



## Tip of the Month June 2020

### Proactive Steps for Undoing Racism in Ourselves and Our Systems

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Another black man was killed at the hands of a police officer in the Twin Cities. The outrage was explosive, [built up over years](#). Our communities and country are reeling. In a time of a viral pandemic, [the American Psychological Association has declared](#) that “we are living in a racism pandemic” too, a pandemic that infects just about every structure and system in our society. But activists working to undo structural racism report community engagement at the levels of the Civil Rights era (the spirit of which informed [VLN’s founding](#)).

Volunteer Lawyers Network’s (VLN’s) clients are people living in poverty. Because of structural racism, that means our clients also are disproportionately Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) (see [here](#) and [here](#)). Conversely, a majority of our attorneys are white. Those of us who are white tend to have little understanding of the lived experiences of BIPOC, the stories of past and present BIPOC leaders, or nuanced understanding of the dynamics, manifestations and impacts of ubiquitous systemic racism.

As our VLN community recommits to addressing racial inequities, here are some concrete, high-level steps for those of us who are white to consider, many taken from the [Harvard Business Review](#).

**Commit to lifelong learning about racism - out of *our* need for integrity and humanity.** [Many white HCBA leaders have shown](#) how to start. Among other things, this helps us:

- Understand what [white privilege](#) means
- Understand and reduce the harm we cause, such as through [microaggressions](#), [acting out unconscious bias](#), minimizing others’ [lived experiences](#), etc.
- Understand the impact and history of *systemic* racism that lives on today (VLN has several on-demand CLE resources to help). This includes the legal, school, prison, policing, health care, banking, philanthropic, higher educational, investment, and other systems. No system is immune.
- Gain important insights about our own humanity and how to better live it.

**Engage in sustained and meaningful conversations around racism with other white people.** We need to develop the skill and courage to have meaningful conversations about race and racism, in our workplace, social lives, neighborhoods, public spheres of influence, and families. This includes ongoing discussions around skills, trainings, movies, books, etc. It also includes speaking up in white spaces when a white colleague or friend says something offensive (and being uncomfortable) or when you see policies that reinforce racism. Speaking up about racism with white people takes courage, but as they are saying in the streets: “Silence is complicity.”

**Commit to accepting discomfort.** As we deepen our understanding of racism, its harms, and our complicity in those harms, many of us feel embarrassment, grief, sadness, anger, shame, urgency, and other uncomfortable

feelings. It's especially painful to see the extent of individual and systemic racism when we've tried to live with integrity and respect. But we can't address racism (or "[white fragility](#)") without the capacity to hold the discomfort, both in our minds and bodies, for the rest of our lives (see e.g. [Resmaa Menakem](#)). Only then can we engage in sustained antiracism work as opposed to sporadic efforts fueled by bouts of guilt.

**Respect BIPOC anger, pain, sadness and distrust.** We need to allow space for our BIPOC colleagues, clients and communities to feel their feelings about what they, their communities and the world is experiencing. While many of us have overcome great difficulties in our lives, we have not had to overcome the difficulty of being BIPOC in this society. These feelings are legitimate responses to systemic unfairness and grave injustices.

**Avoid becoming defensive in conversations.** Our ability to hold discomfort helps us listen more fully to BIPOC perspectives on racism and not, for example, view them as personal attacks or deflect our thoughts from issues of racism. See Robin DiAngelo's research on [white fragility](#). For example, we are told something we said or did was problematic. Defensiveness can include saying "I didn't mean it that way," which deflects from the immediate impact on the person we are speaking to. Or we hear about the police using "excessive force against unarmed Black people." Defensiveness can include statements about what the victim may have done to contribute to the conflict, implying they somehow deserved the abuse.

**With BIPOC colleagues and friends, acknowledge their pain around high-profile events.** Just a simple, "How are you doing with all this right now?" can mean so much. Some of us might get frozen at making such a comment, afraid of making a mistake. But silence itself can be hurtful and alienating. If your colleague chooses to respond, just listen and be aware that their lived experience gives them a very different lens than ours. This is a time to let someone else have the last word, including interpretation of events.

**Be a good teammate to white colleagues.** White people need to support each other in this lifelong and often difficult work – it is not the responsibility of BIPOC to hold our hands as we learn to fix a system that disproportionately harms them. We're all going to make mistakes. When that happens, we can encourage each other and keep moving forward. We may be in a competitive field, but antiracism work is hampered by competitiveness or insidious feelings of superiority to other whites. As an African proverb says, "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together."

**Avoid asking BIPOC clients or colleagues to *teach* us about racism or share their personal experiences of racism.** It might seem convenient, more authentic and/or a time-saver for *us*, but it creates more work, vulnerability and stress for *them*. Many BIPOC people are [tired of talking about racism with white people](#). Countless online and in-person resources are just a Google click away. On a related note: avoid asking a BIPOC colleague or friend to help us process *our* feelings around racist events; that can be like asking someone who's lost a child in a car crash to empathize with our fender-bender.

**Make a practice of publicly acknowledging the legacy of racism.** Racism won't end until we fully recognize the extent to which our country was built on labor stolen from slaves (primarily African American and Native American) and [land stolen from Native Americans](#). Since Minneapolis and St. Paul are home to one of the largest urban Native American populations in the country, one possibility for doing this is to [publicly acknowledge](#) that we are occupying land stolen from the Dakota.

**Engage in ongoing antiracism work.** Antiracism work is both internal *and* external - both are essential. White people hold most of the wealth and power in this country (whether elected, law firm, corporate, or other);

racism won't end until white people are engaged in antiracism work on an ongoing basis. Some steps:

1. **Assess your spheres of influence and capacities.** This might include: policies in your law firm; wide social circles; connections with influential people; financial resources; connections with young people; understanding of how city or state politics works; ability to attend meetings or show up at political rallies; time for volunteer work at BIPOC-lead organizations; child care abilities; etc. We all have strengths we can use.
2. **Join groups engaging in anti-racism work.** Racism is a community-wide problem and we need to solve it in community. Find groups working on antiracism and join one that interests you and with people with whom you'd like to connect. None of us can solve this problem in isolation. Contributing our unique skills to a larger group is more effective and sustainable.
3. **Listen to BIPOC voices and leadership.** BIPOC leaders (as well as leaders from other marginalized communities) tend to have deep experience with systemic injustice. Listening to them, partnering with them, and offering our help where they say it's most needed are essential in this work. Do some research to find BIPOC-lead organizations near your home or office with whom you might have some organic issue- or identify- affinity.

VLN has partnerships with many organizations, both attorney- and community-based, headed by BIPOC leaders. Over the coming months VLN will be paying especially close attention to their lead and how we might support and leverage their ideas and work. Many of these partners have come out with statements of action for how to respond to the murder of George Floyd to which we can lend our support:

[CLUES](#), [Minneapolis Urban League](#), [Minnesota Association of Black Lawyers](#), [Minnesota Asian Pacific American Bar Association](#), [Minnesota Hispanic Bar Association](#), [Hmong American Partnership](#), [Minnesota Indian Women's Resource Center](#), [Pillsbury United Communities](#)

4. **Act.** Once you've narrowed your options, engage in sustained action to end the systems of racism in your spheres of influence and in our country overall.

**Conclusion** In this historical moment, we are again visibly and prominently called to engage in sustained work to end racism. There is no going back to "business as usual." Answering this call will require, if we haven't already, rearranging our priorities to build antiracism work into our routines. Yes, this is a high bar. But as Archbishop Desmond Tutu said, "If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor." For others' humanity as well as our own, let's be actively engaged in ending the injustice of racism.