Suggestions for Leaders to Support their Teams through Racial and Social Injustice in the Context of COVID-19 and Other Ongoing Stressors

Leaders across the world have been struggling with how to continually adapt to the ongoing reality of COVID-19 and the impact on their workforce. In addition to the direct impact of COVID-19 on health, safety and economic stability, the year has seen the consequences of systemic racism play out more visibly than ever on the national stage, from headline-making instances of violence and discrimination against people of color, to national protests, political turmoil, and devastating health disparities. It is not surprising, then, that our teams are experiencing exhaustion, burnout, fear and frustration.

The stress and trauma of racism for communities of color is informed by a long history of violence and social injustice. The effects of systemic racism permeate our society, with consequences including negative outcomes for physical and mental well-being. Images, media portrayals and public discourse have triggered post-traumatic stress-like symptoms in many of us, with the heaviest toll being that on racial minorities. The magnitude of the challenges and disruptions that continue have the potential to exacerbate stress among our workforce. The issues at stake in recent protests following the senseless murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Daunte Wright and others, as well as, instances of violent insurrection and racially motivated political unrest have implications for health, safety, justice, and economic wellbeing; some of our colleagues may feel that they and their families are particularly vulnerable.

Fortunately, this moment of national reckoning has sparked a conversation most feel is long overdue to address the effects of oppression on Black, Indigenous, or a Person of Color (BiPOC) individuals. These conversations, although emotionally charged, are necessary for change--it will take courage to achieve a more racially just society. However, it is essential to remain mindful that our diverse workforce may have a range of intense emotional reactions. Although the availability of vaccines may serve as a hopeful sign that the end of the pandemic is within reach, the exhaustion, fatigue, uncertainty and anxiety we and our staff have been feeling for over a year cannot be easily undone; recovery will take time, acknowledgement, and action, especially around issues of systemic racism. **The goal right now is to mitigate stress whenever and wherever possible.**

In the face of these complex and ongoing challenges, **compassionate leadership** is increasingly important. **Getting comfortable with uncomfortable conversations** is essential. Leaders can take simple yet powerful actions to create more explicitly caring work cultures. Workers across universities and healthcare systems are eager and ready to engage in efforts to improve the culture and work environment. Integrating acknowledgement of and openness about the impact of racism on individuals and society, as uncomfortable as this may be, is an important part of facilitating a compassionate and equitable culture in the workplace.

As a leader, **it may be difficult to know what support your staff needs because we are in such uncharted territory.** Stress related to racial and social injustice can often be the designated “elephant” in the room. Even when racism is not directly addressed during a group discussion, it is likely on someone’s mind. It is acceptable – and even welcome – for leaders to acknowledge their privilege, and/or lack of knowledge or experience about particular topics or perspectives related to race and racism. **There is an opportunity for open dialogue, without judgment, nurtured by acknowledgement and validation.** Staff might feel hesitant to start the conversation around complex issues related to systemic racism, healthcare disparities, and injustices that may arise – for example around Covid-19 vaccination or violence towards our Asian American neighbors – so creating space for these discussions may need to be initiated by leadership. **Staff who feel supported by their leaders are more productive and resilient.**
The Cope Columbia team published general recommendations for supporting staff wellness (https://www_cuimc.columbia.edu/covid-19-resources-cuimc/copecolumbia). Building off of these recommendations, attached is a handout with ideas on how to enhance the support you are already offering to your colleagues and staff by initiating or continuing the difficult conversations around racism and disparities.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUPPORTING STAFF

Create space to understand the sources of stress

- Carve out 5-10 minutes in your agenda at the beginning or end of every meeting to understand general sources of stress: “This is an incredibly challenging time. Our work is really stressful, and you might be experiencing new stressors at home, too. I want to understand what’s been difficult so we can figure out what resources might help.”
- Explicitly acknowledge recent current events, such as police brutality, race-based attacks, protests or the health disparities that have been uncovered due to COVID: “Are there other thoughts, concerns, or reactions about these recent events that would feel helpful to make some space to discuss as a group?”
- Assure your staff that you hear them. Simply reflecting, “I hear that you are worried about X (e.g., recent attacks on Asian Americans, civic unrest, vaccine side effects). That makes total sense.”
- Validate different perspectives and experiences: “Feeling stressed is not a sign of weakness, it is normal in these circumstances.”
- As a manager, strive to be open and non-defensive to criticism of how you or the University are adding to stress. Address issues that are amenable to rapid intervention quickly or acknowledge those that are not in follow up meetings. If you notice that you have become defensive, acknowledge it and work to repair it and move forward: “I heard myself just then reacting by reflex to defend myself [or the University]. Can we maybe rewind a bit? I’d really like to approach this conversation differently.”
- Inform people of available resources and model openness: “I’m really glad that we as a group are talking about X. These can be hard conversations to have, but they are so important. I want to share some resources that might help strengthen our team.”

Recognize Stress and Provide Support: As a leader, you recognize that staff have limits. They are under stress at work and at home, and simply acknowledging this is validating. For BIPOC colleagues especially, assessing the internal impact of external events regularly can help guide self-care needs. All staff should be encouraged to care for themselves (e.g., good sleep, hydration, exercise). When coping with the stress of systemic racism, individuals might identify those who are good listeners and a team of colleagues that can be trusted to carry the burden when it becomes too daunting for any one individual. Consider having individual check-ins with staff, and explicitly raise issues around racial justice as a potential source of stress, without expecting them to necessarily share their individual feelings.

Gratitude: Simple and genuine expressions of gratitude toward staff are very important. Gratitude helps most when we state specific descriptions of what was done and its impact. Because conversations about racism and social injustice can feel uncomfortable and inadequate at times, expressing gratitude to those who contribute to the discussion despite this is useful; it reinforces that leadership is receptive to ongoing, open communication.

Identify Blindspots and Goals. Leaders, just like their team members, come to a conversation about racial and social injustice with their own personal history. Be sensitive to the fact that inequality and injustice may feel subjective; the goal as a leader is to personally get more accustomed to speaking your truth while
acknowledging this and helping members of your team to do the same. Recognizing the complexity can go a long way. Remind your teams that at times the loudest voices should “step back” and open space for contributions by those less comfortable speaking in meetings and other formal settings. It can also help to remind yourself, and others, that these conversations are not meant to instantly solve centuries old national and global issues – they are simply a step forward towards compassion, understanding, equity, and justice.

Appreciate Differences: While everyone has experienced some emotional toll from this pandemic, the burdens of this time are not distributed equally. Consider the effects your employees may experience due to recent racially driven incidents. The inability for communities of color to access mental health resources has historically created a barrier to treatment and recovery. This, in conjunction with the stigma associated with mental health care in communities of color, can make is much more difficult for some individuals to access emotional support resources. Sensitivity to vulnerable groups and potential barriers to care can guide leaders in how they discuss benefits of getting individualized attention to address one’s concerns.

Mind the Tone. As a leader, you have managed many difficult conversations. In general, focus on the importance of listening and understanding, rather than persuading or defending. It is okay to set limits by explicitly saying that you are willing to have the group discuss a range of opinions as long as they are expressed respectfully. It is also important to let your team know that people can express how particular opinions make them feel. If the discussion does become contentious or the conversation seems uncivil, you may need to intervene as outlined in Box 1. Explicitly tell the group that the discussion does not seem productive. Leaders may be placed in the role of "referee" and may need to call out microaggressions, or statements or actions that are out of bounds, not because of the point of view but rather because of how it's expressed.

RESOURCES

**CopeColumbia:** During weekly meetings, leaders should talk about the opportunity to seek more support via CopeColumbia. If your Department or Division would like to arrange a Wellbeing Town Hall or Peer Support Group, please email us at CopeColumbia@cumc.columbia.edu. For our 1:1 Peer Support Line, call 646-774-6311. Our website has materials to support wellbeing, including curated wellness resources for individuals, resources and support for families, and content on grief, loss, trauma and anti-racism.

**The House Staff Mental Health Service (HSMHS):** During Resident Meetings, PDs and Chiefs should talk about the opportunity to seek more support via the HSMHS. If your program would like to arrange a Noon Conference or Peer Support Group or if you prefer more individual support, please contact the HSMHS via Dr. Mayer at lsm16@cumc.columbia.edu or call 646-774-8067.