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INTERVIEW

Pressing Toward Racial Equity

An Interview with Dr. Robert Livingston

Originally published in the *District Management Journal*, v.29, Spring 2021

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Pressing Toward Racial Equity

An Interview with Dr. Robert Livingston

Dr. Robert Livingston is a social psychologist and one of the nation's leading experts on the science underlying implicit bias and racism in organizations. His research examines the psychology of implicit bias as well as the processes and messages that maintain discrimination at the institutional level. He is currently on the faculty of the Harvard Kennedy School of Government and has previously held professorships at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University, and the University of Sussex in England. In addition, he has served for the past two decades as a diversity consultant to numerous public sector agencies, nonprofit organizations, and dozens of Fortune 500 companies, including Airbnb, Deloitte, Microsoft, Under Armour, L'Oreal, and JPMorgan Chase. In his work with these organizations, Dr. Livingston shows people how to turn difficult conversations about race into productive opportunities for real change.

Dr. Livingston shares his work in his recently released book, *The Conversation: How Seeking and Speaking the Truth About Racism Can Radically Transform Individuals and Organizations*. Founded on principles of psychology, sociology, organizational behavior, behavioral economics, and history, *The Conversation* explores the root causes of racism, the factors that explain why some people care about it and others do not, and the most promising paths toward profound and sustainable progress.

In his book, Dr. Livingston also shares his approach to promoting racial equity — PRESS (Problem Awareness, Root-Cause Analysis, Empathy, Strategy, Sacrifice). Through this process, he invites readers to challenge their own assumptions while developing a scientifically based understanding of racism in this country, particularly against Black people, and encourages the development of anti-racist beliefs and actions using the key mechanism of social exchange — conversation.

In this edited interview, Dr. Livingston shares his research, experience, and reflections with DMGroup CEO John Kim and DMGroup Senior Associate Rachel Klein.



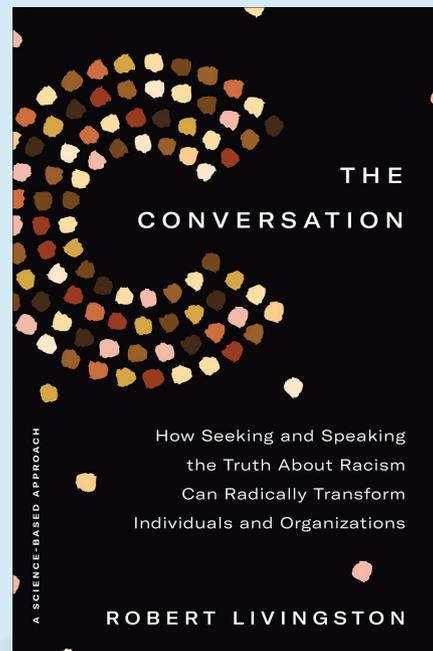
Robert, thank you so much for making the time to be with us. With the national reckoning on race and the pandemic's spotlighting the tremendous disparities in our society, your book is very much needed. I'm really hoping to have a conversation with you about your ideas and specifically how our audience — district and school leaders — can leverage your work because education seems to be at the heart of addressing how we make the world a more equitable place. So let's just start with your book, which you titled *The Conversation*. How is it that conversation — something so seemingly simple that we do all the time — can be such an important part of addressing such a serious and complicated topic?

Well, John, that's a great question. I pondered the title for many months, and I kept coming back to my experiences and the research, and all signposts were pointing to our indelible humanity. What that means is humans are not really good computers — we don't just process data and information. People relate to people, and there are a lot of studies that show you can give people all the data in the world, but social relationships serve as the portal for facts to enter: people learn most of what they know about the world through relationships with other people, whether it's primary caregivers, friends, peers, or our social network. And conversation is one of the fundamental ways for people to connect; social change won't happen without social exchange.

But I don't see conversation as a panacea. I think it's a three-stage process: education, conversation, and action. My book, if anything, is about 80% education, 15% conversation, and 5% action. I think a rookie mistake that a lot of organizations make is wanting to jump straight to a solution without going through this process of education and conversation before you get to action. Albert Einstein once famously said that if he were given one hour to solve the world's most difficult problem, he would spend 55 minutes thinking about the problem and only 5 minutes on the solution. In line with this wisdom, my book dedicates ten chapters to the problem and only two chapters to the solution.

What are some recommendations for making these conversations really intentional?

The first thing is when you're having a conversation, be focused on the reason that you're having a conversation.

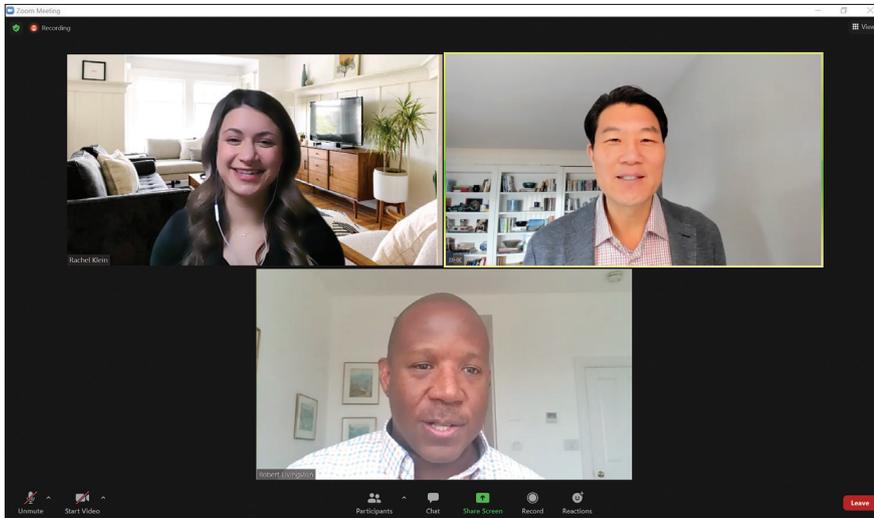


The Conversation

How Seeking and Speaking the Truth About Racism Can Radically Transform Individuals and Organizations

by Robert Livingston

Published in February 2021, *The Conversation* is being called “an essential tool for individuals, organizations, and communities of all sizes to jump-start the dialogue on racism and bias and to transform well-intentioned statements on diversity into concrete actions.” Livingston states that one of the primary goals of the book is to provide knowledge in order to facilitate *informed* conversation: “Education, conversation, and action — in that order!”...“Social change requires social exchange. In other words, we have to start talking to one another — especially those outside our social circle,” says Dr. Livingston. In the book, he shares his PRESS intervention model for promoting racial equity in the workplace and provides discussion questions to get *the conversation* started.



“Does Rejection Hurt?” and they show with MRI brain scans that the same areas of the brain light up when someone feels ostracized as when they endure physical pain. So, it’s both attending to the facts and making room for the feelings. You really can’t divorce those two, and I talk about how to do this very delicate tightrope walk between facts and feelings, but it’s far too complicated to get into in this small segment.

One thing that struck us as we were getting prepared to talk to you today is your ability to combine

deep academic research with the lived experience. I do think that’s very distinctive and makes your work so powerful. Before we go any further, I want to take a step back and hear a little bit about what drives you in this work and why you take the approach that you do.

There’s generally a problem at hand that needs to be solved, and I think one tip for having a productive conversation is to remind everyone that the focus is on the problem at hand and not the characteristics of the people in the room. Really focus all of the conversation on racism or racial inequity rather than labeling who’s the racist in the room, because that can create more of an ad hominem focus, and it’s really not productive. Focus on the problem not the person.

Also, have a conversation grounded in facts rather than opinions. Feelings and opinions are important, very important, but I think conversations have to be informed. If you’re really trying to solve a problem, you need to bring some facts and have some sort of objective grounding in what you’re doing, which is why I say education, then conversation, then action.

There’s a whole chapter in my book called “How to Talk about the Problem.” And rule number one is stick to the facts, but you have to make room for the feelings. You know, it goes back to that empathy or that primal human connection that I talk about, and how our mortal fear is being cast out of the group. There’s a paper by Naomi Eisenberger and Matt Lieberman called

I grew up in a bit of a bubble — I grew up in an exclusively Black, middle-class neighborhood. My principal was Black and lived in the neighborhood. My teachers lived in the neighborhood. My dentist lived in the neighborhood. Lawyers and engineers lived in the neighborhood. The school I attended was integrated, but we Black students were in the advanced classes and we were the cool kids. So I grew up with this really positive view of Black people and Black achievement. To put it frankly, I was a little naive and didn’t know how negatively Black people are perceived by much of the world.

Then, fast-forward: I’m 18 and go away to college, and I have people practically saying to me, “Wow, you can read?!” I became intrigued, even amused, by it—much in the same way you’d be amused by a child telling you that there are monsters living under their bed. Only this ignorance was less innocuous than a child’s, so I felt I

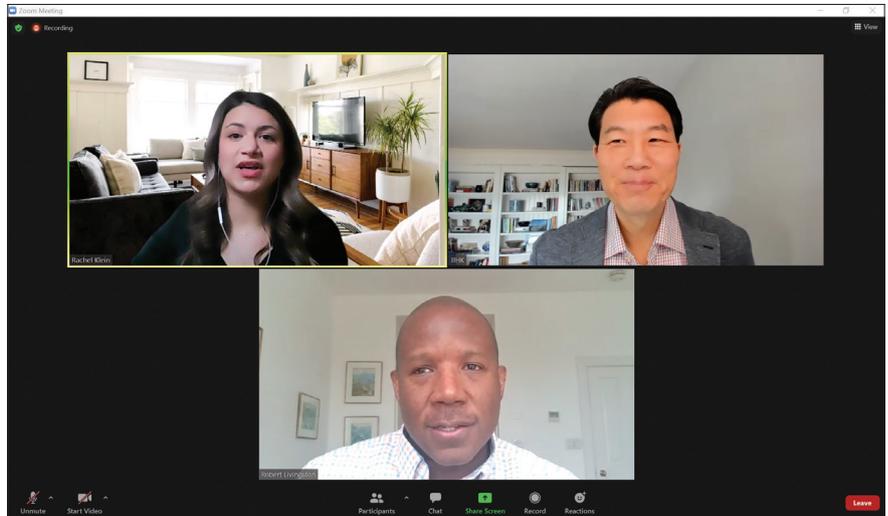
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needed to do something about it. I think the strong foundation that my community, my village, had provided me over 18 years allowed me to go out into the world and approach this issue of race with this really solid armor. Even though arrows were coming at me in all directions, they didn't pierce me because I had this really thick protective coating. And then I thought, "Okay, this is really an issue." And so it started as an intellectual curiosity and became almost a mission to solve this problem of racism. I switched my major from literature to social psychology. For the first eight or nine years of my career, I just studied theoretical, conceptual questions, like "What is racism? Where is it in the brain? What causes it?" Then when I was at my first job at Wisconsin, I got a call from the Kellogg business school, and that set me on the path to being a practitioner as well as an academic.

In your work as a practitioner, you've developed an intervention model for promoting racial equity in the workplace that you call PRESS. Can you tell us a little bit about your approach?

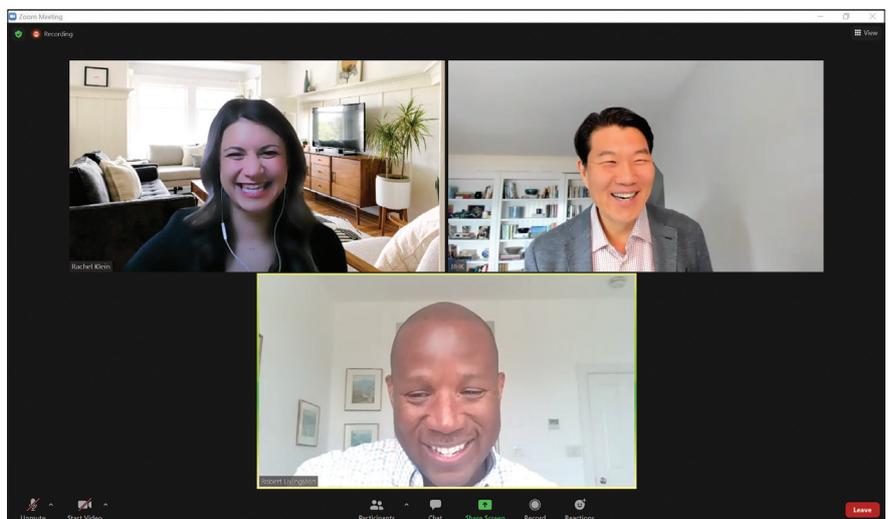
My model PRESS stands for **P**roblem awareness, **R**oot-cause analysis, **E**mpathy, **S**trategy, and **S**acrifice. Everyone wants to jump to strategies, but strategies are, in some respects, the easiest of those five steps and come later in the process. To illustrate how this approach works, let's take a simple example. Let's say I realize there's a problem, which is that I gained three pounds. The root cause is Thanksgiving: I ate too much. And do I care? Well, maybe I don't — it's just three pounds — but maybe I do because it's driving up my cholesterol. Then comes the strategy: do I know what to do to lose those three pounds? Well, yeah, there's no shortage of diets, of gyms, of exercise plans and personal trainers. I can give you a long list of tried and true strategies that will actually work. But it all boils down to this: am I actually *willing* to do it? It also goes back to understanding that empathy is related to sacrifice. Do you care enough to



actually do something about it? And doing something about it means sacrifice. Are you willing to invest the time, effort, energy, and resources — especially when the going gets rough?

So, problem awareness is the first step. But in your book, you share a lot of research showing that many people actually don't think racism exists. You have a powerful metaphor about salmon that you use to explain that racism is systemic. Can you share that with our readers?

Many White people don't think that racism is a real thing, and I give a lot of reasons why that is, but one of the reasons is people construe racism as being evil acts by rotten apples. If we just get rid of that one racist cop, if we just get rid of Derek Chauvin and people like him, then all of a sudden the Minneapolis Police Department is going to be fine. It's easy for people to attribute all of the





blame to a few bad actors, and fail to understand that racism is systemic. The term “systemic racism” gets thrown around a lot and is really abstract, so I use a metaphor about salmon to try to explain it.

You’ve got a mountain stream that flows downhill because of gravity; that stream has a current, and all the fish that live in the stream are affected by the current. If you’re a fish in the stream and you do nothing, and you just sort of tread water, the current will push you downstream. If you swim with the current, you’ll go downstream faster. The point that I make is there’s really no difference between people who are overtly racist and people who are silent and complacent. The destination is the same. You end up where the current takes you. We don’t start off in a neutral world where you do nothing and things stay neutral. You start off in a world that has a current that pushes things in a certain direction.

Anti-racism is about being the salmon that swims against the current and makes it upstream to the pristine headwaters to spawn. It’s a metaphor for producing positive outcomes for the species. But the thing is, it requires a lot of effort, and I know this because I’ve been salmon fishing, and that’s actually what inspired this metaphor. It’s fascinating to watch the salmon’s journey, because it’s really hard, and you see the incredible

amount of effort and power it takes. In fact, only a small percentage of salmon ever make it upstream, and they are super fish—they almost seem to fly!

You either need to join that group of salmon swimming upstream, or you need to build a dam to stop the current altogether. There needs to be a structural solution for a structural problem, and that’s the idea that I’m trying to convey. Racism is not so much about the fish; it’s about the dynamics of the stream. Everything that lives in that environment will be affected by those currents.

So, changing the current is the big challenge. And I know you believe education has a role to play in changing that current.

I talk about five pillars of systemic racism, and one of them is public education. The reason that so many White people are resistant to policies like affirmative action is they don’t know enough about history to even understand the root cause of the disparity, and therefore they think there’s something deficient about Black people. This is what I encountered when I went away to college, and my reaction was, “Wow, these people don’t know anything about the history of Black people, or even White people for that matter!”

How to Promote Racial Equity in the Workplace

Professor Robert Livingston's PRESS Intervention Model

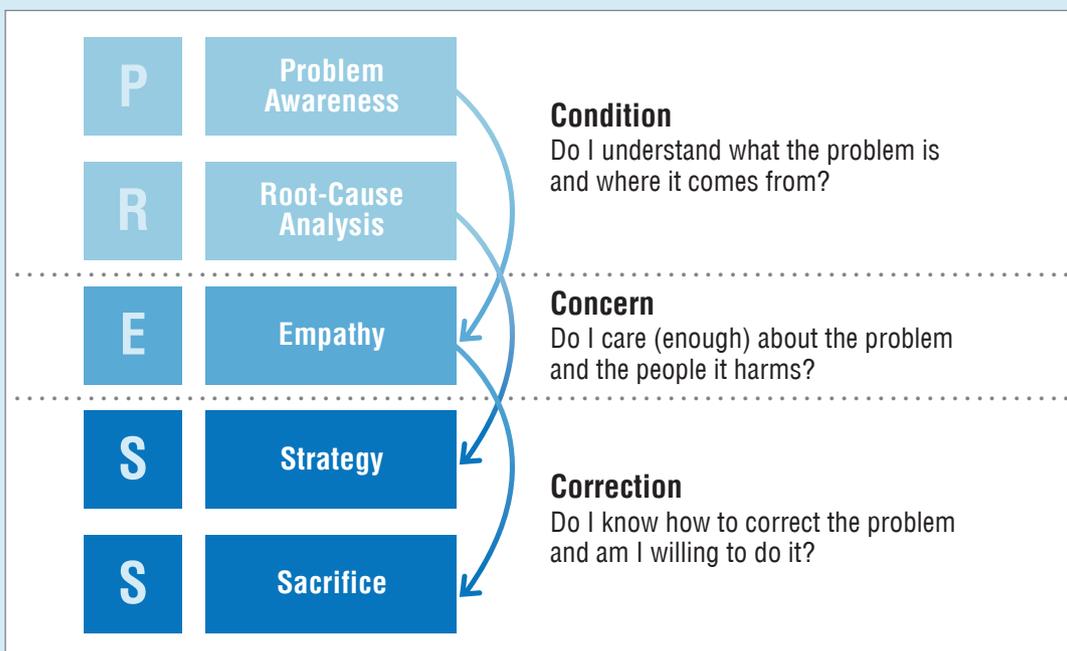
Problem awareness – There are inconsistent beliefs about the existence and persistence of racism. In fact, many White people believe that over the past 50 years, racism against Blacks has decreased while racism against Whites has increased. The first step in the model requires people to recognize the beliefs and biases that underlie racism in society, within organizations, and within themselves.

Root-cause analysis – Racism has many psychological sources but is mainly the result of structural factors. Instead of focusing on remedying the character of individual actors or “bad apples,” this stage of the model requires leaders to investigate their organizational culture to see the biases that exist in the system.

Empathy – After individuals and organizations are aware of the problem and its underlying causes, this next phase aims to build the level of concern about the problem and the people it afflicts such that people are compelled to action. Empathy, Livingston argues, is critical for making progress toward racial equity because it moves people to take measures that actively promote equal justice.

Strategy – A variety of strategies have been proven to be effective in increasing racial equity. The emphasis in this stage is on effective implementation and ensuring that strategies are simultaneously addressing individual attitudes and institutional policies.

Sacrifice – Sustainable change requires that individuals and the organization are willing to invest the time, energy, and resources necessary to implement the elected strategies. The most challenging part of this stage is to build a shared understanding of the types of changes that need to happen. For example, many believe that equality – everyone getting the same thing – is more important than equity – everyone getting what they need.



Source: *The Conversation: How Seeking and Speaking the Truth About Racism Can Radically Transform Individuals and Organizations* by Robert Livingston.

So I think there's a lot educators can do. I'm not just talking about Black History Month. I'm talking about an honest portrayal of U.S. history in a way that points to the facts. Research has shown that when people take ethnic studies classes in college, it reduces unconscious bias. I think there's a huge role that educators can play in moving the needle. It's just about the truth, and figuring out how we feed this truth, this healthy food, to our young people in order to create a more productive and cooperative and sustainable society.

“ I think what superintendents can do with their power is to focus not so much on hearts and minds, but on policies, procedures, practices, and accountability. ”

The metaphor of changing the current makes me think about some of the research I've been doing on the use of the SAT and other standardized scores in determining college admissions. For a long time, there has been evidence that the SAT, ACT, and other standardized tests highly correlate to wealth and race, and yet universities and colleges around the country have continued to use those tests. One silver lining of the pandemic is that these barriers have been removed, at least temporarily. It's going to be very interesting to see if those standardized tests come back, because I think talent defined by standardized scores feels very much like that current you're talking about.

You know, I'm from Kentucky, so I am going to use another animal metaphor. People show up at the Kentucky Derby and they think they know which horse is best and have all kinds of metrics. But it's impossible to pick the “best candidate,” because the best candidate is an outcome, not a trait. The only way you can know which one is the best horse is to fire the pistol, let the horses run, and see which

one crosses the finish line first. Guess what? Most people are wrong about which horse they think is best. That's why it's called gambling, and that's why the race track makes a ton of money — because people with all their logic and metrics, all their reasoning, they end up not picking “the best horse.”

Even if your horse wins, you still can't say that that's the best horse, because there are two other races in the Triple Crown — the Belmont Stakes and the Preakness. More often than not, the horse that wins the Kentucky Derby is not the horse that wins the next race with those same horses running again.

So what I tell organizations is there is no such thing as the best candidate. There are lots of “best candidates,” and you need to nurture their talent and their potential like a jockey, because what determines whether that

horse wins or not is not just the raw talent of the horse. It's also the jockey or “coach,” and it's also the weather, and so many other environmental factors. We see “best candidate” as a static trait, but it's incredibly dynamic.

So a college admissions committee will never know who the best candidate is. You would have to create 10,000 alternate universes, put each student in each one and press Play, like a horse race, and then see what the outcome is. That's the only way you can know, and otherwise it's gambling. You're picking a “favorite,” not a best candidate. So what I say is pick good candidates and invest all your energy into developing them. This is the message for educators.

Teachers serve one of the most important roles in society, which is bringing out the potential of young people, turning potential energy into kinetic energy, and I think things like the SAT shouldn't serve as barriers to recognizing that talent comes in lots of different forms, and outcomes are determined by myriad factors besides one test or even a handful of tests.



So how can we forge change? In your work with organizations, you talk about encountering the “frozen middle.” The CEO or other senior leaders may have a vision to address inequities and racism, but the initiative gets frozen at the middle management level. I’m thinking about our audience of district and school leaders who, like the business leaders you have worked with, want to be leading change but may feel like their effort gets frozen. What can they do?

It’s a bit of an oversimplification, but in the book I talk about three types of people: people who care about promoting opportunity and social justice; people who are apathetic or uninformed and maybe don’t know what to do; and then people who are vehemently opposed to it. I call them dolphins, ostriches, and sharks, metaphorically speaking. Leaders are going to have to figure out which group they are dealing with and apply differing approaches.

I talk about the difference between carrots, sticks, and better angels. For people who know what to do and are all in — the dolphins — you just appeal to their better angels and you give them tools. You basically give them the manual and say, “This is what you do.” They’ll go off and do it because they care about the pod, or the community. And then there are the people who are not intrinsically motivated to do the right thing, so you have to give them either carrots or sticks. Some people don’t agree because they’re a little apathetic, but they’re not really against it. So you give them a carrot and they’ll come along. But there are other people who say, “Over my dead body,” right? For them, you need sticks, and I think what managers often fail to do is use a variety of approaches.

Managers often approach the work with the philosophy, “Everyone’s a good person who cares deeply about social justice and we’ll simply appeal to their better angels. We don’t need to use carrots or sticks.” But there’s a lot of data that shows there are many, many people — good

people — who just don’t care about social justice. They care about their next-door neighbor, and they care about their kids, and they care about their parents, and their spouses, but they just don’t really care about the rest of the world. I think we often fall into the trap of believing that everyone cares about this stuff, but the data shows slightly less than 50% of people are dolphins who champion social justice. Everybody else is either an ostrich or a shark — they don’t care at all, or they are actively committed to dominance, hierarchy, and exploitation.

In short, it starts with getting rid of the assumption that everyone is intrinsically invested in the equity work that the organization is trying to accomplish. Leaders who are truly committed to this work will take a stand and say, “This is who we are. This is what we’re doing. We understand if you’re different. We’re not judging you, but if you’re not with us, then maybe this isn’t the right organization for you.” And there will be people who will leave the organization, and find something that better suits their values or goals, and everyone’s happy.

As people in school districts think about applying some of your ideas and approaches, is there a difference between how a White leader and a leader of color should approach the work?

That’s a great question. So I’m going to give you a few examples. There’s a lot of research on mentorship and sponsorship, and one of the things that really helps people along is whether there’s someone who’s willing to go to bat for them. Many people of color that I encounter think that their mentor or sponsor has to look like them, but in fact the research shows that your mentor or sponsor does *not* have to look like you. So if you’re a White person and you see a person of color with potential, reach out. In fact, some research shows that sponsorship from a person who’s not from your group is seen as more credible because there’s no group interest involved.

There’s also research on confronting racism. If you see something, a transgression, occur, do you speak up?



Research shows that when Black or Latinx people speak up, it has the intended effect, but there's a cost to the individual — they're often seen as being a complainer or a troublemaker. I'm not saying that Black people or Latinx individuals shouldn't speak up. I'm just saying — and they already know this — that there's a cost to speaking up, and you have to calculate the trade-off between the cost and the benefit. But White people are able to be anti-racist with more latitude and more impunity. So what that means is there's a really viable role for White allies. So I think that puts an even greater responsibility on White people to do this work.

Having said that, I think White people need to approach the work with a certain amount of humility because you get too many White people who come in and want to take over the show. They think that they now know everything; they have a few badges — “You know, I voted for Obama, so I can pretty much say or do whatever I want to because I've proven that I'm not racist.” By the way, that is a study; I didn't just make that up. It showed that people who voted for Obama feel like they have “moral credentials,” and that ironically frees them up to be more racist toward Black people. In a nutshell, we know that there are different reactions to people who are advocates for this work: people of color bear the brunt of a lot of backlash, and White people are able to do this work more safely.

In the remaining time, one final question for you, Robert: do you have any advice for our superintendents?

I think what superintendents can do with their power is to focus not so much on hearts and minds, but on policies, procedures, practices, and accountability — to really be the architects and the engineers designing the blueprints of the system. And we know that that has the biggest impact on outcomes.

I'll give you just one concrete example that I talk about in the book. Massport, the Massachusetts Port Authority, is a public agency that owns billions of dollars' worth of land, and they give development contracts to large-scale real estate developers to build hotels and convention centers, skyscrapers, etc. And what they found was that everyone reaping the benefits of these contracts was White and male, and — in Boston — Irish; there was little diversity in this developer profile. They said, “How can we change this?” What they did was change the criteria for selection. Granting of development contracts used to be based on finances, infrastructure, and the

aesthetic design of the project. They then added a fourth criterion, which was diversity, and gave each an equal weight of 25%. Developers knew that they would be rated 25% on diversity, and it forced them to search their Rolodex. One of the developers that I interviewed basically said, “You know, Robert, we're not racist; we're just busy! We're trying to get from Point A to Point B in the quickest time possible, finish this project, move on to the next, and so I use the same engineers, architects, and carpenters that I've used for the last 40 years” — who, guess what, are White, male, and Irish.

So this policy forced them to do their research and find women-owned architectural firms, structural engineering firms owned by people of color, etc. They went out and did that, and they formed all of these relationships — because it comes back to relationships and connections — with these talented people who did exceptional work, but they never would have reached out to find these people if not for the change in policy.

So what I say to superintendents is somehow you need to change the policy, and people can determine what that means, whether it's hiring, whether it's the curriculum ... or whether it's providing emotional support counselors for students — because you can't learn if you've got problems at home. I think it will vary depending on the district, and that's up to the superintendents to figure out. But the take-home point is that there needs to be structural or policy change.

The mission statement isn't enough; the change has to be built into the system.

That's right. You need to bake it into policies, because if you just put it in a mission statement, it's not gonna do diddly. Massport had a mission statement for a long time, and the developer I spoke with wasn't against women architects or Latinx engineers or Black electricians — he just was busy. But when Massport said now 25% of your score is based on this, then he went out and did it, and now he's made a lot of friends and colleagues and contacts, and he's become the biggest champion for diversity, equity, and inclusion. But it never would have happened if the policy hadn't been changed.

This has been a terrific conversation, Robert. We're very grateful for your time and look forward to continuing our conversations with you. ♦