



HEALTHY,
SUSTAINABLE
COMMUNITIES

Leadership Brief: Anti-Racist Executive Leadership for Public Libraries

ABOUT THIS LEADERSHIP BRIEF

This Leadership Brief focuses on the power of self-aware and committed public library executives in ensuring racial justice. It calls on all library executives to own the challenge and impact of enduring racism, acknowledge their own biases and use their leadership to dismantle structural racism, starting in their own library systems.

OVERVIEW: The police murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and other African Americans in 2020 ignited a new wave of public demand for race equity and social justice. At the same time, COVID-19's disproportionate impact on Black, Indigenous and people of color has further amplified and exposed racism's deep roots and sustained harm across our society.

For library leaders, these events were painful reminders of how deeply racism is embedded not only in our communities but also within our libraries. As part of effectively advancing systemic change and dismantling structural racism in our communities, there is an urgent need for libraries to do the hard, foundational work of facing and actively addressing the racism internal to our institutions and our profession.

There is no shortcut or easy solution for this work. It requires leaders at the highest levels of the organization who are openly and passionately dedicated to driving their libraries forward on their anti-racist journeys.

As communities everywhere recover from and move beyond the pandemic, racism will not be left behind. It is up to today's library executives to lead the charge for the institutional reckoning and racial healing that is long overdue in today's public libraries.



URBAN
LIBRARIES
COUNCIL



"In order to make any progress as library leaders, we need to look at our own history with humility and have the courage to recognize that we can be part of the solution."

— Sonia Alcántara-Antoine, Director, Baltimore County Public Library

NOT ALWAYS WELCOMING PLACES

Despite their enduring reputation as open and inclusive institutions, North America's public libraries have not always been welcoming places. From the late 1800s through the mid-1960s in the U.S., most public libraries in the Jim Crow South weren't open to Black people. Many libraries in other parts of the country either excluded Black Americans or severely limited their access to buildings, books and services. Some libraries created separate collections that were placed on "colored" tables or marked with a prominent label to ensure that Black and white hands didn't touch the same books.

Across this same time period, institutionalized racism largely excluded Canadian Indigenous peoples, particularly children, from using public libraries because of where they lived and Canada's residential school system, which removed children from their families — usually far away from any public libraries.

White library professionals widely supported segregation as well as the exclusion of Black people from the library workforce and leadership. Even after U.S. library systems desegregated in the 1960s, many Black individuals didn't, and sometimes still don't, feel welcome as patrons or employees because of long-standing practices and attitudes. Nearly a century of shutting Black people out of all aspects of public libraries — including job and professional development opportunities — has contributed to a profession that remains largely white today with little movement toward greater diversity during the past decades.

"Racism is embedded in our libraries," said **Austin Public Library** Director Roosevelt Weeks. "It is part of the DNA of libraries as reflected in our history. That's just the way it is." From Black teenagers being asked to leave the library or having their privileges suspended more frequently than white teens, to policies that create barriers for non-white customers and employees, to uneven investment across library systems, racism lives on inside today's public libraries. Policies that create barriers are easier to change than attitudes, but neither can be tolerated if the library is truly committed to being an anti-racist institution and change agent.

It starts with leadership.

THE LEADERSHIP IMPERATIVE

Confronting systemic racism honestly, intentionally and meaningfully will require library executives to dig deep. To embrace the leadership imperative of anti-racism, library executives must:

- ▶ Acknowledge racism's deep roots and enduring harm and the public library's segregated history.
- ▶ Identify and address personal biases, blind spots and attitudes and sustain that personal work even when it is exhausting, stressful and lonely.
- ▶ Commit to anti-racist leadership by being vigilant and vocal about the impact of systemic racism, admitting to personal limitations, identifying and acting on discriminatory actions, practices and policies and modeling anti-racist behavior.
- ▶ Communicate directly and regularly with staff about personal commitments, organizational challenges and planned actions to implement those commitments.

KEY MESSAGES: RACE, RACISM AND LIBRARIES

- ▶ Anti-racist library work must start from within by ensuring that library executives and their organizations commit to anti-racism.
- ▶ Library executives must be in touch with their own inherent biases and personal experiences in order to be effective anti-racist leaders in their organizations and communities.
- ▶ To live up to their mission, public libraries must recognize why systemic racism persists and work intentionally to eliminate discriminatory policies and practices.
- ▶ It isn't enough to not be racist. Leaders must be actively and intentionally anti-racist by confronting racism wherever they find it, including in themselves.
- ▶ Confronting systemic racism isn't about ticking off items in a checklist. It is a lifelong journey for leaders that requires unwavering commitment and an acceptance that progress can be uncomfortable, and even painful.

- ▶ Encourage, listen to and act on feedback from staff and colleagues, particularly those who identify as Black, Indigenous or people of color.
- ▶ Be accountable by engaging the library board and other key leaders in understanding the library executive's commitment to anti-racism and regularly measuring and reporting on the library's progress in eliminating inequities.

LIBRARY EXECUTIVES LEADING ANTI-RACISM

The following examples highlight ways library executives are starting to create a library history of equity rather than perpetuate a history of racism.

Charlotte Mecklenburg Library has a comprehensive commitment to anti-racism including a full-time staff equity and inclusion leader who serves as an in-house champion, a liaison to the county's equity work and a key resource to the library CEO. "There has never been a more important discussion nor more important work than to ensure that equity pervades every corner of the library," said CEO Lee Keesler.

Saint Paul Public Library allocated financial resources to support staff-initiated and facilitator-led racial healing circles to help the organization deal with the trauma of George Floyd's murder. Participation was voluntary and actively included the executive leadership team. "We are building our skills to talk about things when they're messy and painful," said Director Catherine Penkert.

A public protest following George Floyd's death amplified the internal work of **Cedar Rapids Public Library** on race and racism. "If there is something positive coming out of these difficult times, it is that in this heavily white community people are recognizing that racism is real, and it is here," said Director Dara Schmidt.

While **Milwaukee Public Library** has consistently used an equity lens to assess policies, programs and services, Director Joan Johnson is working to deepen the library's commitment to anti-racism by creating an action plan with clear metrics for sustainability.

"We're pulling various strands together to form one strong rope," said Johnson. "Our goal is to be more intentional with living our commitment every day rather than just carrying out projects."

San Francisco Public Library City Librarian Michael Lambert relies on an 18-member Racial Equity Committee to guide the library's commitment to anti-racism. The group, which is made up of diverse staff representing all levels, recently completed work on a comprehensive racial equity plan. Lambert said the plan will help the library focus inward on how it has fallen short in advancing racial equity and specific actions that will steer the path forward.

Calgary Public Library Director Mark Asberg and **Edmonton Public Library** Director Pilar Martinez have drawn on experience confronting discrimination against Indigenous people as a foundation for addressing anti-Black attitudes and practices. "The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was a paradigm shift in Canada, a call to action and an impetus for change," said Martinez. Both directors have provided training opportunities for staff to increase awareness of inherent bias and discriminatory practices. "We are working to ensure that every staff person makes a commitment to being against racism and to call it out when we see it," said Asberg.

For **Louisville Free Public Library** Director Lee Burchfield, Mayor Greg Fisher's commitment to creating a city of racial justice has strengthened and guided the library's work. As a department of the Metro Government, the library is a partner in *Lean Into Louisville* which focuses on the impact of racism in the community and sets objectives for all government departments.

LIBRARY EXECUTIVE ACTION STRATEGIES

The following strategies offer a framework for library executives to embrace the leadership imperative.

Start by focusing inward.

The road to dismantling systemic racism within the library system begins by using an anti-racist lens



"As leaders, we must find ways to be more touchable to our staff in order create a safe environment where we can address racist issues and tendencies together."

— **Brigitte Blanton, Director, Greensboro Public Library**

to examine every aspect of the library's internal operations — every decision about hiring, every interaction with employees and patrons, every discussion about policies, procedures and budgets.

Do the personal work required to lead with intention, persistence and honesty.

Personal work includes examining life experiences and attitudes that influence and shape how the library executive understands racism and what it takes to be an anti-racist leader. Library executives need to learn about and acknowledge inherent biases, engage in uncomfortable conversations, admit to limitations and missteps, listen to other people's stories and be accessible to their staff around tough issues. While the personal journey will be different for everyone, self-examination is the path to understanding, personal growth and change.

Call it what it is — race and racism.

If library executives fail to use the right words to describe issues of race and racism, they may fail to do the right work. "Until we can say race and racism without stumbling over the words, we can't make progress," said **Houston Public Library** Director Dr. Rhea Lawson. The common use of the acronym EDI to describe library activities addressing equity, diversity and inclusion glosses over and deflects away from the real issues of race and racism.

Prioritize becoming an anti-racist library.

A clear plan, defined outcomes and dedicated staff establish that the library executive's personal commitment to confronting racism is also an organizational commitment. While the details and scope of anti-racist plans may vary, essential components include a written statement defining the commitment, measurable goals, a budget to support the plan including both dedicated funds and in-kind support, regular discussions about and reports on the work and an annual review of progress.

Engage and empower staff as essential partners.

When staff understand and believe the executive's commitment to anti-racism, they are more likely to be active contributors. A staff team responsible for leading anti-racist efforts and an equity manager who serves as a champion, advisor and resource contribute to an empowered staff. Training on

inherent bias, presentations by trusted voices and opportunities for both informal and structured conversations about race, racism and personal life experiences will help staff find their place in the process. Library executives must recognize that staff will react to and embrace the work in different ways and at different paces — and that this work is as difficult and uncomfortable for staff as it is for the executives. Patience and support are essential.

Invest in diversifying the library profession.

"When you don't see people that look like you working in the library, you don't feel like your needs will be met so you feel less welcome," said **Hennepin County Library** Director Chad Helton. Approaches for carrying out this commitment include using an equity lens to ensure that hiring and promotion practices are anti-racist, introducing the library profession at career days and places where young Black, Indigenous and people of color gather and nurturing non-white leadership potential in the organization.

Stay the course.

Structural racism and systemic inequity weren't created overnight and can't be fixed quickly. Making progress will require transformational change and sustained attention. For library executives, the path to meaningful progress requires authenticity, honesty, humility, courage and, perhaps most importantly, stamina.

The **Urban Libraries Council** is an innovation and action tank of North America's leading public library systems. We drive cutting-edge research and strategic partnerships to elevate the power of libraries as essential, transformative institutions for the 21st-century. We identify significant challenges facing today's communities and develop new tools and techniques to help libraries achieve stronger outcomes in education, workforce and economic development, digital equity and race and social equity.

This Leadership Brief is a product of ULC's Anti-Racism action team, as an extension of ULC's **Going Forward from the Pandemic Initiative**. Learn more at urbanlibraries.org/initiatives/going-forward-from-the-pandemic.

ULC thanks **Gale, a Cengage company**, for their sponsor support of this Leadership Brief. Learn more at gale.com/equity.

