

Leadership in equity: A longterm commitment

Justin Schott, September 2021

Approach: My approach to equity parallels Ibram Kendi's approach to anti-racism: every action either advance or combats racism; a neutral position perpetuates the dominant systems of oppression and white supremacy that are the root of disparate outcomes for Black people, Indigenous people, and other People of Color. The waters we swim in are inherently inequitable—advantage begets advantage, even without conscious effort. I believe we can only effect greater equity by actively dismantling systemic racism, sexism, classism, ableism, ageism, homophobia, xenophobia, and related ills that establish structures for “othering” people based on identities that are beyond their control. Silence in our current system is complicity and perpetuates both racism and inequity.

I believe words and leading by example do indeed matter, but only to the extent they are backed up by action. After the death of George Floyd, many organizations were quick to trumpet Black Lives Statements or commitments “to do better”. These responses may be important start points for setting the right tone, but on their own they have not actually achieved any greater degree of equity, nor do commitments or flashy reports about an organization's approach to equity. What matters is our practice—how we give power to marginalized communities in decision-making and redistribute resources and give a higher share to those who have battled a slew of disadvantage for their entire lives. Our practice cannot erect boundaries in which we advance equity in one sphere while ignoring or exacerbating inequities in another. Equity is needed throughout our policies, programs, budgets, relationships, representation, language, cultural norms and physical space. My practice has been far from perfect, and I still have deep remorse about my own failures to speak and act for justice over the years. But every day, I ask myself: *What am I doing to advance equity and racial justice?* Below are a sample of actions I stand behind; I want partners to know not just what equity means to me, but what I have been doing about it and the pathway I continue to pursue.

Leadership in action:

- Extensive personal participation in anti-racist and equity training and study for 15+ years
- 13 years of community-driven sustainability work in Detroit
- 5 years as Executive Director of majority BIPOC organization
- Initiated a “Justice League” in 2016 and, as both a program director and executive director, dedicated and organized more than 20 days of anti-racist and anti-oppression professional development
- Worked with the Justice League to develop an organizational statement on racial justice
- Transitioned from role as ED to part-time Project Manager to create space for a new BIPOC leader and successfully recruited a local, BIPOC successor. [Communicated the decision](#) and process to our stakeholders and the public, including through stories in [local news outlets](#). Have shared my experience and advice with several white EDs considering a similar transition.
- Promoted and recruited staff to shift the leadership team from 17% to 71% Black
- Maintained a maximum wage gap between highest and lowest paid staff of 2:1
- Elevated AmeriCorps stipends by over 40% during my tenure as ED in an effort to achieve a living wage and far exceed federal requirements
- Started an emergency fund to support staff with financial needs and informally supported staff in crisis and BIPOC organizations through personal donations
- Regularly sought to include and fundraise on behalf of BIPOC-led organizations and accept lower rates or budgets in order to build their capacity
- Oriented programs and research activities to serve BIPOC-led organizations and communities. For instance, resisted the urge to pursue easier and more lucrative contracts in suburban school districts and dedicated 95+% of annual \$500,000 budget to serving Detroit Public Schools.
- Advocating for equity in the face of existential organizational risks. For instance, intervened in a utility energy efficiency plan to criticize inequitable spending levels for low-income and BIPOC households, which jeopardized a contract for a residential energy efficiency program that comprised 40% of our total funding but secured an additional \$10M in the utility's plan.