



# MESSAGES TO GROW AND UPROOT:

Narrative Strategy Amid Attacks on Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Racial Justice





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# Appreciations

Appreciations to

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# About This Guide

Race Forward is committed to supporting partner organizations in navigating efforts to dismantle institutions, policies, and practices dedicated to equity and justice. Narratives, stories, and messages are effective tools to shape the way we understand diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. Anti-equity messages in the form of executive orders, public discourse, and press statements have been part of the escalating attacks on equity and inclusion initiatives. These attacks that have resulted in the dismantling of policies like Affirmative Action and Roe Vs Wade among others. It is very clear that attacks on equity language and messages are ultimately attacks on vulnerable populations served by diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives such as communities of color, trans and queer communities, and people with disabilities.

Organizational partners have thus expressed the need for narrative and messaging support and tools to **counter harmful messages about diversity, equity, and inclusion**.

Race Forward's mission centers on advancing **racial justice** and we view **diversity, equity, and inclusion as critical pathways** to correcting historical harms and barriers to access, opportunity, and justice. And so we are committed to responding to these narrative attacks and supporting organizations at the forefront of the narrative struggle.

This guide is for organizations working to advance equity and justice in service of communities most impacted by systemic inequities and racism. Its intention is to help diversity, equity, and inclusion practitioners in supporting organizations and communities make sense of and respond to the current attacks on equity work by applying narrative strategy and messaging frameworks.

This guide is broken into three parts:

**1** Using the Narrative Pyramid to strengthen organizations' overall narrative strategy;

**2** Messaging considerations to guide organizations in responding to attacks on equity;

**3** Sample messages to grow and uproot

Race Forward believes in the power of narratives, stories, and messages in shaping policies, culture, and institutions to become racially just and equitable. With this guide, we hope to offer narrative and messaging strategies and tools that can be useful for organizations struggling to continue advancing racial equity amid the political moment we are in.

## Using the Narrative Pyramid

**“Cultural change precedes social change. Narrative drives policy. This is why we must be as strategic and rigorous in building narrative power as we are in building all other forms of power. Narrative is the space in which energies are activated to preserve a destructive system or build a better world for us all.”**

— [Race Forward's Butterfly Lab Report](#)

Narrative IS power. The stories and messages we repeat over time shape policies, outcomes, culture, and material conditions. They shape our understanding of problems and solutions, and resonate with people because they are rooted in our collective values. Messages and stories also deepen and solidify these values.

When we think about successful movements in history, it becomes clear that narratives and stories are tools that have been wielded in small and big battles for power and that have won many of our freedoms. The seed of an idea that harmful systems can be abolished begins in whispered stories told in small community spaces that then travel as cries for justice across cities, that reach the halls where laws and policies are debated, that then spread across masses of people that form a movement demanding justice.

The opposition has wielded narrative strategy skillfully which is why we are here. We need to fight back and build our own narrative power.

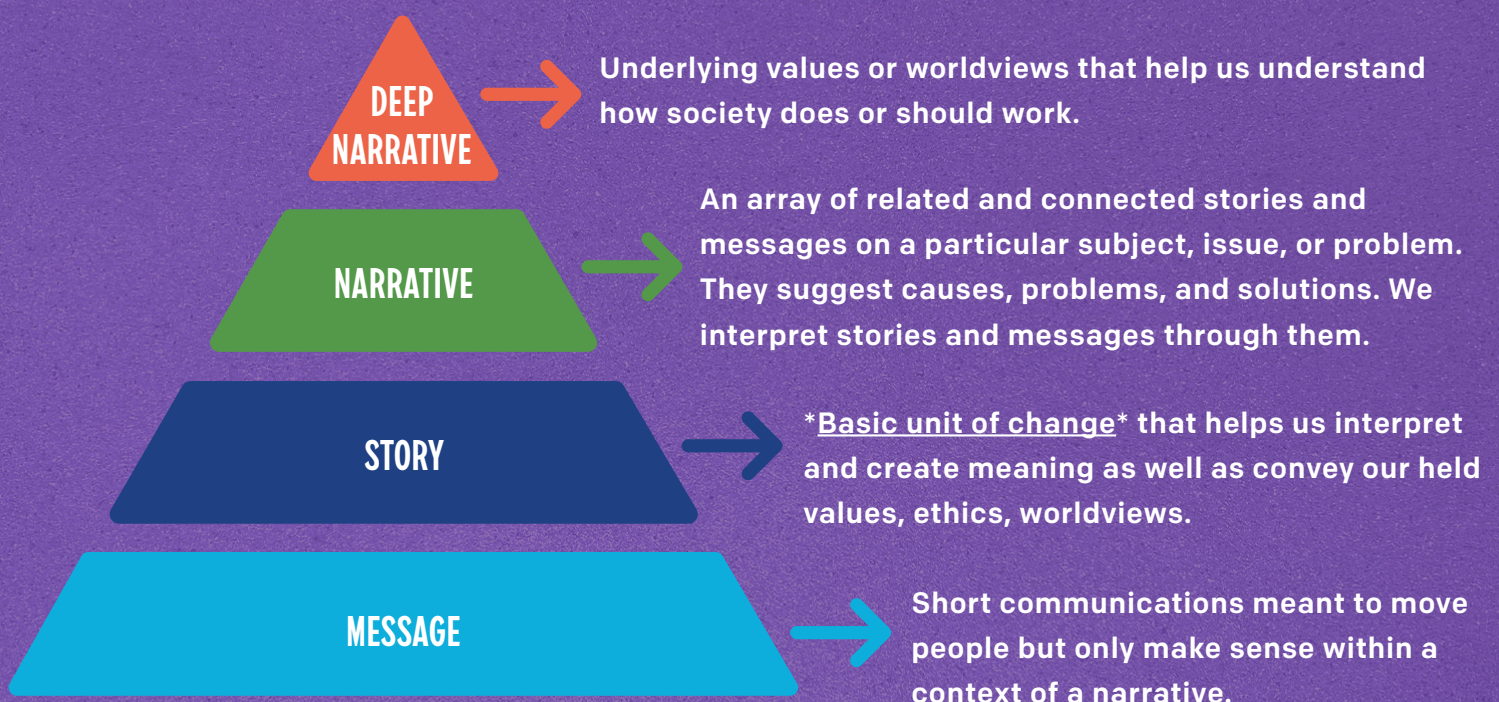
Understanding narrative strategy is a helpful foundation in building effective communication and messages to advance racial equity and justice in our current political environment. Narrative strategy is long-term work that seeks to build narrative power in service of our collective vision of the world. One way to begin building our narrative strategy is by using the **Narrative Pyramid**. The Narrative Pyramid helps us build alignment and connections between our **Deep Narrative** (values and world views), **Narrative** (array of related and connected stories and messages that suggest causes and solutions), **Story** (basic unit of change that helps us interpret and create meaning), and **Messages** (short communications to move people as part of a larger narrative strategy).

The Narrative Pyramid also helps us understand how our opposition stacks these elements to maintain harmful systems. For instance, a simple message like “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” connects to stories about self-made millionaires, which reinforce narratives about personal responsibility, which support deep narratives about individualism and limited government.

Narrative strategy intervenes at all four levels of the Pyramid — not just at the level of story-shift or messaging. **A robust narrative strategy links all four parts of the Narrative Strategy Pyramid from deep narratives down through messages.**

Here is a worksheet that you can use to practice applying the Narrative Pyramid to your narrative, messaging, and storytelling work: [ButterflyLab-Y1-Toolkit-PyramidNarrativeWorksheet.pdf](#)

## THE NARRATIVE PYRAMID: A TOOL FOR IDEATION AND ALIGNMENT





When we communicate about the impact of the executive orders on communities, we must be clear about the underlying deep narratives or values that drive our communication and stories. Messages rooted in deep narratives of equity and justice will not just name the negative impact of these orders on society at large but their disproportionate impact on communities of color, trans people, immigrants, and people with disabilities. By clarifying the deep values that operate underneath, we also give ourselves an opportunity to **bridge** the urgency of the moment and the critical need for equity and racial justice.

Below is an example of how Race Forward has applied the Narrative Pyramid in response to the harmful attacks on diversity, equity, and inclusion. In our own analysis, these attacks are a continuation of many other attacks rooted in the deep narratives of individualism, for example. To be clear, values such as individualism by itself are not negative. But in the context of the attacks on equity work, individualism narratives have been wielded to deny the existence of structural inequities that affect all of us. It also reinforces the idea that we don't need to rely on each other for survival and thriving. Race Forward's deep narratives reassert the need for solidarity and interconnectedness as necessary tools for racial justice.

| Anti-Equity Narratives                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | Equity Narratives                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p><b>Deep Narratives</b></p> <p><i>Underlying values or worldviews that help us understand how society does or should work.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Individualism and self reliance</li><li>• Meritocracy</li><li>• Deservingness</li><li>• Personal Freedom</li><li>• Hard work alone is rewarded</li></ul> | <p><b>Deep Narratives</b></p> <p><i>Underlying values or worldviews that help us understand how society does or should work.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Interconnectedness/Shared fates</li><li>• Good of all</li><li>• Solidarity/Multiracial Solidarity</li><li>• Collective responsibility</li><li>• Fairness and justice</li></ul> |

### Narratives

*An array of related and connected stories and messages on a particular subject, issue, or problem. They suggest causes, problems, and solutions. We interpret stories and messages through them.*

- Equity initiatives are unnecessary because systemic inequities are not real. People just need to work harder and pull themselves up by their bootstraps.
- Diversity yields unqualified people.
- Government/Institutions who embed diversity, equity, and inclusion reward those who don't work hard or who are not qualified.
- Diversity, equity, and inclusion is divisive.
- Diversity, Equity and Inclusion is antithetical to the American dream.

### Narratives

*An array of related and connected stories and messages on a particular subject, issue, or problem. They suggest causes, problems, and solutions. We interpret stories and messages through them.*

- Equity is critical in correcting structural inequities embedded into our policies and institutions. Hard work alone is not enough.
- Diversity, equity, and inclusion expands the pool of candidates who are highly qualified, thus making organizations stronger.
- Diversity, equity, and inclusion benefits everybody/is good for everybody.
- Diversity, equity, and inclusion builds solidarity.
- Diversity, equity, and inclusion is part of the promise of this country (that all men are created equal).

### Stories

*Basic unit of change\* that helps us interpret and create meaning as well as convey our held values, ethics, worldviews.*

- Fake stories about how equity divides the country.
- Fake rags to riches stories/stories of billionaires who became rich just by hard work alone.
- Government is too big, bloated, unnecessary — we need to make it smaller by eliminating equity programs.
- Diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives bring unqualified immigrants who are taking away American jobs.

### Stories

*Basic unit of change\* that helps us interpret and create meaning as well as convey our held values, ethics, worldviews.*

- Stories of how racial reckoning helped drive a nationwide equity progression that brought people together.
- Stories of solidarity and collective action that lead to shared success and wins.
- Stories of how government led equity initiatives have improved the lives of entire communities.
- Stories of orgs/companies committing to diversity, equity, and inclusion because it's good for the workers AND the business and aligned with American values.

### Messages

*Short communications are meant to move people but only make sense within the context of a narrative.*

- Diversity, equity, and inclusion as “Efforts to divide the workforce — to put one group ahead of another— erode camaraderie and threaten mission execution.”
- Diversity, equity, and inclusion leads to hiring of unqualified people and is bad for organizations.

### Messages

*Short communications are meant to move people but only make sense within a context of a narrative.*

- We need to [Build the Bigger We](#) from Race Forward’s Cultural Week of Action campaign.
- We need each other.
- “Together” messages or messages that call for solidarity to advance diversity, equity, inclusion, and racial justice.
- Systemic racism is real and we need a majority of people working to dismantle it.
- Government for All means equity-centered institutions and policies.
- Now is the time to right historical wrongs.

# Communication Considerations in the Midst of Attacks on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Messages (short communications to move people as part of a larger narrative strategy) are powerful tools available to us in the midst of the attacks on racial justice, and the larger equity field. Below are some considerations for organizations crafting messages in response to the attacks on equity work. These considerations come from Race Forward’s long experience with narrative strategy and strategic communications. These considerations emphasize the need to ground our work in deep values, audience needs, systems thinking, risk analysis, and clear vision. The invitation is to slow down on reacting to attacks coming our way and take time to assess risks, opportunities, and strategies related to messaging.

- 1 Start with Reflection and Assessment:** Before digging into messaging and communication, it is important for organizations to do some reflection and assessment of their goals, audience, risks, and resources. This practice of reflection and assessment will help sharpen messaging and communication to be more precise and strategic. The reflection and assessment tool below is based on Race Forward’s [ACT Tool](#) that’s been tailored for this exercise.

2

**Lead and ground your messages in values.** According to The Opportunity Agenda, “Opening conversations with shared values helps to emphasize society’s role in affording a fair chance to everyone. But starting conversations here does not mean avoiding discussions of race. We suggest bridging from shared values to the roles of racial equity and inclusion in fulfilling those values for all. Doing so can move audiences into a frame of mind that is more solution-oriented and less mired in skepticism about the continued existence of discrimination or our ability to do anything about it.” It is also important to be clear with values that undergird and drive our messages from the onset.

3

**Craft messages that uphold the desired narratives and values** rather than unintentionally reinforcing dominant narratives. This can be as simple as not repeating harmful messages in our counter messages and/or beginning our counter messages with narratives we want to activate and grow.

4

**Elevate solutions and calls to action.** It is easy for organizations and people to feel a sense of doom and gloom and hopelessness when faced with systemic oppression and active attacks on equity and communities. We must elevate solutions and calls to action that will activate people and center their energy toward concrete next steps.

5

Depending on the risks involved, **be explicit in naming structural roots of discrimination, racism, sexism, and ableism and their impact on specific groups of people.** If the risks for being equity and racially explicit are high and real, then explore communication bridges such as shared values and complementary words (human dignity, equality, etc). The goal is not to be equity silent but to find new paths and avenues to get to our desired outcomes while navigating real risks.

6

**Develop, iterate, and recalibrate** stories in collaboration with impacted communities we are working with and/or are representing. Narratives should never be imposed on communities without their buy-in, input, and engagement first. Collaboration with communities on our messages should lead us to adapt to changing needs and the political landscape. We need to be open to shifts as the needs of communities change with the political battles they are facing. **Organizational leaders should also work with as many experts as possible such as Board Members, General Counsel, etc.**



# Messaging Assessment and Reflection Tool

| Reflection and Assessment Questions                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Answers to Guide Messaging and Communications                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p><b>Deep Narratives and Values underlying your communication and messaging:</b> What deep narratives (underlying values or worldviews) are my organization trying to activate or defend in this current political moment through our stories and messaging?</p>                                                                                                    | <p><b>Examples of deep narratives:</b> Everybody is equal. Everybody deserves equal access to opportunity, racial justice, etc.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| <p><b>Strategic Audience:</b> Who's our key audience for this communication? Is it strategic for us to engage with them in this current moment? In what way is it strategic? If not, who else should we communicate with?</p>                                                                                                                                        | <p><b>Example Answers:</b> Organizations defending equity work or services might want to communicate to their base to help them make meaning of these attacks.</p>                                                                                                                                                                  |
| <p><b>Messages to Grow:</b> What racial justice or diversity, equity, and inclusion narratives do I want to activate with my message?</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | <p><b>Example Answers:</b> Diversity, equity, and inclusion is central to democratic values and the preservation of civil rights, structural racism is real, racial equity would benefit everyone, shared fate, etc.</p>                                                                                                            |
| <p><b>Messages to Uproot:</b> What harmful narratives on race and diversity, equity, and inclusion do I want to counter or uproot in this current moment?</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                        | <p><b>Example Answers:</b> DEI is divisive, DEI is anti-civil rights, disparities caused by behavior; colorblindness, "reverse racism," etc.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| <p><b>Capacity and Risks:</b> What's my organizational capacity to engage and communicate? If I do not have the capacity, who are potential messengers or partners that will be effective communicators to my key audience?</p> <p>What risks are involved in communicating about race, diversity, equity, and inclusion during this moment for my organization?</p> | <p><b>Example Answers:</b> Explicit support from funders allows organizations to be more courageous in their messaging knowing that they are being flanked with resources by philanthropic organizations. Messages from partner and aligned organizations can be elevated in our organizational socials if our capacity is low.</p> |

**Navigating Risks:** Given the risks, how explicitly can I talk about diversity, equity, and inclusion in my messaging?

If the risks are high and real, what communication techniques can I use to navigate these risks and navigate existing gaps? What complementary words can I use in the short term that will serve as bridges to talk about race, diversity, equity, and inclusion?

**We should note that navigating and problem-solving for risks to being race or equity explicit does not mean backing away from these conversations totally. It means finding different communication pathways and bridges to start the conversations on race and equity in the midst of the attacks that will get us to our goals and outcomes.**

**Example:** Using “human dignity” or “equal access for all” as entry points and bridges to talking about equity. Using income and location data to start having conversations about racial and gender wealth disparities. Recognizing that proxy data and language are not the goal but are helpful starting points that bring us closer to racial equity, etc.



## Messages in Response to Attacks on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

As attacks on diversity, equity, and inclusion continue to escalate, we must be clear about the narratives and messages we want to grow and reinforce while also being equipped to counter harmful narratives. Below are messages we crafted based on previously discussed Narrative and Framing Tools.

## Messages That Reinforce the Critical Need for Equity and Justice

**Alignment with Values:** “This country is founded on the ideals of equality, justice, and liberty. Policies, systems, and initiatives that discriminate and marginalize people based on their race, gender identity, and ability undermine these values that are at the very heart of this country’s founding. Diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives were created to correct these discriminatory and exclusionary policies and systems in alignment with values and ideals we as a country hold. We must all work together to ensure that our institutions and policies build communities where everybody can thrive.”

**Expanding Civil Rights:** “Diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives protect and expand civil rights by ensuring that all individuals, regardless of their race, gender, and ability are treated equally under the law and have the chance to thrive in a just society. It is everybody’s responsibility to protect our civil rights by supporting diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives that give everyone equitable and equal access to opportunity.”

**Structural Access to Opportunity:** Diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives aim to expand access to education, jobs, and other opportunities for everybody, especially those who have been historically excluded. Structural racism, sexism, and ableism have prevented people of color, women, LGBTQIA folks, and people with disabilities from having access to opportunities that can improve their material conditions. Diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts were created to correct these structural inequities to allow underserved groups equal access to these opportunities. We must continue to support and grow our organization’s equity initiatives that bring about justice and opportunity.

**Everyone Benefits:** Many studies have shown that diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives benefit everybody. Such initiatives encourage organizations to dismantle policies that discriminate based on race, gender, and ability. When an organization values and promotes fairness, equity, and justice, everybody in the organization and the community experiences the benefits when it comes to access, treatment, and compensation. Organizations also benefit from equity initiatives by having a wider pool of qualified people to choose from in their hiring. Diversity in staffing, background, and ideas also brings about creativity and innovation that benefits the organization in the long run.

**Solidarity:** Diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives bring about solidarity and unity which this country needs to succeed and progress. These initiatives bring people from different backgrounds, experiences, and identities together to build common ground and understanding. Diversity, equity, and inclusion breaks down structural barriers and builds bridges between people and communities. We must build equity-centered policies and practices that bring about solidarity and deeper collaboration.

# Countering Harmful Messages

| Anti-Equity Narratives                                                                                                           | Equity Narratives                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>"We don't need DEI initiatives, everybody already has an equal chance."</p>                                                   | <p><i>"We as a country have made a lot of progress in dismantling systems of inequities and discrimination. Unfortunately, many studies show that barriers to access and opportunity continue to persist. Nobody is really equal until everyone has equal access to education, resources, jobs and so on, irrespective of socioeconomic status or racial and gender identity. Diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives are still necessary until these structural barriers are broken down."</i></p>                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| <p>"Efforts to divide the workforce — to put one group ahead of another — erode camaraderie and threaten mission execution."</p> | <p><i>"Diversity, equity, and inclusion builds unity and solidarity by breaking down barriers to access and bringing together people from different communities, backgrounds, and identities. Dismantling equity efforts will lead to further division because historically marginalized groups will lose access to opportunities and be excluded from places of power and decision-making. The real threat to unity and solidarity is the dismantling of equity. We must continue to support equity initiatives that are central to building solidarity and collaboration."</i></p>                                                                                                                                |
| <p>"DEI means discrimination against white men and other white people."</p>                                                      | <p><i>"Diversity, equity, and inclusion is not a zero-sum game. Equity initiatives transform organizations to become equitable for and inclusive of everyone. Everybody benefits when organizations improve access and the material conditions of people most impacted by structural exclusion and inequities in society. For example, unbiased hiring processes as a result of equity efforts will benefit everybody in the organization by bringing in candidates based on their qualifications regardless of race, gender, or ability. Diversity, equity, and inclusion does not discriminate against white people and in fact they benefit from solutions and strategies as a result of these efforts."</i></p> |

|                                                                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>"DEI only benefits Black and brown people."</p>                               | <p><i>"Diversity, equity, and inclusion programs benefit everyone. Saying that equity initiatives benefit only Black and brown people is a racist dog whistle. Equity initiatives are meant to give access to groups historically barred from job and income opportunities such as people of color, women, LGBTQIA people, and people with disabilities. Equity initiatives encourage organizations to implement equitable policies that benefit everybody, not just historically excluded groups."</i></p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| <p>"DEI leads to hiring of unqualified people and is bad for organizations."</p> | <p><i>"Diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts provide qualified people who face structural barriers access to jobs and other opportunities. The reality is that many people from historically excluded groups cannot even get a foot in the door because of implicit bias and discriminatory policies and systems. There is no evidence that people hired through equity and diversity initiatives are unqualified. In fact, many folks from these excluded groups have had to work twice as hard because of the challenges they face due to discriminatory practices. We must support diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives that expand organizations' pool of highly qualified applicants from different backgrounds and communities."</i></p> |

# Resources

[GARE Communications Guide](#)

[Shifting Narrative: Stories for a Multiracial Democracy Brief](#)

[Butterfly Lab Narrative Design Toolkit](#)

[Making Opportunity Real: A Framework for Communicating About Racial Justice](#)

[Opinion: Corporate America Isn't Abandoning DEI.  
It's Rebranding it - Los Angeles Times](#)

[Narrative Power in Crisis: How to Narrate Towards Action](#)

[Ten Lessons for Talking About Race, Racism,  
and Racial Justice - The Opportunity Agenda](#)

[The ACT Model](#)

[PACE: How to Talk Bridgey](#)

[Guide to Messaging Our Freedoms](#)

[PUBLIC: The Fierce Urgency of Now: Messages that  
Advance Diversity and Equal Opportunity](#)