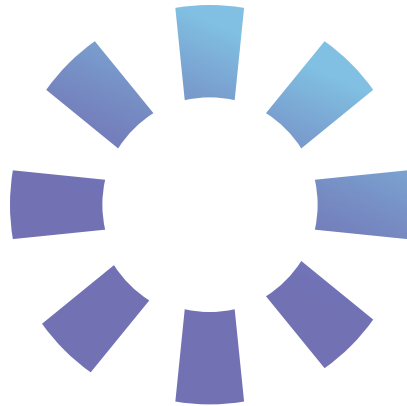
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Foreword

Will Keith Kellogg, founder of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation (WKKF), articulated a three-step iterative process for community change, saying, "... it is only through cooperative planning, intelligent study and group action – activities on the part of the entire community – that lasting results can be achieved." The process of intelligent study undertaken here includes looking to the work of grantees and partners to learn about how they have made change for their organizations and communities.

This anthology of three thematic papers highlights common themes found in organizational racial equity journeys of WKKF grantees and partners, as a supplement to our Racial Equity Spotlight series, parts **one** and **two**. These themes emerged in interviews with leaders of more than 40 nonprofits who have been committed to racial equity, racial healing and justice. They undertook transforming their organizations knowing that racial equity is critical to achieving their missions. They also recognized that in some cases, organizations evolved from legacies of inequity, as leaders, board, staff members and donors did not always come from the communities the organizations were serving. This anthology gleans learnings about how WKKF grantees and community partners – many of which have long been dedicated to racial equity – navigated and continue to navigate the journey toward racial equity, healing and justice.

The summer of 2020 carried the combined impact of a global pandemic with disproportionate impact on people of color, the ongoing murders of Black men and women and other people of color, and increasing violence against Asian Americans and immigrants in the United States. After that summer, many organizations decided to move forward with explicitly centering racial equity and racial healing in their operations and programming, realizing that racial equity is critical to achieving their missions. Many reached out to us for advice about how to shift their programs, internal operations, organizational cultures, leadership and staff to be able to do this work.
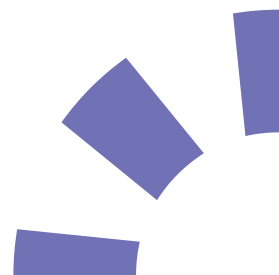
We have been honored to partner and support the work and share the journeys of the organizations represented in this anthology. And we are grateful to our partners, Social Policy Research Associates (SPR) and Eternal Knot Evaluation, for surfacing these learnings and bringing this work to life. Our hope is that you will see many of the different approaches to taking on racial equity and the work of racial healing. Reflecting on where your organization is in the process, we hope you will gain insights, taking what may be helpful from the many ways our grantee partners have approached this journey—an ongoing journey, not a one-and-done event.

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Introduction

The following anthology of three papers is the third in a series of publications intended to lift up the journeys of nonprofit organizations across the country that are focusing on centering racial equity within their internal programming and operations. Earlier this year, two sets of spotlights profiled 10 diverse organizations and their internal racial equity journeys, delving into the unique approach each is taking, the challenges they are facing and the ways that each has grown and learned from their experience.

Rather than telling an organization-specific story, as was the case in the spotlight series, this final publication endeavors to surface learning from a cross-section of 31 organizations in three specific areas:

- **Leadership perspectives in stewarding organizational race equity journeys.** *What motivated their racial equity efforts and how did they get started? What was the role of leadership in their efforts and how did that influence their journeys? What challenges did they face along the way and how did they address them?*

- **Organizational approaches to cultivating a supportive culture for racial equity work.** *How have different organizations thought about creating a supportive organizational culture for their racial equity work? What concrete steps are they taking? What are different challenges and considerations that are rising to the surface?*

- **Organizational approaches for fostering individual journeys toward shared racial equity practice.** *What was the impetus for organizations to support deepening individual and collective knowledge and understanding? What approaches are being utilized? What role does racial healing play in supporting staff toward this end?*

The impetus behind the overall series stemmed from an increasing number of organizations asking W.K. Kellogg Foundation (WKKF) staff for advice and guidance on their own internal racial equity journeys following the summer of 2020. The murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor and George Floyd — in quick succession and against the backdrop of a global pandemic wreaking disproportionate impact on communities of color — compelled millions of people of all races to take to the streets, to raise their voices against police brutality and to demand racial justice. The momentum of the movement toward racial justice created an

opening for many to reflect on their own beliefs and biases, and search for ways to bring about the change they hoped to see for the country in their own personal and professional spheres.

WKKF staff recognized that the grantees of the foundation — many deeply dedicated to advancing the well-being of low-income and racially diverse communities — represented a potentially rich learning community of organizations engaged in myriad approaches to further their own racial equity journeys. In 2021, WKKF therefore approached Social Policy Research Associates and Eternal Knot Evaluation to support the foundation in surfacing stories of different organizational journeys and approaches within their grantmaking portfolios that might offer useful learning for others.

Who Are the Organizations Contributing to the Learning Offered Through These Papers?

Ultimately, during the summers of 2021 and 2022, a total of 41 individuals representing 31 organizations generously reflected on their organizational journeys with us. In the spirit of deepening collective practice of the broader field, each approached their interviews with candor and vulnerability. Many shared strategies that they were experimenting with and ways that they were iterating on their approaches based on challenges they were facing; none thought that they had it "right" and almost all emphasized the long-term, evolving nature of their organizational journeys.

With a full list of contributors included in the acknowledgements, the participating 31 organizations were purposefully diverse in composition. They represent advocacy and

organizing groups, health and social service organizations, regional community foundations, membership networks, employment training programs, youth development programs, food banks and leadership development and networking organizations. Just over half are nationally focused organizations, with the rest focusing more locally and regionally in areas across the country. Five organizations were founded in the last decade, four had histories that extended over a hundred years. Some were founded on values of racial equity; others have come to embrace this focus just in the last few years. *All* were deeply committed to carrying out their missions on behalf of those they represent and serve, such as building power and promoting civic engagement of local communities; ensuring families have equitable access to basic needs and economic opportunity; addressing disparities in health and education; and dismantling systems of institutional racism in fields as diverse as early childhood education, maternal health, conservation, workforce development and philanthropy.

The Invitation

As has been the case throughout this series, the learning offered in this anthology is not intended to be a "how to" roadmap or a series of "magic bullet" solutions for centering racial equity in organizational programming and operations. Rather, the goal is to connect the reader to the stories of others as a way of reflecting on what is possible and promising within their own specific context. We invite you to dive in and hope that the learning surfaced here serves to advance your own organizational equity approaches in the journey ahead.

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STORIES FROM THE FIELD

Organizational Leadership for Centering Equity

The choice to focus inward and assess the extent to which an organization is manifesting its own racial equity values within its internal policies and practices is not one that organizational leaders make lightly, given the many layers of sensitivity and vulnerability required of those committed to engaging ▸▸

in an honest and meaningful change process. It requires a level of readiness, willingness to invest resources and a deep commitment from the entire organization, especially its leaders, who are "on the hook" for making the case for, investing in, standing behind and sometimes defending their internal racial equity efforts.

This paper lifts up the perspectives of organizational leaders around the decision to embark on an internal racial equity journey and some key learnings they have picked up along the way. It aims to answer some key questions that commonly come up for organizational leaders who are interested in starting or deepening their journey, and who want to learn from others who have been engaged in this work. *What motivated their efforts and how did they get started? What was the role of leadership in their efforts and how did that influence their journeys? What challenges did they face along the way and how did they address them?* Ultimately, the paper aims to provide insights that may be of use to other organizational leaders who struggle to start or stay committed to a journey that is arduous but meaningful, and that both tests and affirms their commitment to their values.

IMPETUS FOR THE JOURNEY

While the racial justice uprisings of 2020 motivated many organizations to begin questioning racial equity within their own practices, this was not the case for all organizations we interviewed. The uprisings influenced their journeys but did not always serve as the catalyst. When we asked organizational leaders what served as the impetus for starting their internal racial equity journeys and what role, if any, the uprisings played, most organizations fell into one of three categories: (1) those who were in the early phases of their journeys, having started largely in response to the 2020 uprisings; (2) those who had already started their journeys but who realized, in the wake of the uprisings, that they needed to do more; and (3) those who had long been engaged in internal racial equity journeys but who were able to then leverage the resources and opportunities that emerged in response to the uprisings and other racial justice movements to advance and deepen their practice. Interviews across respondents from these organizations surfaced common themes around what motivated organizational leaders to start or deepen their internal efforts to examine and improve their internal organizational racial equity practices. These include: recognizing the need for an internal reckoning, wanting to do more and do better, being invited to participate and leveraging the racial justice moment.

Recognizing the need for an internal reckoning

Several organizational leaders shared that the uprisings sparked the realization that, as organizations, they needed to "walk the talk." Specifically, they acknowledged that while they may have had a strong focus on supporting racial equity through their external programming, they had not had the same level of intentional focus internally. One organizational leader shared that, "Before George Floyd, we were just really not

that deep in thinking about racial equity from an organizational perspective." Another leader shared that just as "The death of George Floyd rocked the country, it rocked our organization," prompting the CEO to call together their staff, "to hear directly from our employees about what our response as an organization should be."

Wanting to do more and do better

A number of leaders shared that they had started their internal work years ago but realized that their efforts were insufficient. As the quote to the right suggests, some organizational leaders described how the 2020 uprisings challenged them to "think bigger" and to reflect around how to "do our work better." Another organizational leader shared that their racial equity efforts began in 2014, fueled largely in response to the death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. But the reflection moments inspired by the racial justice uprisings in 2020 revealed to them that their work was "piecemeal" — that they had "pockets of work" and they needed to do more. This leader shared, "The overall consensus from staff was that we need to do more, and that racial equity should be something that we embed across our organization and every facet of our organization."

Being invited to participate

Multiple organizational leaders shared that being afforded resources and learning support for their efforts was key to sparking or deepening their racial equity journeys. Leaders from at least three organizations shared that being "invited" or encouraged by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation

▼ Racial equity, again, has always been one of the foundations of our work. But I think, like many organizations and many individuals, we experienced the shift back in the summer of 2020 after the death of George Floyd. We really took that opportunity to figure out how we could really double down on our commitment to racial equity, and really challenge ourselves to think bigger, number one, and think about what our impact has been over time … . So it really did allow us to do some thinking, and to do some work around what we need to do as an organization to do our work better, to have a greater impact in the field, and to be true to our values. I think there was a recognition that, if we say we value racial equity, we want to dismantle structures and institutions that oppress people of color, then we need to operate in those same values. I think there was a recognition that we had some work to do. ▲▲

to participate in racial equity initiatives or learning communities focused on racial equity, justice and healing, and providing resources to

support that participation, influenced the start, direction and/or continuation of their racial equity journeys. The CEO of one organization, for example, participated in a six-month learning cohort focused on racial equity, and WKKF subsequently provided funds for more managers to participate. Another leader talked about how participating in a learning community with other foundations helped them to realize the importance of addressing racial equity internally before bringing their member organizations along.

> ❝ 2020 wasn't the first time we recognized we had issues within our own organization, even. So this work around social justice and racial equity is not a new conversation by far. It certainly was elevated in a global way in 2020, which was helpful to move us forward … I feel like we were able to speed up some of our momentum of the things that were already in the works, because folks who may not have recognized the urgency now were confronted with this in a different way and forced to reckon with our role in this movement. Having structures [already] in place certainly allowed us to be strategic and systematic in our approaches. ❞

Another shared that while they had already been steeped in racial equity work, the invitation to participate in WKKF's Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation process afforded them the ability to leverage the same resources by learning alongside the community they were serving and applying their learnings internally.

Leveraging the racial justice moment

Some organizational leaders shared that they had long been engaged in internal racial equity work and described racial equity as being "baked into" their work, or "part of their DNA." Several leaders, like the one quoted at the lower left, shared that while 2020 was not the "first time" they wrestled with their internal issues, the events of 2020 helped them make significant progress in their efforts. Several leaders described the 2020 uprisings as providing opportunities that they, as leaders, could leverage to move faster, go deeper and refine their efforts because the reality of the persistency of racial injustice was becoming more visible and more evident, and this helped organizations move forward with their efforts with fewer barriers. Beyond having fewer barriers, more resources also existed in the field to support this work, which helped leaders take their work to the next level. Having these resources is especially critical for nonprofit organizations that often do not have adequate support beyond what is needed to support their programming. As one organizational leader described, *"We had just been running, running and running as a little nonprofit. And I think finally, we were like, 'This is the time.*

This is the time to do it.' [Having resources for this work] really allowed a lot of what we already had going on, to be able to shift it and solidify it and streamline it to be a model, to be an example."

GETTING STARTED

Once organizational leaders make the difficult and courageous decision to examine the ways in which one's organizational policies, practices and structures support or inhibit racial equity, it is not always clear how best to start. There is no one "right way" to engage in these efforts and, given the unique needs and contexts of every organization, starting points can look different and are subject to multiple influencing factors. That said, many of the organizational leaders we interviewed shared that their starting points began with questions. Indeed, at least two respondents stated that the job of a strong organizational leader is to "ask the right questions" as well as to "answer the hard questions." In fact, organizational leaders we interviewed shared a range of questions that they pursued as they started their journeys. Some questions were somewhat conceptual in nature: *What are we doing? Why are we doing this? Why is this important to us? What do we need to learn? Where do we need to go?* Some were more specific: *What do we mean when we talk about equity? What does it mean to embed racial equity across our organization? What are we doing to confront the racism within our own institution?* As illustrated in the quote above right, for some leaders, questions encouraged personal reflection and helped them connect the personal to the organizational.

> ❝ I had a friend of mine who leads racial equity work and he asked me a question that was the turning the point for me. He said, why are you doing this work? And in my mind, it was because, because racism is wrong. He's like, yes, but why are you doing this work? What is it that you get out of doing this work? And I said, I don't want to see Black people suffering from racism. But he said, but how does that impact you? And what he was trying to tell me was, let's not be saviors. Let's not do this because we're trying to save Black people, let's do this because all of our destinies are tied. And if we don't see how structural racism impacts our communities and how we tackle it, and how, if we don't tackle structural racism, we're not going to free [our] communities. ❞

How organizational leaders approached their start was rooted in the kinds of questions they and their staff wanted to answer, but it also depended on a number of other factors like organizational readiness and capacity, connections to resources, etc. Organizational leaders shared a range of activities that they engaged in to help ensure their efforts were

focused and aligned with their goals. Several hired consultants to help guide and support the implementation of their efforts. Leaders who were unsure how to go about choosing consultants sought recommendations from experienced colleagues or partner organizations. Multiple organizations shared examples of how consultants supported their growth and understanding, with one organization describing the hiring of their consultant as "the turning point for internal knowledge development." Not all organizations, however, were able to bring on consultant partners to support their racial equity work, but several shared other beneficial activities they engaged in, such as trainings, workshops and internal assessments focused on things like community representativeness in staff, power dynamics and shared understandings of key equity concepts. More detailed information on these efforts is shared in the second paper in this series, [Cultivating a Supportive Organizational Culture to Advance Equity](#).

LEADING THE WAY

While the starting points for organizations varied, there was widespread agreement that in order to succeed, it was essential for organizational leaders to hold and drive the vision right from the start and to seek buy-in from board members, other organizational leaders and staff. As one respondent noted, the role of the organizational leader in driving the work is critical because they have the power to "bring this vision to life and really promote it." Another respondent further emphasized the

critical nature of leadership support, noting, "If they were not supporting, this would not be occurring. I know from past experience, when I've worked in other organizations when we've tried out similar initiatives and the executive team wasn't supported, they failed."

> ❝ We're going to really work on a halo effect. We're going to work on staff and senior staff to get very comfortable with our equity roadmap and journey, and then go to the board and say, here's how we see us … . So we're trying to set the stage now for the board's learning. [Ours is] a very diverse board and not all of them are on the same page on their equity journey — so they're very representative of our membership. And so their journey has to be developed and nurtured differently. And so that's why we're working to be really good at it ourselves first. And then making sure as we get the board ready for that conversation, they're fortified with all the tools they need in order to carry the lead. ❞

Most respondents shared that leadership engagement efforts began with leaders at the C-suite or executive level, so that they could then be equipped to serve as a champion and

encourage buy-in from other leaders, as well as to "bring their board on board." Some engaged their board and their organizational leadership at the same time, often through different but parallel activities tailored to meet the roles and the capacities of their target groups. One organizational leader shared that in their context, it felt important to focus on senior staff and staff first, to get them comfortable with their equity journey, before focusing on the board. One respondent noted how important it was, when considering leadership engagement, to pay attention to where power lives in an organization, noting that it wasn't always confined to top-level executives. Leaders at this large membership organization, for example, recognized that program managers had greater influence over larger swaths of staff than their executive team and thus they were included in their first wave of trainings.

The important role that engaged and committed leadership plays in ensuring success in internal racial equity efforts cannot be overstated. Respondents shared a range of other roles that are critical for organizational leaders to play in order to support progress in their efforts. These include: visibly leading the way, being the "first experts," transparently setting expectations and holding the organization accountable, sustaining the work and the momentum and making sure it evolves, listening and engaging as leaders, and effectively responding to resistance.

Visibly leading the way

Respondents emphasized the importance of having members of the executive team visibly lead racial equity efforts by bringing them to life, championing the efforts with staff and their board and resourcing them. Having organizational leaders actively promoting and engaging in racial equity efforts reassures staff that the organization is committed to meaningful change and demonstrates strong organizational commitment to the work. One respondent shared, for example, that part of the "critical pre-work" that an organization needs to engage in is "finding one champion within your executive team or leadership who is really going to be committed to bringing your leadership on board." They described, for example, that having their organization's COO lead the work made it "so much easier to get buy-in from across the agency, and from other executive leadership team members." Once they were able to get their full executive team on board, they were then able to get their "board on board." For this organization, having the right leadership committed to the work from the start made the process "surprisingly smooth."

Being "the first experts"

Leaders from several organizations shared how important it was for them to use the racial equity tools first, and to be the first to pilot processes and procedures. Being "the first" afforded leaders a better understanding about whether and how tools and activities could be implemented within their organizational contexts. It also gave leaders time and space to gain competency in the practices and tools themselves before asking others to engage with them. This helped pave the way for organizational leaders to be able to coach others and truly lead the way in building

shared understanding. The quote to the right explains in more detail the rationale for having leaders serve as "first experts" and how that can support more effective implementation.

Transparently setting expectations and holding the organization accountable

Setting expectations around the work is a critical role that organizational leaders can play to support progress in their racial equity efforts. Respondents also shared that expectations should be set not only for leadership, but for staff. They added that there should also be processes in place to keep people accountable to doing the work. One organizational leader described it as "Continuing to make sure that everyone is doing the work that they need to do ... they're self-reflecting, they're applying it to what's happening through their work, as well as on a personal level." They added that holding themselves accountable ultimately supports them in strengthening their work internally, noting that they are "using these experiences to build a model, what we hope is the standard for how to incorporate this internally within your organization and then within the broader community."

Sustaining the work and the momentum and making sure it evolves

Too often, internal approaches to addressing racial equity begin and end with surface-level work (e.g., occasional readings of articles or participation in one-off workshops). Respondents shared how important it was for leaders to recognize that working toward racial equity is an endeavor that takes time, and that leaders need

❝ In terms of being able to understand and build competence around specific tools, the strategy and leadership team leaders knew that we needed to be the first experts.... What we've done as a leadership team is really talk about what are the expectations as a leader in this organization for you to understand and be able to coach your team, your department as a leader in this work. We're halfway through going through those guides, where we go deep and ask ourselves as a team, are you committed to this? Do you understand this? Can you explain this? Can you do this? The team is really building a shared sense of ownership and leadership around those tools ... we've been going through this leadership process of owning and really deepening our competency in these frameworks. ❞

to ensure that the work continues and evolves in ways that attend to continued growth. One leader, who utilizes workshops and trainings, shared the importance of *"mak[ing] sure they evolve in a way that we're giving our staff, our board of directors and folks that are internal what they need to continue to learn and grow in that space."* Moreover, this leader shared that they consider not just the evolution of the

current year of trainings, but also what needs to happen in the subsequent two years. They shared that this enables them to consider how to *"scale this so that we are using what we've learned internally as best and promising practices to be able to share with others in the community, and with our affiliate organizations."*

Listening and engaging as learners

As mentioned here and in other papers in this series, there is no "right" way to engage in this work — there is no one formula that will fit the needs and contexts of every organization. As such, respondents shared that it is critical for leaders to be good listeners, and to apply their learnings to their efforts. As one organizational leader shared, *"This is one of the first things that we learned in a lot of these trainings, is listen just to hear, not to respond. Having even directors be able to just listen. Not have to respond, not have to say anything."* Other leaders described the importance of recognizing and accepting that mistakes will be made along the way. As illuminated in the quote to the right, leaders emphasized the importance of engaging with honesty and humility. They encourage other leaders to be comfortable admitting that they are new to this and that they, too, are on a learning journey with their staff.

Effectively responding to resistance

Respondents shared numerous examples of resistance they encountered in their efforts to reflect upon and address racial inequities in their organizations, from colleagues insisting that it was "not their role" to engage in racial equity conversations, to staff avoiding or refusing to

❝ [Leaders] should remember that this is a journey and that they're not going to knock the ball out of the park the first swing, and that's okay, because it's not necessarily about that. It's about the authenticity and the transparency of being committed to being able to transform your organization, and a level of humbleness to be able to admit to staff when you don't know. The reason why I say that is because even with the plan that our folks have submitted to the senior executive team to be approved and adopted and implemented, we all recognize the fact that that plan could change. The way that you're able to keep staff and to keep the momentum and to keep the authenticity of your desire in place is to try to be as honest as you can in that process with folks. That's being able to say that, 'I don't know,' and it's being able to say that, 'We're scared,' and it's being able to say, 'This is the first time we've ever done this,' and it's also being able to say, 'We don't have the expertise to do that, so we may need to go and find somebody that can do that.' ❞

participate in workshops, to representatives from member or partner organizations walking out in the middle of racial equity-focused meetings. Multiple leaders shared that, while frustrating, resistance is to be expected, given the levels of vulnerability required of people when engaging honestly and meaningfully in internal racial equity efforts. As such, they noted that organizational leaders should be prepared for this, with one suggesting that leaders view resistance as a sign of productive change. This leader indicated that, particularly for organizations with roots in oppressive practices, if their efforts don't upset at least some people, then it may be an indication that they are not making a "big enough change"

in how they are doing things. As this leader also implied, the balance is trying to stay focused on the work while also attending to resistance. This was described as *"being prepared for pushback, being prepared for disruption, being prepared for loss of people and funding, and at the same time trying to open doors for those who have been excluded."*

While enthusiasm for the journey was a common refrain across our interviews, so too was the presence of resistance to participation. The section that follows provides a range of examples of ways in which organizational leaders attempted to address resistance in their organizations.

Approaches for Addressing Resistance

As noted previously, organizational leaders shared that making the decision to engage in internal efforts to reflect upon and promote racial equity within their own organizations resulted in varying levels of resistance from some colleagues and staff. These leaders offered a range of approaches for addressing resistance within their organizations. We share these approaches here in order to provide examples that may help inspire other organizational leaders who wrestle with resistance to racial equity efforts,

with the caution that these approaches were designed to fit the unique needs and contexts of the organizations that utilized them and may not be appropriate for all organizations.

Whetting the appetite

One organization asked member and partner organizations to participate in a foundational training that the organization described in their interview as "an appetizer," designed to whet the appetite so that participants would want

▸▸▸ to "come back for more." This organization noted that this "appetizer" course was extremely well-received and resulted in many participants wanting to "take the next step." They also shared, however, that while staff at their core organization "were ready" and therefore "did fine" through the next step of the journey, some of their partner organizations did not always share the same enthusiasm for continued forward movement. One organizational leader shared the memory that, at one point, one of their partners "stormed out and left." Interestingly, this same partner eventually came back and is now one of the most vocal advocates of the work.

Taking the time to strengthen words and build thicker skin

Addressing persistent resistance often requires significant emotional labor. One national organization shared that they "got clobbered" repeatedly, particularly during the era of the Trump administration, 2016-2020. During this time, they were repeatedly questioned about the reasoning behind their decision to focus on racial equity, and the direction they were taking with their work. While this was a rather difficult time in general for organizations that were trying to focus on racial equity, the leader of this organization shared that those years also gave their organization the opportunity to "really develop a thick skin." They shared that they optimized this time to not only build their resilience against resistance, but to actively focus on "strengthening their words" so they had more powerful language to articulate and enforce their position. They noted that taking the time to do that equipped

them to "really put down the sledgehammer" when the 2020 uprisings occurred.

"Waiting it out and persevering"

Multiple respondents shared examples of times when the best they could do was persevere and keep pushing forward despite the resistance. One organizational leader shared that the work of changing people's mindsets will always be an ongoing endeavor, so perseverance and continuing to commit time and resources to the work is key. Another shared that when faced with board members who actively resisted or refuted the work, rather than use all their energies trying to get those one or two resistant board members "on board," the most productive tactic was to enforce board limits, wait out those board members' terms and focus on filling those seats with new board members who shared the same values around racial equity.

Taking a stand and being clear on your values

For some organizational leaders, the appropriate response to resistance was to simply stand firm on their values. One leader felt it was important to not be swayed or discouraged by resistance and to instead affirm "This is what we're doing, whether you question it or not." Similarly, another emphasized the importance of reminding people of their vision and of the values undergirding that vision, stating, "This is our vision. We have a food system that has been intentionally racist and exploitative and harmful. And this is the work that has to be done. And here's where we can show you, you actually *can* do this."

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LEARNING AND CONSIDERATIONS

The organizational journeys that respondents shared around their efforts to engage in honest reflection and examination of internal racial equity practices and work toward meaningful change were layered and complex. None were straightforward. All were filled with learning. Below are some lessons organizational leaders shared about their experiences on this journey.

Bringing diverse people along on a shared racial equity journey is enormously complicated and requires leaders to lead with and model respect and grace.

As reflected in the quote above right, a common challenge faced by organizational leaders was how to bring other leaders, board members and staff along on a shared journey while recognizing and respecting that each person is at a different point in their own racial equity journey. How do you honor difference and still move together? This was especially challenging for large membership organizations that spanned multiple geographic regions. These organizations included member or affiliate organizations from a range of different cultural and sociopolitical contexts, which made it even more challenging to meet staff and organizations "where they are." Multiple organizational leaders emphasized the

> ❝ Also there's that challenge of bringing people along. People are in very different places in their journey of racial equity, and that's to be respected, whether you're in that place or not, or whether you agree with the place that they're in or not. They are still folks who are working here within the organization. Then it is imperative that we are also finding ways of bringing folks along that want to come on this journey. That takes time, because it's not a one-size-fits-all to being able to do this. ❞

importance of recognizing and accepting that this work is complicated and takes time. One organizational leader emphasized the need to model grace for their staff, acknowledging that, at times, people can get frustrated and judgmental with colleagues who are not as far along in their equity journey, which can lead to backlash. This leader shared the importance of modeling how to engage in order to help all staff honor each other as they work through their journeys, noting, "One of the things that we have tried to spend time talking about as an equity team and also modeling in the organization is the grace that you need to give people."

It is not easy for leaders to find the right balance between meeting the urgency of the moment and finding a learning pace that meets the context and diverse needs of an organization.

Another common challenge leaders shared was figuring out the right pace for learning and for implementing change. One organizational leader shared, for example, that because their existing practices were already so deeply embedded, they started their change efforts at a slower pace, opting to adjust existing practices first rather than engaging in radical change. This led to staff frustration at the slow pace of change, particularly given the rising sense of urgency around addressing racial inequities and injustices. At the same time, this same leader shared that there were times when they had to slow down their processes to ensure that they weren't "burning out some of our most promising and productive leaders." This leader felt they never quite found the "right pace," often feeling like they were "always a little forward or backwards." Another organizational leader acknowledged how frustrating it can be to recognize and honor the time it takes to do this work well and while managing a sense of impatience at the slow pace of change. This leader shared that it placed them in a constant place of questioning and reflection, wondering if they provided enough time and space for change to happen, while also wondering whether they "pushed hard enough" in places where progress could have been made faster.

" There are barriers of capacity; you have to be very intentional in order to commit to that. I want to be frank — we are a nonprofit, we're a large nonprofit, but a nonprofit nonetheless. So that doesn't mean that we have dollars oozing out of the walls for us to just continue to invest in that. So we had to be creative in certain ways ... there are still organizational commitments and things that have happened prior to [our decision to focus internally on racial equity] that we still have to juggle. "

Structural barriers and capacity constraints often impede forward movement; leaders should be prepared to attend to these challenges creatively and intentionally.

Engaging in internal racial equity work requires infrastructure and capacity to support change. However the level of infrastructure and capacity needed is not inherently available in most organizations, which one leader described as the result of working within a capitalist infrastructure. They explained that as a result of working for so long under a capitalist infrastructure, "You're just not going to have a lot of great examples of what it means to do this work well, and do it in an equitable form." Multiple leaders shared that a key capacity challenge they face is in trying

to figure out how to fund their internal racial equity work. To paraphrase a question that came up multiple times in our interviews, How do we build capacity to do this important and reflective work while also juggling our other work obligations? As one organizational leader shared in the quote on the previous page, nonprofit organizations often do not have the financial means to invest in internal racial equity work, and thus leaders need to be creative and "very intentional" as they work to fulfill their external work commitments while also staying committed to their internal racial equity journey.

Leaders must ensure that the burden of supporting and implementing learning around racial equity is not placed upon staff of color.

As reflected in the quote below, at least three respondents acknowledged the common

> ❝ Often when we're trying to do racial equity and racial justice work, we put the burden of educating ourselves and carrying the work on people of color. Even within our own organization, with this commitment to racial equity, when we pause and take a look at who's carrying the workload, it is often women of color in particular in our organization, and we knew that that wasn't sustainable, and that that was perpetuating the inequities. ❞

and problematic practice of leaning on people of color — and often women of color — to educate others about racial inequities and injustices. One leader shared that they made it their professional goal to "not continually place people of color in the position of having to educate us stupid White people." Leaders we interviewed recognized that this practice further perpetuates inequities and they acknowledged the specific role that White leaders in predominantly White spaces need to play, not only to assure that the burden of education about oppression does not fall on those most impacted by oppressive practices, but also because White leaders should leverage the level of influence they have in making change within predominantly White spaces. As one leader shared, "Even though it's not fun, I want to take on more of that burden. Because in our community, a lot of these spaces are still primarily White spaces. And what I can say is received quite differently than what someone of color can say."

To promote honest and meaningful engagement in internal racial equity efforts, leaders must be willing to be vulnerable and "own" their mistakes.

A number of respondents discussed how difficult but vital it was for leaders to be able to admit that they do not know everything, to seek help, and to own their mistakes. Respondents acknowledged that this requires leaders being willing to be uncomfortable and vulnerable, which ultimately leads to important growth moments and models the kind of mindset necessary for change to

be meaningful, rather than performative. As illustrated in the quote to the right, leaders added that it was important to build trusting and caring relationships that will help create a container for "brave space" so leaders and staff can be honest in their vulnerability." At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that discomfort often accompanies meaningful growth, but part of the work is to figure out how not to let that discomfort lead to paralysis.

Leaders should be prepared to potentially lose people along the way.

A major challenge in this work is recognizing that you may not always be able to win people over. As one leader shared, "Part of our journey has been ultimately acknowledging this work has to happen, and we're going to lose some people that show up as a result." This is a key area where the commitment to the internal racial equity journey is tested and where leaders will need to consider where they stand. As that same leader shared, despite recognizing they might lose people, "That doesn't mean that we change, we bend over backwards — this has to happen." Indeed, multiple respondents shared stories of "losing people along the way," including board members, staff and partners. One leader who lost two staff members because they did not embrace the racial equity work said that they thought leaders "need to be ok with people who say this isn't the right place for me," indicating that it creates space for

" It's one thing for me to say, 'I'm totally okay with acknowledging I didn't know [about the Tulsa massacre],' and that's because I work in a group of people who I know care about me and aren't going to judge me for that. So again, having those relationships is really important. It is still very hard for me to be called out on it. And that happened to me recently from a funder … it was really hard. It was really hard to hear that. And yet we need to have those kinds of interactions to grow from it. So I think there's something to doing it in a way that doesn't create defensiveness, but it's also really important for people like me to not take it personally. But it was still a learning opportunity for me, and that's going to happen. Right? And there are days when I feel really lucky that I have people like that who will help me grow. "

others to come on board who are invested in the organization and in supporting change. According to this leader, "If they don't reflect your values, then it's ok to let them go."

CONCLUSION

As noted previously, the decision to embark on an internally focused racial equity journey is not an easy one for organizational leaders to make. The stories shared in this paper reflect the reality that the journey can be fraught with difficult moments and tensions that, while challenging, also pave the way for important growth. Staying committed to the journey may be one of the hardest parts of this work, given the enormity of the endeavor and the ways in which it can test leaders and staff personally and professionally. Yet, as one leader indicated, it is critical for organizations and their leaders to push themselves because, "We cannot talk about putting up authentic voices that are doing work and not do it ourselves. It just doesn't work." The role of organizational leadership in leading the way, staying committed to the journey and embodying the commitment in ways that model grace, empathy, humility, patience and fortitude is critical for creating a context in which organizational leaders and staff can not only feel supported in their journey, but that allows them to grow together along the way.

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Cultivating a Supportive Organizational Culture to Advance Equity

The W.K. Kellogg Foundation portfolio is made up of organizations working in different sectors throughout the country to promote equitable communities where families and children thrive. As these organizations dedicate themselves to the demanding work of addressing disparities in access ▸▸▸

services and resources, fostering diverse community narratives and leadership and dismantling structures of inequity, many are simultaneously taking a step back and turning inward to reflect on their own equity culture and operations. As one organizational leader simply stated, "If you're thinking you're just going to come into this work and solve the issues of the world without recognizing that you might have a part in that, then you're missing an important step."

Part of a series that lifts up stories of different ways organizations have approached this internal journey, this paper specifically focuses on **how organizations are cultivating a culture to engage in and advance racial equity goals**: *What are we learning about how different organizations have thought about creating a supportive organizational culture for their racial equity work? What concrete steps are they taking? What are different challenges and considerations that are rising to the surface?* The collective experiences of 31 interviewed organizations offer a window for others to reflect on their own approaches in fostering an organizational culture to center equity in their programming and operations.

DEMONSTRATING CLARITY OF COMMITMENT

How are organizations cultivating a culture to engage in and advance racial equity goals? Across interview respondents, it was clear that a clear and authentic organizational commitment to racial equity is at the foundation of organizational cultures that invite meaningful engagement and leadership. Staff need to believe that the organization's focus on equity is neither performative nor temporary in order to bring their full selves to the work and freely innovate in service of racial equity values and the diverse communities they represent and serve.

Underscoring the sometimes frustratingly uphill nature of racial equity-focused work, organizational leaders described the critical value of knowing they had a committed organization behind them. As one explained, "We've been given a lot of permission to actually explore and to recognize it's not going to be a linear walk and we're not necessarily going to know where it goes and we'll have missteps, but [there's a] commitment nonetheless."

What does commitment look like in practice? Interviewed organizational leaders described different ways they demonstrate a deep-rooted commitment to racial equity:

Framing a focus on equity as "mission-critical"

It is not enough for an organization to simply say that a focus on racial equity is important. A few interviewees emphasized the importance of tightly tying the "case for why" to the organization's fundamental core work and mission. "Why is [focus on racial equity] important to you? That's something that I think you need to ask leadership and

you need to also ask staff, because they'll keep asking that question," one organizational leader emphasized. "Why are we doing this? If you're not clear from the outset of why it's important for you, then it'll be difficult for people to catch on and to be on board." Another leader concurred, explaining, "People need to be able to connect [racial equity] to what they do ... whether that's if they answer phones, whether they're a social worker, whether they're out in the community doing community engagement."

Among those interviewed, across the board leaders spoke with fluidity about how deepening organizational capacity to engage around racial equity and racial justice served to further their respective missions — whether it be not just

> ❛❛ We have an internal employee handbook that focuses on inclusivity and capturing the ways in which we like to incorporate our values, things like talking about our commitment to individual and collective liberation and recognizing that those two are inseparable [in] working with our community, [as well as] knowing that we respect and honor each person's humanity, and we seek to understand their stories and circumstances, and that we hold their freedom dream sacred. ❜❜

promoting food access but justice, providing expert case management support to low-income communities of color, shifting the paradigm of teacher professional development to advance educational equity or helping a larger field examine the harm it has historically done as a catalyst for systems change. "Working through a racial equity lens, it's not an extra thing we do. It is actually the core of our mission, who we are as an organization," one stressed. "It is embedded in our mission. It is embedded in our vision. It weaves its way throughout."

To formally make this connection clear, notably over a dozen interviewees described going through a process within the last several years to update mission statements or organizational values to explicitly name how focusing on equity serves to further their core work. A few others have separately crafted equity statements that unequivocally underscored their commitment, as well as articulated their organizational point of view and vision for racial justice.

Exhibiting external consistency

Beyond what is communicated internally, examples of demonstrated commitment to racial equity also included how organizations publicly support and lead on issues of racial equity. For some organizations, this has encompassed actions as simple as highlighting organizational missions and values on websites and other promotional material. Others described deeper investments in dedicating annual conference tracks (or in some cases full conference agendas) to

racial equity-focused themes with the goal of stepping forward as a leader in a broader movement. One described implementing a three-year series of deep engagements with member organizations exploring diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI): "Each conference took one of those themes and went deep, everything from the keynotes down to the breakouts." Other organizations described regularly writing blogs, issuing public statements and serving as featured speakers on racial justice in their external-facing work.

For a subset we interviewed, a first opportunity to turn outward in their equity orientation came in the summer of 2020 against the backdrop of racial uprisings sparked by the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor and George Floyd in quick succession, and in the midst of a global pandemic wreaking disproportionate impact on communities of color. Representatives of some of these organizations testified to how the process of

> ❝ [Publicly taking a stand against racism] really gave expression to what we had been talking about in the staff meetings, and [publicly] used language that we hadn't used before. ❞

crafting an external statement signaled their organizational convictions and served as a solidifying endorsement of their internal work to that point. As one explained, "It really

gave expression to what we had been talking about in the staff meetings, and [publicly] used language that we hadn't used before."

Visible organizational investments

Another way organizations described reenforcing their demonstrated commitment to racial equity is through meaningful and sustained investments in fostering a racial equity culture. Among those we interviewed, several had created dedicated staff positions — DEI Directors, DEI Project Managers, Directors of Equity, Learning and Culture — who had specific responsibility for strategically spearheading organizational equity work. Multiple others described significant investments of organizational dollars, hiring equity consultants, sending all staff to equity conferences or multi-day equity-focused trainings, offering all staff flexible equity-focused professional development resources upwards of $1,000 or hiring equity coaches for those in organizational leadership positions. Beyond financial resources, many more described setting aside meaningful portions of staff time to participate in organizational committees charged with setting and operationalizing equity priorities for their organizations, affinity groups to engage around issues of racial equity with colleagues of similar backgrounds or a wide range of other organizational activities intended to support furthering individual racial equity journeys.

A handful of those we interviewed indicated that they had put forward "equity strategic

plans" as a way to be transparent about their equity-focused commitments and investments. As exemplified in the quote below – often based on consultant- or staff-led audits of organization policies and practices through a racial equity lens – these strategic documents create clear goals and benchmarks that signal a desire for organizational change, and a willingness to be held accountable to progress.

> " Our equity strategic plan was just adopted ... it gets at infrastructure, policy, diversifying funding, hiring practices, professional development, all of those things with some accountability metrics in place. It really is not just a statement that we've put out, but the infrastructure has been thought through on what's needed to really get through our barriers in moving this forward. "

ESTABLISHING A FOUNDATION FOR ENGAGEMENT

Among those interviewed, a second complementary area of investment in fostering cultures for racial equity-focused programming and operations centered on establishing a foundation for meaningful engagement. This was especially named as critical given the

often raw, personal nature of issues of race and racism, and varying levels of understanding and experience that individual staff members might bring to this area. As one organizational leader reflected, "You can't invite people into a really big transformative conversation and not build the container to be able to hold it."

Several organizational leaders described aspiring to foster spaces not simply for engagement, but for productive, uncomfortable and challenging conversations, disagreement and even conflict. "We know that it is so important when you're thinking about that journey to being a fully racially inclusive and diverse place to think about how you handle conflict," one leader explained. Another leader described the culture she was aspiring to create as one where "it is okay for us to misstep and still move forward."

Organizations took different types of approaches to meet this goal, as described in the following pages.

Ensuring shared language and frameworks

Almost across the board, organizations shared that they have made intentional investments in fostering shared language for staff to engage with each other on issues of race equity. In many cases, this has taken the form of hiring consultants who lead teams through equity 101 trainings as a first step to establish common equity terms and frameworks that staff can use in their discussions with each other. Others have chosen to engage in internally led efforts using various equity-

focused resources and tools ([Awake to Woke to Work](#) was the resource most commonly named). One organization described a process within their organization where a team worked through defining concepts for themselves as part of their strategic planning process, asking themselves, "How do you define that word? What do we mean by it? What do we mean by racial healing? What do we mean by equity? What do we mean by racial justice? What do we mean by anti-Blackness? What do we mean?" These were not just one-time investments; to ensure continuity with staff over time, several described then incorporating shared definitions and frameworks into institutional glossaries, employee handbooks and onboarding processes.

Various leaders shared that this foundational investment served to advance conversations and avoid interpersonal misunderstanding amongst staff. Beyond fostering internal culture, it has allowed for deepening of the work itself. As one leader emphasized, "If we keep lying to ourselves about our situation, we're never going to resolve it. And that's where I constantly see the issues and the gaps, not being able to name the thing. We're afraid to talk openly about what the actual barriers and challenges are. A lot of things that we are dealing with are outcomes of racist policies. And to talk about that then and be honest about what it is so then we can actually undo, rework, revise, abolish whatever those things are that are causing these disparities."

> ▝▝ We are now at a point where we're putting together a comprehensive glossary based on all the things that we talk about … like with the framework for principled struggle for example. What is that, what does it mean, and can everybody go to one location and get what they need? ▝▝

Setting expectations and support for challenging conversations

Fostering a level of safety for honestly interrogating racism and vulnerably showing up as one's authentic self requires another level of attending to culture. This was an area where many, when asked, described their organizations as still a work-in-progress. "Challenging conversations," one explained, "put you in a space where you, naturally, as a human being want to be judgmental or you want to be defensive or you want to stay where you are instead of leaning into a new space." Learning to trust the both the organization and your colleagues at a level such that one can authentically open up, explained others, takes time and intentionality.

Different organizations have endeavored to meet this challenge in different ways. Many have organized affinity groups of staff with similar backgrounds to create dedicated space for people of color, or women of color,

or Latinx, Black and/or Indigenous staff to have closed-group discussions. Some have articulated clear guiding values for engagement, in some cases having all staff and board members sign on to these values. Staff feedback suggests the power of putting organizational expectations in writing, with one sharing that having an organizational touchstone explicitly asking staff to "speak your truth" has allowed her to do so for the first time as a Black woman in a workplace setting (see quote below). Underscoring the importance of organizational willingness to directly invite and appreciate disruptive conversations, some organizations have specifically introduced conflict management or conflict literacy training to their organization,
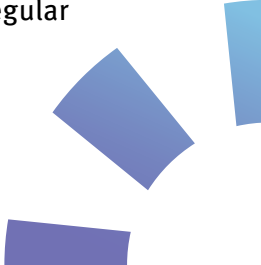
which included tools and guidance on how to engage in conversations that can be difficult or charged. One organization — which also engages in community mediation — brought in a restorative practice consultant to focus on how the organization thinks about conflict internally.

Authentic listening and engagement by leaders

Given natural power differentials, several called out the role of organizational leaders in setting the tone for cultures of authentic engagement and learning around issues of racial equity and racial justice. As captured in the quote on the next page and in a companion paper in this anthology focused specifically on leadership, some stressed how powerful it can be when organizational leaders are unequivocal in their commitments to racial justice, and show up in spaces where they demonstrate humility in listening to and learning from the experience of others. As one respondent explained, "You can tell [staff] over and over and over again, this is a safe space. This is a brave space. You can say what you're thinking. You can say what you're feeling. People still will hold back. I think a lot of it has to do with when they actually see people being safe in those conversations."

A few top-level leaders described shifting their management approach to have regular meetings with individual staff members, to build the level of trust where critical issues could arise; others described holding regular

> " If a touchstone is saying, 'Speak your truth,' as a guideline and I speak my truth, it's hard for someone to wag their finger at you and say, 'Well, that shouldn't have been said.' As a Black person, I can speak for my experience, that [speaking my truth] is not something I've ever been comfortable or felt safe doing at work, but if someone is providing guidelines and just a way to navigate these conversations, then that's more helpful for me and it gives me more permission to lean into that. "

listening sessions with teams of staff. Some noted that they are asking divisional managers to similarly engage with their teams, with one organization explaining that managers are asked to have conversations with team members "about things like where they see themselves in terms of their learning around social justice and equity, how they see themselves applying what they've learned into their role." Recognizing the potential challenge of holding these conversations poorly, one organization shared that they have purposefully integrated racial equity in their professional development of managers, providing direct support for having hard, open and authentic cross-racial conversations with those they supervise. As one leader shared, "You got to grab the humanity

in this work and treat people like they're human and use that as an opportunity to build trust because that's the currency of this work."

BEYOND TALK: ORGANIZATIONAL ACTION

Finally, in considering how to foster organizational cultures to advance racial equity, several organizations recognize that framing and engagement only takes you so far. "A lot of folks have put out statements and have hired new positions or created a DEI plan and so forth," one leader explained, "but continuously checking yourself and your organization against those words with your actions is a critical step." Among those interviewed, many are redoubling a focus on "walking the talk," interrogating organizational policies and practices and ultimately endeavoring to address embedded systemic bias within their organization. As one leader stressed, "White supremacy is institutional, right? And so as such, it finds its way in even the most racially equitable and even diverse organizations, and oftentimes masks itself as capitalism or other forms of isms that cause conflict and harm for not only the people internally, but the people who are being served. And so examining that is a really important piece of organizations on their racial equity journey."

Among those we interviewed, equity-centered organizational policies have encompassed: hiring and recruitment, compensation and pay equity, bereavement, flexible work schedules and performance evaluations.

> ❝ Senior leadership is absolutely present in these conversations and you can see that there's a dedication to the equity work, just in the fact that the entire leadership team serves on that equity team. I'm the only person who's not a member of the leadership team in that space. But it's reassuring for me to see that these conversations are constantly taking place. And I would also just say outside of the leadership team, there's a very clear investment in equity from staff too. It comes up in so many conversations. ❞

Hiring and recruitment policies to increase diversity. Most commonly, organizations have expressed a priority of diversifying staff, boards and/or contractors and vendors with whom they work. To meet that goal, some organizations have hired consultants to root out potential biases in their hiring processes, eliminated educational requirements in favor of valuing lived experience of potential staff members, or formalized policies to ensure that Board recruitment prioritizes those with community leadership and organizing experience. Still others have extended their focus on diversifying those with whom they work, putting in place a vendor procurement policy that ensures that "where we're buying our materials, clothes, food for events, things like that, we are really sourcing those local businesses of color, and queer- and women-owned businesses."

Compensation and pay equity policies. As part of their demonstrated value for equity, multiple organizations have explicitly interrogated their compensation policies and salary scales to ensure equity with the local market. Tying this action to their equity-centered goals, one organization has taken it a step further to work with a consultant to ensure "we actually communicate and roll them out and implement them in a way that is really equitable." In some cases, these changes are being driven by staff; one organization shared that they were pressed by staff members about how the organization was "decolonizing our salaries, thinking about how white supremacy influences our

> " We don't require B.A.s, or we don't emphasize degrees when we're hiring. We really try to make the job descriptions much more competency based, lived experiences are very important ... when we hire, one of the requirements of applying for a position here is you have to tell us your core story. Why are you doing this work? What motivates you? And so, we find that that's just a really great way of really understanding where people find meaning, and why they would want to work here. "

salary schedules." The question inspired the organization to talk about how every learning experience, not just formal educational degrees, should be considered in salaries.

Bereavement policies that allow for how different cultures grieve and heal. In recognition of kinship structures and bereavement culture looking different for different staff, two organizations have built more flexibility into their policies to allow for staff members to travel further distances, sometimes for extended periods of time, and for members of the family that may not be defined as "immediate family" by Western heteronormative standards. One organization

described putting in place a "no-cap bereavement" policy, "so however much time you need to handle your business with your family is how much time you need. So it's not a broad-based definition of what family is like. It is what your definition of family is. And again, the time that's necessary to take care of that business."

Flexible work schedules. A few organizations have put in place policies like four-day work weeks, unlimited paid time off or unrestricted schedules where staff can work when it is convenient to them in direct recognition of the toll that racial justice-focused work can take. "We talk a lot about wellness and secondary

> ❞ We have an unrestricted workday and an unrestricted work week. And so we don't focus on a 40-hour, you sit at your desk and you have to produce these things within a week ... one of the reasons for that is because we live in a capitalist society that is rooted in white supremacy. And to work against that is, you work when you know that you're going to produce your best work. And that may be at night, that may be in the day. But also this work is exhausting. And so focusing on your whole being and your well-being as a Black person or as a person of color is very important. ❞

trauma," one leader shared. The leader of an organization who moved to a four-day work week explained, "In order to address healing, you need additional time. We've learned that two days is not enough. It takes one whole day to wind down. And then the next day you're preparing to ramp up for the week ... and so, if we can provide additional healing by adding a four-day work week we do that."

Performance evaluations that integrate racial equity measures. Finally, a few organizations report formally embedding racial equity within staff performance evaluation processes, developing job competencies that integrate racial equity, writing them into job descriptions, annual plans and performance reviews. One leader stressed that racial equity is not an "add-on" of one or two items on performance evaluations, but rather integrated throughout their performance review systems. "I just did a review this morning," she noted, "and there are 20 different things I am rating my team member on specific to racial equity."

More than the policies themselves, many organizations emphasized that a core element of "walking the talk" for them was creating meaningful pathways for staff voice and feedback on policies. Multiple organizations reported that they have implemented organizational culture surveys where direct feedback on issues of equity within their organizational policies and operations is invited and acted on. "The results are made

fully transparent to everyone. And we have conversations about them," one leader shared. "We look at it the way that we look at any data through a very scientific ladder of inference. So it's like here are the facts. And then what are the layers? What are the contexts? And therefore what do we want to do?" Another leader reflected, "Some of the feedback is really hard to hear and yet it was really clear where we needed to do some of the focus work so that the organization as a whole can heal and move forward."

LEARNINGS AND CONSIDERATIONS

As different organizational leaders shared different approaches they have taken to foster organizational cultures that support their racial equity programming, each was clear that they were on a journey in figuring this out for themselves. Many offered advice and learning from their experiences, as described in the following pages.

Building culture requires multiple points of intervention and engagement

Importantly, as leaders discussed their efforts to foster equity-centered culture within their respective organizations, no one spoke of a single action or investment. Rather, all talked about a wide range of reenforcing efforts that serve to intentionally counter often institutionalized racism that has seeped into organizational cultures. As one leader described his organization's efforts on multiple fronts, "Lots

of statements have been out, several committees have been put in place, funding sources have been reallocated. We have collectively been looking at policy changes that are needed. An equity strategic plan was designed and developed with leaders from across the [organization] focused on infrastructure, programming elements, funding partners, accountability structures."

Culture building requires a deep commitment to process and time

Especially if an organization is committed to inclusivity, even the most simple actions described above require multiple steps that demand significant time and process. Going through a process of revising mission and values can take upwards of months

> ❝ It takes a lot of time to build that trust, and those relationships, and to develop, we like to say brave space, where you can be honest and vulnerable, and also be comfortable being called out if you are incorrect ... it just takes time. ❞

or even years, and even bringing on a consultant to do a training requires a process to understand what's needed, researching and interviewing consultants, running staff-centered selection processes, following up with attendees afterward, etc. Further, the

types of cultural change that organizations are aspiring to simply do not happen overnight. As highlighted in the quote on the previous page, one leader emphasized the long-term nature of fostering an equity-centered culture. Many of those interviewed emphasized the long-term nature of the journey, and encouraged others to celebrate milestones along the way: "We're very hard judges on what we want to see and when, and so when we make incremental change, we're not very good at saying, wow, that's a victory. We need to do better at that."

There is no one-size-fits-all approach; organizations are embedded within varied contexts that internally focused efforts must take into account

Those interviewed represented organizations that were made up of majority people of color staff, majority white staff and intergenerational staff. Some were located in urban centers with close networks of justice-focused partners, others had networks that extended into communities where "anti-woke" forces are actively working against racial equity goals. Some were accountable to conservative donors, some described themselves as a "legacy-type organization that obviously has some root in oppressive practice." These contexts influence everything from language in organizational missions or public statements, to seeking out consultants aligned with more conservative or "radical" values, to requiring the use of pronouns in email signatures. Ultimately,

calibrating each organization's path forward with their respective context is what shapes individual organizational journeys.

Ultimately, organizations are made up of individuals who drive culture

While each organization is taking specific actions to influence culture, the interwoven nature of individual and organizational equity journeys is clear. A companion paper in this anthology series, **Fostering Individual Journeys,** captures organizational efforts to support individual staff members in their racial equity journey. In reflecting back on what they would have done differently, at least two organizational leaders wished

> " A core part of [our focus on organizational development] is developing our own understanding of equity, our own equity journey, our own self-discovery as individual staff and collectively and using that opportunity to change organizational culture. "

they had focused even more on individuals, "preparing staff for the journey" or "empowering staff" to have more ownership in driving racial equity conversations. One organization described their approach as "developing our own understanding

of equity, our own equity journey, our own self-discovery as individual staff and collectively, and using that opportunity to change organizational culture."

Attending to healing is a necessary part of building a foundational culture for racial equity

Culture-building is ultimately a process of change; as such, as in any change management process, organizations must attend to supporting staff through the transition. This is particularly the case when building race-equity cultures. In talking about their culture-building efforts, various organization leaders brought up examples of tension and resistance that they have had to navigate. Disruption, however, is a part of the transformation process; as one leader shared, "If you don't upset anyone then you likely are not making a big enough change in how you're doing things." Therefore, as part of the transformation process, healing — both individual and collective healing — and a focus on what is being built out of change is paramount. Reflecting on learning to share with others, one organizational leader advised, "You cannot just focus on what needs to be torn down, but also what needs to be built up. There's so much emphasis on get rid of this system, tear that down, do this differently, and there's not enough emphasis focusing on what actually needs to be built up."

> ❝ I would love other organizations on this journey to know ... you cannot just focus on what needs to be torn down, but also what needs to be built up. There's so much emphasis on get rid of this system, tear that down, do this differently, and there's not enough emphasis focusing on what actually needs to be built up. ❞

CONCLUSION

Fostering organizational culture is an extraordinarily complex endeavor; explicitly aligning that culture to support racial equity and racial justice programming adds layers of complexity that many organizations are facing head-on. One leader emphasized their commitment to navigating that complexity, "We made that conscious decision that we were going to put our, not just dip our toe, but stick our whole foot in the water." Another similarly emphasized, "You do it with intentionality, you do it with urgency, you do it with the insistence of that core leadership group. We are not going back, because this is absolutely the right thing to do."

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Fostering Individual Journeys

As organizations move toward advancing racial equity within their organizations, a key aspect of this centers on the individuals who ultimately carry out these visions. Recognizing that organizations are made up of diverse individuals, all of whom are in different places in their own understandings ▶▶

of and personal journey around racial equity, one factor that many organizations have focused on was how to provide organizational supports to staff and leaders on their own individual learning journeys around personal histories and experiences with race, racism and racial equity. Ultimately, these efforts served to build and strengthen individual capacity to carry out organizational visions and missions toward advancing racial equity while also exploring these beliefs and experiences in collective spaces with others.

The purpose of this paper is to showcase examples of approaches that organizations have taken to build a culture of practice as part of a larger organizational culture focused on centering equity. It focuses on the variety of ways, ranging from internal, staff-driven efforts to external trainings and engagements of consultants to encourage staff to deepen their individual knowledge and understanding around racial equity, while also supporting staff in learning collectively with others. As such, the key questions that inform this paper include: *What is the impetus for organizations to support deepening individual and collective knowledge and understanding? What approaches are being utilized? What role does healing play in supporting staff toward this end?*

Ultimately, this third paper in this anthology aims to provide insights that can be helpful to others who seek to learn from examples of approaches utilized and implemented to support staff and leaders charged with carrying out critical work for the communities they serve.

THE IMPORTANCE OF INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE PRACTICE

Across interviews with organizational leaders, many expressed reasons why investing in organizational approaches that support individual and collective learning is a critical element of organizational equity work. One thing that was clear in interviews was that this work requires a multi-pronged approach that recognizes that individuals have different experiences, beliefs, biases and histories, and they therefore ultimately enter this work at different levels and in different ways. As such, interviewees discussed the importance of supporting staff in their individual journeys in ways that support not just individual staff members but also the collective learning of all staff. Themes that emerged included:

Supporting staff to focus inward and individually to live out organizational equity values and missions

Across the board, a resounding number of interviewees explicitly noted that it is critical to focus on building equitable organizations from within — by supporting their staff and leaders in engaging in individual and collective learning. Turning inward, for some, exemplifies a commitment to holding true to their organizational equity values and missions. For others, this
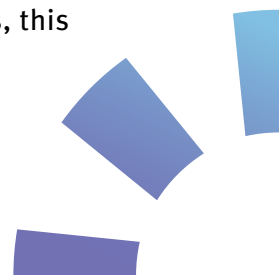
commitment focuses on ensuring that staff can collectively respect and honor each person's humanity and seek to understand each other's stories and circumstances, in addition to their own. One organizational leader also likened this to the analogy of "putting on the oxygen mask first," where staff — individually and collectively — must tend to their needs and learning before "helping your neighbor or colleague."

Supporting staff in building their racial equity knowledge so they can articulate the impact of race and racism

Respondents also shared a desire for investing in resources and supports that would assist individuals with developing their knowledge, lens and vocabulary on race, racism, intersectionality and racial equity. For some, as noted by the quote below, this entailed supporting staff who might

> ❝ We started having conversations about racial equity and began seeing that our staff actually does not have a concept of what it means. We don't have a shared language. We don't have definitions. We don't have a baseline overall that we are all speaking from. There are folks that are in different points of their journey, and we need to level set. ❞

not yet have a "baseline" of understanding to articulate racial equity and the impact of race and racism, while others wanted to move toward adopting a shared language and understanding of racial equity across their organizations. One organizational leader reflected on developing her own knowledge as key to being equipped to lead her organization in racial equity work. She reflected, "That's why investment at the individual level is really important. I need to develop that lens and that vocabulary about what I want to lean into as my identity and my power. How do I apply the power that I have positionally and as an individual and how do I advance our organization's work?"

APPROACHES FOR SUPPORTING INDIVIDUAL PRACTICE AND COLLECTIVE LEARNING

Across the board, organizations shared numerous examples of approaches and resources that encourage staff to explore issues of race, racism and racial equity. These approaches have allowed individuals at their organizations to reflect upon their own personal histories and experiences and learn collectively with others. This enables staff to infuse this learning into their efforts to strengthen not just their work but their relationships with their colleagues and with
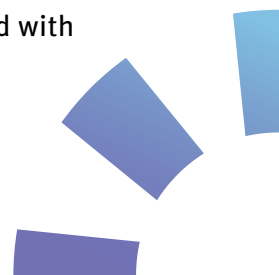
the communities they serve. Recognizing that staff have different entry points and the value of providing multiple approaches, many interviewee respondents shared approaches that ranged from informal, staff-driven efforts to more formalized trainings or engagement of consultants and leadership coaches. The following are examples of approaches that interviewees mentioned, grouped by the most prominent themes shared.

Holding reading groups or watching films. By far, the most commonly named approach that organizations mentioned was holding informal reading groups and spaces for staff to view a series of films and videos to support both individual and collective learning. Engaging in reading and learning on different topics has helped staff with "personal growth and development" and simultaneously offered a space for conversation in community with others. Examples shared by respondents included staff curating reading materials, holding lunch-and-learns, optional informal books clubs for groups of staff and incorporating readings as part of monthly staff meetings. The quote to the top right provides an example of how one respondent used a variety of approaches to support individual learning. Ultimately, these activities supported staff in "developing fluency in talking about issues of race and racism and helping to deepen our understanding."

Providing tailored coaching for leadership and staff. Several organizations focused their efforts on utilizing tailored, individual

> ❝ We … held a series of Equity Journal Clubs, and these helped to deepen our individual learning. There's so much to be learned, and that can take the shape of podcasts, journal articles, excerpts from books. This provides us with the personal growth and development and offers a space for us to have these conversations, which I think for a lot of us, in our personal lives are not able to set aside the time. ❞

and group coaching for organizational leaders and staff. Some organizational leaders specifically worked with coaches and consultants, attended leadership retreats and received individualized support to deepen their knowledge on their role as leaders to steward organizational equity. One organization invested in executive diversity, equity and inclusion coaching support for "leaders based on identity so that [staff] could connect with coaches that shared their identities." As one interviewee mentioned, working closely with a consultant helped shepherd difficult conversations around internal practices and lifted up issues of identity, race, power and positionality, but these conversations were "ripe for our

organization and we needed to have them." The frequency of this coaching also varied by organization; for some, coaching was held monthly, while others joined leadership coaching retreats more sporadically.

Allowing staff to design internally focused trainings and curriculum to support learning. In addition to providing formalized, external training and professional development resources and opportunities, several interviewees shared examples of staff designing trainings and curricula and

> ❝ We have a training model that includes five different modules [The first of the] modules covers the history of race and racism in America. The second looks at doing internal work and exploring your own racial experiences, your own racial narrative. The third looks at racism in the profession. Depending on who we're training, we'll help people understand how racism has affected their profession. Then a fourth component looks at race and children and how children develop an awareness of race. Then the fifth module helps people take all of that information and sort of put it all together, so that they can change their practice. ❞

incorporating equity topics as key portions of regular staff meetings and retreats. Close to 10 organizations designed presentations and trainings that focused on a variety of topics ranging from providing a historical understanding of racism and systemic exclusion within systems, anti-racism trainings, how-to guides on having racial equity conversations within organizations and families, awareness around microaggressions toward Jewish communities, trainings on African American Vernacular English and digging into personal racial narratives and experiences. Many of these trainings were designed to lift up biases, deepen awareness around white privilege and other forms of privilege, and provide definitions of DEI terms. To further embed these into organizational culture, organizations would incorporate trainings as part of onboarding processes for new staff or new board members.

Providing opportunities for staff to attend external trainings, workshops and conferences. In addition to internal-facing opportunities, organizations also listed examples of external trainings, workshops and conferences as resources that staff used for their individual and collective learning. Interviewees shared that staff utilized professional development or learning funds to pay and attend (virtually during the COVID-19 pandemic and gradually in person more recently) a variety of events. Opportunities ranged from trainings focused on the intersection between race and racism to the organization's focus of work,

trainings for organizational leaders and board members, workshops on whiteness and allyship and racial equity impact analyses. A couple of organizations shared that they also encourage their entire staff to attend racial equity-focused conferences, such as Race Forward's **Facing Race Conference**.

Holding listening sessions and staff-wide conversations. A subset of organizations set up opportunities for staff to come together for informal conversations and more structured listening sessions. In some cases, these opportunities were designed to gather information and feedback around organizational racial equity efforts to understand what types of learning and professional development opportunities would be most helpful for staff. For others, these conversations were led by external consultants, who often embedded racial equity-focused curriculum and education topics to build staff understanding and awareness.

Using validated tools and assessments to build knowledge. A few organizations specifically named completing validated tools, such as the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), for individual staff. At one organization, staff were provided with individual time to work on their individual development plans as it related to their IDI results. These tools were described as useful for "building the capacity for staff to engage in self- and internal reflection." Another organization also engaged their

staff in conversation to identify additional trainings, resources and supports that could help build on and support learning.

Establishing racial and identity-based affinity groups. Several organizations made space for racial affinity groups. Staff could self-select into a group — based on their race/ethnicity — and meet frequently to "learn, unpack and challenge each other" around topics that focused on how their personal identities intersected with issues of race and racism, but also around imagining what racial equity, justice and anti-oppression meant for the group. A couple of organizations brought in external consultants to facilitate affinity groups and one organization self-facilitated internally (individual staff members would each facilitate a session). For one organization, affinity groups were held once a week for 16 weeks.

Using frameworks and tools to support collective, organizational learning. Some organizations used organizational equity tools and frameworks as anchors for internal conversations on how race, racism and white dominant practices showed up across the organizations. A couple of organizations named Equity in the Center's **Awake to Woke to Work's framework** and Tema Okun **White Supremacy Culture** as providing helpful guidance on internal conversations and learning.

Using art and film to engage staff in conversations. While not a prevalent theme
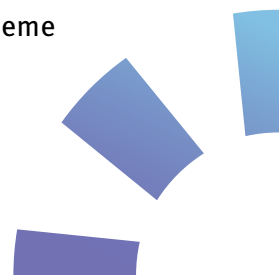
across the board, a couple of organizations also shared examples of using art and film to spark conversation. Art and film provided a different medium for understanding and learning that could also be easy and affordable. As one described, "Watching films and videos is something that organizations can very cheaply engage with. If you have a [streaming service] subscription, you can stream a film. You can use [video communication platforms] to bring people together. It's very easy." The storytelling aspect of films was described by another organization as particularly powerful as it allowed staff to "actually put themselves in other folks' shoes and to understand how people's lives can be impacted by racism."

SUPPORTING RACIAL HEALING

A complementary area of focus included organizations' efforts to support racial healing as a way to support fostering individual journeys. The impact of historic racial injustice takes a toll on staff, particularly staff of color. The dual impact of COVID-19 and racial justice uprisings spurred by police brutality against Black men and women have led to organizations providing more supports around healing and well-being. Moreover, racism has a deep impact on individuals and "affects our ability to know, relate to and

value one another."* Thus, racial healing is a process that focuses on acknowledgment of the truth about past wrongs created by individual and systemic racism. Engaging in racial healing can serve as a powerful tool toward restoration* and serves to build and foster stronger relationships and connections with others.

Across our interviews, the primary way that organizations supported healing was through racial healing circles for staff and at some organizations, holding healing circles for board members. A couple of organizations engaged racial healing practitioners to facilitate circles with staff. As noted in the quote on the next page, racial healing circles helped facilitate conversations between staff and learning about one another. For some, healing circles were established to support staff impacted by the murder of George Floyd and for those impacted by loss (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic). At one organization, a staff member who had been trained as a racial healing practitioner held monthly 90-minute mindfulness/healing sessions for staff. Another organization equated healing with the importance of bringing in a "restorative" framework for engaging in conflict. They shared, "When you're thinking about a journey toward being a fully racially inclusive and diverse place, an important component of this work is knowing how you

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* W.K. Kellogg Foundation. *Restoring to Wholeness: Racial Healing for Ourselves, Our Relationships, Our Communities.*
www.ala.org/tools/sites/ala.org.tools/files/content/Restoring%20to%20Wholeness%20WKKF%20Racial%20Healing%20Publication.pdf .

handle conflict." Recognizing the impact of healing circles, one organization has focused on building their internal capacity by providing trainings to others to build a cadre of healing practitioners to support their organization and their community.

> ❝ Racial healing circles brought us closer. We got to talk to each other and find out about each other's cultures. We got to learn that even though I show up as a White person, I'm Native American. And here let me tell you about my culture and my family. It gave us richer relationships and took these to deeper level, more than superficial and surface. ❞

Indicators of Growth and Transformation

As noted above, organizations shared a multitude of approaches — both internal and external — that staff have utilized for their individual learning and through relationship-building and learning in community with others. While the focus of this paper was not to evaluate the impact of particular approaches used, interviewees shared their insights on what has resulted from these activities.

Increased understanding and knowledge of racial equity and Diversity, Equity and Inclusion definitions

Respondents from at least five organizations shared that their staff have deepened their understanding and knowledge on racial equity and other DEI definitions. As noted in the quote on the next page, at one organization staff have developed comfort with racial equity and DEI terms and with having conversations

▸▸▸ with each other on these terms. For one organization, attending an external two-and-a-half day training on racial equity was described as instrumental for staff to understand foundational DEI terms and the impact of systemic racism on communities of color. A couple of organizations noted that this work has led to staff coming to consensus and shared understanding on the terms to use within their program.

> ❝ People are very comfortable with [these terms] nowadays. It's not uncommon to hear people use words like 'White supremacy' or 'White privilege.' We understand that people have actually shifted the way they look at this and the way they feel about having these conversations. This has been significant. ❞

Increased alignment between individual learning and organizational values and missions

For a few organizations, engaging in individual and collective practice also provided the opportunity for some to reflect that "once you start to learn about the history of race and racism, racist policies, practices and institutions, the historical exclusion of people, you realize you know so little." Staff also had the opportunity to reflect around their personal identities

and how these connected to their external-facing work. As one interviewee reflected, "We've had more opportunity and space to think about how we engage in our work and how we show up as individuals." For some, this work also spurred conversations about how to shift their organizational values, with one organization noting that the "videos, lectures and conversations they held around abolition" have helped shape their work around anti-policing. They noted, "So now that we understand abolition, what does this mean? And what do we need to continue to expand our knowledge on in order to understand what we're saying and where we need to continue to learn collectively as an abolition organization."

Deepened relationships and connection within the organization

Another area of observable difference shared by interviewees was seeing staff collectively build and deepen relationships with one another through this work. Individual and collective practice allowed staff to share personal stories and experiences with race, racism and racial equity and see the humanity in others by providing an opening into others' truths and experiences. One organization noted the power of racial healing circles in providing the avenue to get to know staff beyond the surface and understand cultural upbringings and experiences, but also allowing for further connection. "Racial healing circles begin to break down barriers

▸▸▸ and the walls we carry, and I think that makes organizations and teams more effective. We all connect, and our lives began to intersect."

Reinforced organizational cultures for staff to have authentic dialogue

Lastly, a subset of organizations also noted that individual and collective practice has led to staff feeling comfortable with difficult, often uncomfortable, conversations. As one organization leader noted, "People are speaking up. That is just how we are in staff meetings, we are a group of people that are about this work and are focused on learning from each other, and this shows up in how we have conversations across the organization."

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LEARNING AND CONSIDERATIONS

The organizational approaches that respondents lifted up show the importance of providing opportunities that support individual and collective learning. At the personal level, staff were able to reflect on their personal histories and connect these learnings to the work of the organization. Similarly, while developing and fostering individual journeys is important, collective practice has allowed for relationship-building and learning in community with others to further deepen their understanding of race, racism and racial equity and how they are experienced by different communities. As respondents reflected on their organizational journeys, they shared the following lessons they have learned in embarking in this work.

Engaging in individual and collective practice is difficult and requires intentional time for self-reflection and learning.

Across the board, interviewees reflected that developing a culture of individual and collective practice and learning is slow. This work is difficult — conversations around race and racism and individuals' direct experience with this can elicit strong, difficult emotions whereas one organization shared, "People can feel personal responsibility or personally attacked," and so it is important to keep conversations focused on what people are learning about themselves and how the organization can better advance equity from within. A few organizations reflected that while this work is critical, the reality is that it is challenging to balance this with their roles and responsibility. As one noted, "Finding time for people to engage in personal growth on their own is very challenging."

❝ What we've learned is that this work must intentionally allow for self-reflection and learning, particularly for whom this is completely alien. They have a long way to go, and it's difficult to be patient with them. You have to find that balance of how you continue to move forward but at the same time, allow them to learn on their own. ❞

Learning and engaging about race and racism is incredibly personal and requires a variety of approaches to support learning.

Recognizing that People of Color and White people experience race and racism differently, organizations should provide a variety of opportunities that support learning in different ways. A few organizations lifted up the importance of holding "racial equity affinity/learning groups" where staff can engage in personal and interpersonal conversations around the dynamics of race. These spaces provide a safe space to engage with others from a similar group identity for more open conversation and engagement. Groups like these can be a powerful learning tool for staff.

Organizations can bring in and leverage the expertise of outside partners and consultants to deepen learning.

While respondents shared a variety of in-house approaches to support individual and collective learning, many organizations also spoke about the power of bringing in external consultants to build capacity and support learning. Outside partners can also serve as a third-party intermediary and bring the expertise to be candid and push organizations about internal practices. Further, recognizing the burden that internal facilitation may have on staff, particularly staff of color, bringing outside consultants with the knowledge and expertise, provides a vehicle for learning about race, racism and racial equity.

Leaders must be comfortable with and committed to the long journey of supporting individual and collective learning.

As one organization simply put it, "This work is never one-and-done. It's going deep with all staff and our board on trainings on power indifference, around implicit bias, around shared language on racial equity. It's really about developing a shared understanding of the history so that we can come together around our goals on advancing racial equity." Thus, organizations must be comfortable with continuous learning, unlearning and relearning. Another respondent lamented not beginning racial equity conversations and learning much sooner as this would have allowed for staff to build skills and facility around racial equity and DEI-related terms to be learned earlier. Lastly, many of the organizations we interviewed had enduring commitments to racial equity and, as such, simultaneously recognized that
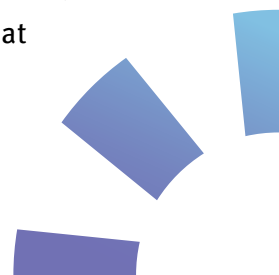
this work requires ongoing learning, given the intractable nature of race and racism.

To sustain and support continued individual and collective practice, leaders note that building organizational structures and policies is critical

Importantly, interviewees recognized that individual and collective learning is situated within the complexity of an organization. As such, this work requires a variety of structures and policies that can help sustain and support this work. First, a few organizations lifted up the importance of buy-in and resources from top-level leaders so staff can have dedicated funds — through professional development or other resources — and time to invest in personal journeys. Second, others noted a continued push to build an organizational culture that provides guidelines for safe and brave spaces. As one organizational leader shared, "Conversation about race is unpracticed for many people," but building a culture that promotes healthy dialogue and difficult conversations can transform individual and collective learning.

CONCLUSION

Individual and collective practice is a critical component of advancing racial equity. At the same time, this work is deeply personal and difficult. Recognizing that the journey toward racial equity is unique to each organization and each individual within those organizations, sharing the variety of approaches other organizations have put in place will hopefully help spark ideas for others seeking to support staff to engage in learning about personal histories and experiences while simultaneously learning from each other. It is also important to recognize that individual and collective practice is a long-time, ongoing effort that requires continual learning and unlearning, particularly because racism continues to impact communities of color. As one organization emphasized, "We are all part of a racist system, and we are set up for a continuous cycle of learning and self-reflection." To fully transform systems and institutions, focusing on individual and collective practice is a key first step.

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INSIGHTS FROM THE FIELD:

Learnings from Organizational Journeys in Centering Racial Equity

PART 3: AN ANTHOLOGY OF THREE PAPERS

OCTOBER 2023