



**TOGETHER FORWARD**  
@Work

# THE JOURNEY TO EQUITY AND INCLUSION

Summer 2020





# **RACIAL INEQUITY PERSISTS IN AMERICA**





## FOREWORD

On May 26, 2020, the world watched in horror as a video began to circulate of a police officer kneeling the previous day on the neck of George Floyd, a Black man, until Floyd stopped breathing. The public response was swift and emotional. And our society hasn't been the same since those images came to light.

What followed was shock, anger, protest and difficult conversations. A universal soul-searching began as it became clear to even the most optimistic among us that racial inequity persists.

As with every social issue, concerns about racial bias naturally have spilled over into the workplace. Rather than assume what employees and business leaders are thinking, however, SHRM set out to measure these perceptions.

What we found was disturbing, but also enlightening. Nearly one-quarter of HR professionals, who are generally more attuned to bias at work than others, affirmed that racial discrimination is evident at their place of work. For Black HR professionals, that number rises to almost half.

But information is power. Equipped with these and other data, workplace leaders can set about creating monumental change in their organizations. When they understand the extent of racial bias their employees see or experience, they can develop a road map for driving inequity and social injustice out of the workplace.

It's not easy. But it is imperative. And it must begin with easing into uncomfortable but candid conversations in our workplaces.

Black and white workers generally agree: It

is not easy to discuss race at work. More than one-third of both groups say they don't feel comfortable engaging in these conversations. But by thoughtfully cultivating these discussions and implementing what is learned, HR and other business leaders can guide our workplaces into a new era of honesty, respect, understanding and inclusion.

That is the mission of SHRM's new initiative, Together Forward @Work, a call to action for HR and the business community to drive out racial inequity from the workplace. It will include more original research; guidance from our Blue Ribbon Commission of experts; measurable goals and responsibilities; and evolving content for growth, learning and collaboration. This is an open platform—anyone can access the data and tools—so all it requires is a commitment to learn.

Together Forward @Work is betting on the ingenuity of business leaders and the determination of the American workforce to show that better, more-inclusive workplaces not only equal better business results, but also a better world.

**JOHNNY C. TAYLOR, JR., SHRM-SCP**

President & CEO

SHRM, The Society for Human Resource Management

## KEY FINDINGS

Despite years of financial and strategic investments in diversity, equity and inclusion, U.S. companies have notable numbers of workers who express concerns and discomfort about fundamental issues of racial equality in the workplace. This manifests in the workers' perceptions of discrimination and incivility, as well as the inability to have conversations on the topic of race. Further, the data show significant gaps in beliefs between Black and white U.S. workers, including—and perhaps even more concerning—those in the HR function.



# 49%

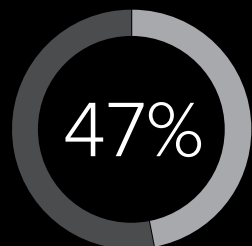
OF BLACK  
HR PROFESSIONALS

feel that discrimination based on race or  
ethnicity exists in their workplace.

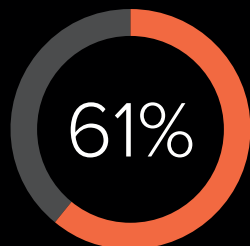
ONLY 13% OF WHITE  
HR PROFESSIONALS  
and 21% of all HR professionals agree.



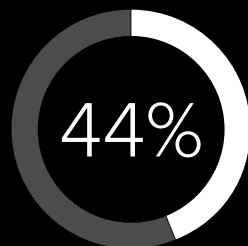
Incivility (e.g., rude comments or slights) exists in my workplace.



**ALL**  
HR PROFESSIONALS



**BLACK**  
HR PROFESSIONALS



**WHITE**  
HR PROFESSIONALS

My organization is not doing enough to provide opportunities for Black employees.



**ALL**  
HR PROFESSIONALS



**BLACK**  
HR PROFESSIONALS



**WHITE**  
HR PROFESSIONALS

**37%**  
**OF BLACK + WHITE WORKERS**

feel uncomfortable engaging in candid conversations about race at work.  
38% of all U.S. workers agree.



SAY THEIR WORKPLACE DISCOURAGES DISCUSSION OF RACIAL JUSTICE ISSUES.

# THE PERSISTENCE OF RACIAL INEQUITY

At a critical moment in our nation’s history, one thing is clear: Racial discrimination continues to pervade every segment of society in the U.S. This includes the workplace, where race-based discrimination remains all too common. While U.S. workplaces have undoubtedly made progress on diversity, equity and inclusion in recent years, sizable numbers of workers believe that racial discrimination persists.

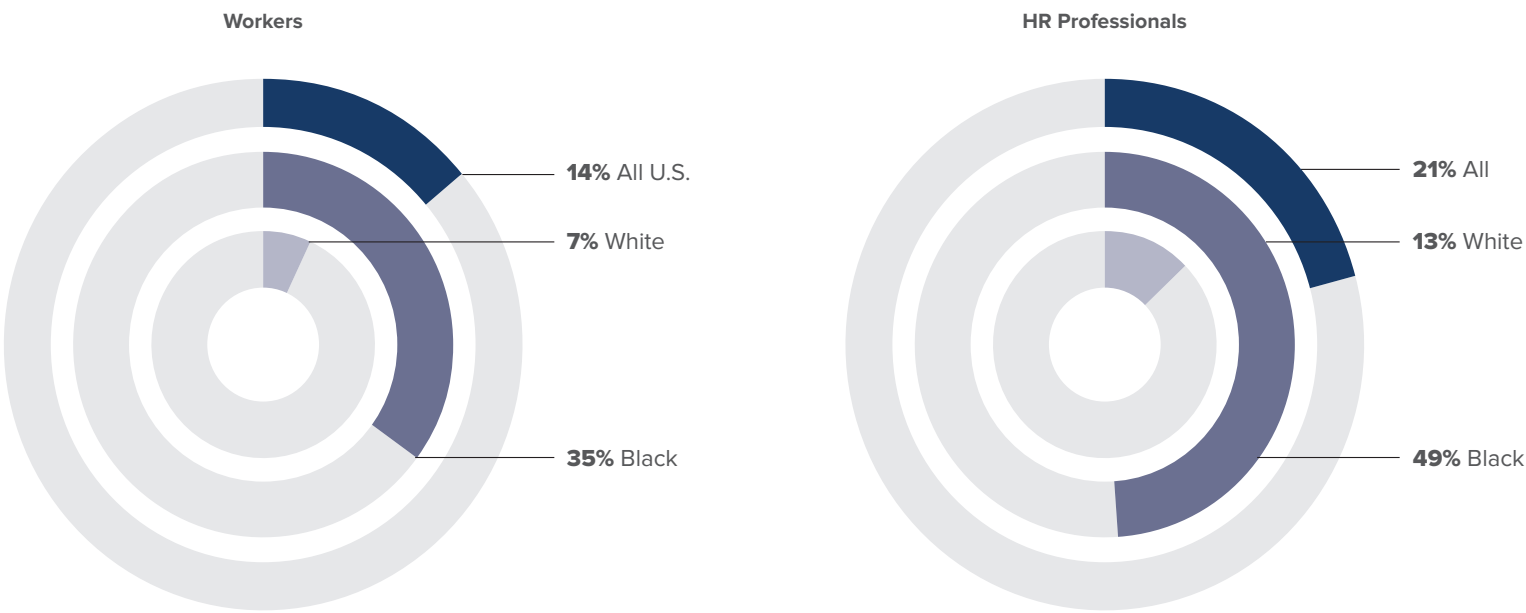
When asked if discrimination based on race or ethnicity exists in their workplace, only 14 percent of U.S. workers said it does. However, Black workers are more likely to agree, with over one-third (35 percent) claiming that racial or ethnic discrimination is part of their workplace. While most work-

ers do not report seeing this type of discrimination at work, a substantial minority of workers perceive discrimination within their organization.

HR professionals have a unique vantage point from which to observe workplace culture, and they are generally very aware of biases within

their organizations. Therefore, it is meaningful when more than 1 in 5 HR professionals (21 percent) say racial discrimination exists in their places of work. This statistic is striking by itself; however, more important for organizations and HR to recognize, understand and address is the gap

**Figure 1: Black and White Perspectives on Racial Inequity at Work**  
Percentage Reporting Racial Inequity in Their Workplace







between white and Black respondents. Black HR professionals report racial discrimination in the workplace at significantly higher rates. Almost half (49 percent) report that racial or ethnic discrimination exists in their workplace, whereas just 13 percent of white HR professionals agree.

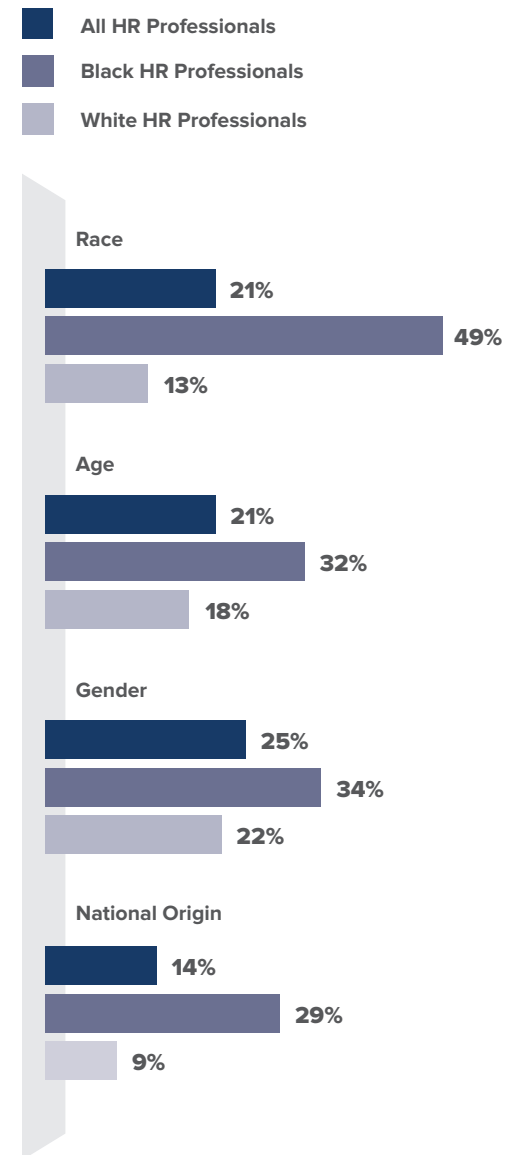
This disconnect between Black and white respondents is equally striking in the overall worker population. Whereas 35 percent of Black workers say racial or ethnic discrimination—for example, discrimination in hiring or promotion—is part of their workplace, only 7 percent of white workers say the same. In this sense, how the workplace is perceived depends, at least in part, on race.

While racial discrimination requires urgent action, it is not the only form of discrimination in workplaces. Workers have multiple identities (e.g., being a Black woman), raising the potential for multiple forms of biases. How HR professionals view different forms of discrimination varies greatly by their race.

One example is ageism. More than 20 percent of all HR professionals report the existence of age discrimination in their workplace. A significantly greater number of Black HR professionals (32 percent) say the same, compared with 18 percent of white HR professionals who agree.

Gender and harassment issues provide further examples. Nineteen percent of HR professionals said sexual harassment exists in their workplace. But a breakdown by race shows that number includes 26 percent of Black HR professionals and only 18 percent of white HR professionals. Similarly, 25 percent of HR professionals report the existence of gender-based discrimination in their workplace. This includes more than one-third of Black HR professionals (34 percent) and nearly one-quarter of white HR professionals (22 percent).

**Figure 2: HR Perspective on Discrimination at Work**  
Percentage Reporting Various Forms of Discrimination



# THE WORKER PERSPECTIVE

Racial discrepancy is also evident in workers' broader feelings about their workplace culture. One-third of Black workers feel disrespected and unvalued in the workplace, compared with just 18 percent of white workers.

A full 30 percent of white workers report that their workplace actively discourages the discussion of racial justice issues at work, while nearly half of Black workers (45 percent) say the same. Indeed, over half of Black workers say their workplace is not doing enough to promote racial justice in the world, compared with only 29 percent of white workers who agree.

However, Black and white workers are fully aligned on one aspect of bias at work: the general feeling of discomfort when discussing race-related issues. More than one-third (38 percent) of U.S. workers say they don't feel comfortable engaging in candid conversations about race at work. The same percentage of white and Black workers (37 percent) claim they don't feel comfortable participating in those conversations.

This shows that, while race can affect the perception of race relations in the workplace, white and Black workers generally agree that it is not easy to discuss race at work. Perceptions of the problem differ between groups, but the discomfort associated with exploring it does not.

Other studies allude to similar discomfort in conversations about race. According to Pew Research Center, 60 percent of white Americans and 50 percent of Black Americans who have had conversations about race with family and friends say those conversations always or mostly occur with people of the same race as themselves.<sup>1</sup>

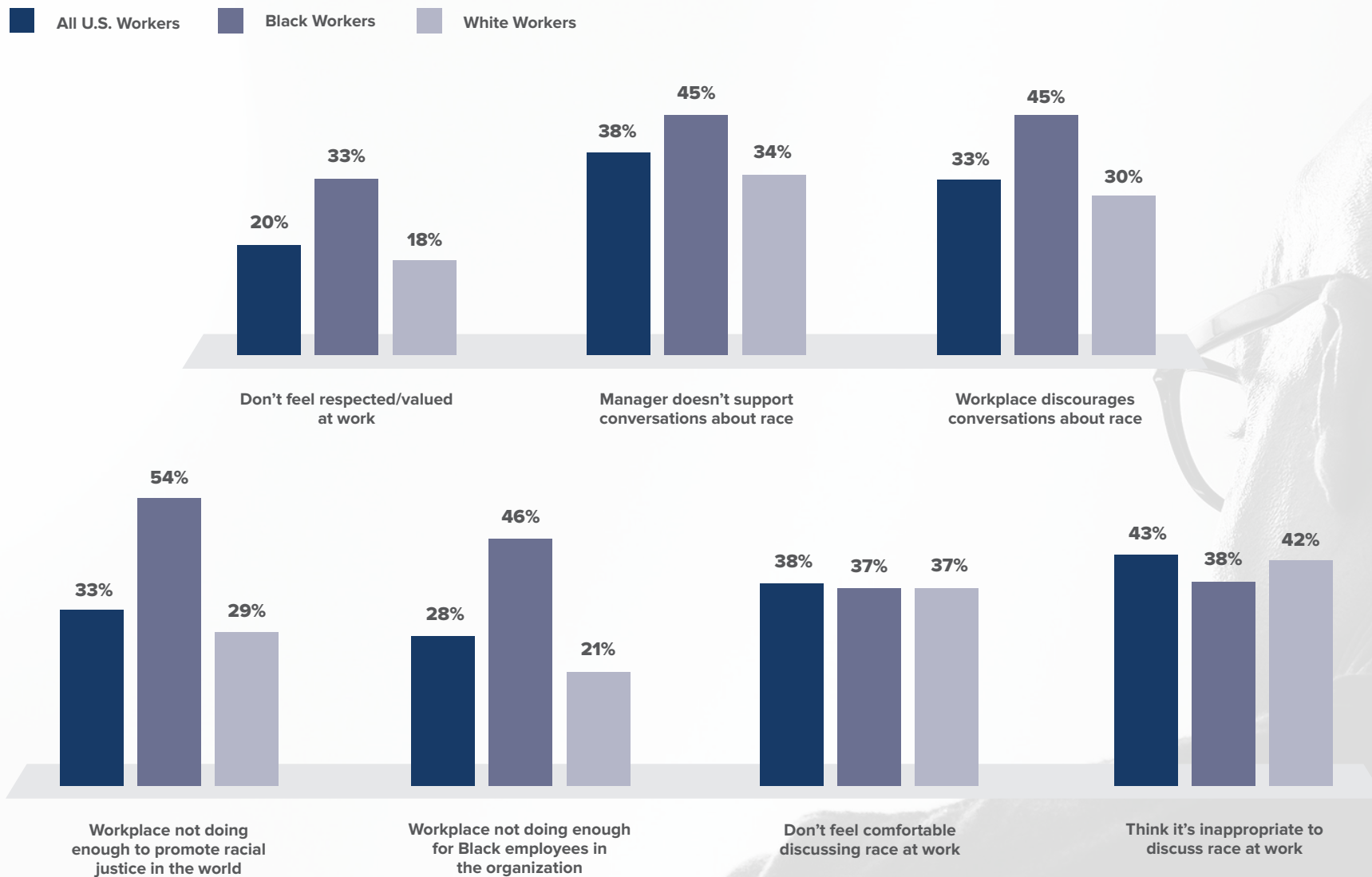
U.S. companies and their workers need to address the foundational race conversation gap to accelerate positive change. Reflecting on the right workplace dialogue and facilitating those conversations is clearly a challenge for everyone.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/06/25/how-often-people-talk-about-race-with-family-and-friends/>





Figure 3: The Worker Perspective on Race in the Workplace







# HR HAS A WORKPLACE CULTURE TABOO TO TACKLE: TALKING ABOUT RACE AT WORK

## THE HR PERSPECTIVE

As is the case among the rest of the workforce, the perceptions of HR professionals are subject to racial difference. Thirty-two percent of HR professionals do not feel safe voicing their opinions about racial justice issues in the workplace—another striking finding on its own. But, broken out by race, we find yet another disconnect that needs to be bridged by conversation, as nearly half (47 percent) of Black HR professionals report feeling unsafe sharing their perspective. While 28 percent of white HR professionals agree, this near 20 percent discrepancy cannot—and should not—be ignored.

In fact, it should be discussed. However, the difficulty uncovered by SHRM research is that many HR professionals, both Black and white, are uncomfortable with these conversations. One-third of white HR professionals say they don't feel comfortable engaging in candid conversations about race at work, while 46 percent of Black HR professionals agree.

Before that discomfort can be addressed, though, HR has a workplace-culture taboo to tackle: talking about race at work. Forty-three percent of U.S. workers believe these conver-

sations are inappropriate at work. In contrast, 70 percent of HR professionals say such discussions are appropriate at work.

Perhaps the greatest discrepancy between white and Black HR professionals comes down to the perception of organizational action on diversity, equity and inclusion. In total, 41 percent of HR professionals say their workplace is not doing enough to provide opportunities for Black workers, compared with 59 percent who believe their organization is doing enough—including nearly two-thirds of white HR professionals (65 percent).

However, fewer than one-third of their Black counterparts (32 percent) agree that their organization's action on diversity, equity and inclusion is satisfactory. In contrast, most Black HR professionals (68 percent) believe that organizations can do more to hire Black individuals and train them for success.

With more than 40 percent of HR professionals agreeing that there are not enough opportunities for Black workers, there is clearly widespread disillusionment with organizational action on diversity, equity and inclusion that transcends racial lines.

# ORGANIZATIONS APPROACH ACTION

Many organizations are reconsidering their approach to racial justice, fostering intra-organizational communication and taking steps to address a major societal issue at a critical moment. Taking action, however, remains an uphill battle for those that don't know how or remain unwilling to address racial injustice. It begins with the struggle to start productive discussions that can catalyze positive change.

## COMMUNICATION HURDLES

Most organizations are running into the same problem: lack of communication. More than two-thirds of organizations (67 percent) have not gathered their workforce's thoughts on racial injustice and similar matters. Only 13 percent of organizations have checked the pulse of their workforce on these critical issues.

This lack of communication suggests a broader breakdown in information-gathering, the precursor for organizational action. Only 19 percent of organizations have hosted town hall-type meetings where they can ask workers to discuss their feelings and concerns on race-related issues. Even fewer organizations (15 percent) have had supervisors—including HR professionals, who are likely to be best equipped to manage workplace discussions about race and ethnicity—explore these topics with their teams. Only 1 in 10 organizations have had their HR managers step in to discuss race-related issues and gather thoughts from workers.

While organizations may be activating or planning to activate strategies to address racial bias in their workplaces, it is clear that open and transparent communication remains a sig-

nificant challenge. Business leaders, guided by trained HR professionals, can engender trust and credibility with all employees by assuring they understand the unique nuances of their workforce and leading with authentic and honest conversations.

### ACTION ITEMS: COMMUNICATE, EDUCATE, INVEST

Even if organizational responses have not been immediate, they are increasingly imminent. As of July 2020, many organizations have indicated that they plan to act in the near future. The range of actions organizations report taking can be organized into three categories: communication, education and financial investment.

## COMMUNICATION

One-third of organizations have hosted or will host a meeting with workers, such as a town hall, to communicate the organization's stance and planned actions regarding racial injustice.

More than 80 percent of organizations have released or will release a statement about racial injustice and protests to employees or other internal parties. Companywide e-mail is a popular form of intra-organizational communication.<sup>2</sup>

But organizations are also thinking beyond internal audiences. For many organizations that are taking steps to address racial inequality, public voice has become a top priority. Over half of all organizations (51 percent) have made or plan to make a public statement of support for the Black community, with more than one-quarter (27 percent) coming out in support of those who engaged in public protests. Moreover, 51 percent of organizations have released or will release a statement about racial issues to customers or other external stakeholders. External communication regarding racial issues is seemingly becoming more commonplace for many organizations.

## EDUCATION

Training is an equally important strategy to which organizations are committing. Many organizations have made it their mission to educate workers about the issues facing the Black community and how they can help. More than half of organizations (52 percent) have provided or plan to provide new training on implicit and unconscious bias, racial inclusion, and other diversity-related topics. Meanwhile, nearly half have added or plan to add training on those topics to their existing educational offerings.

As with communication, training of this signif-

<sup>2</sup> <https://bgr.com/2020/06/01/george-floyd-killed-tim-cook-response-email/>



icance must be representative of an organization's unique workforce culture and needs. Informed by HR professionals, organizations also need to make sure training is connected to communications. Modalities of training can address issues of comfort in discussing topics and directly impact perceptions of safe environments for candid conversations. HR professionals are well-equipped to advise on the best solutions.

One-quarter of organizations are putting together new policies and systems to reduce systemic and structural bias, while another 30 percent have modified, expanded, or plan to modify or expand existing policies and systems to achieve the same goal.

Some organizations have even taken steps to express empathy and solidarity by supporting workers' right to protest. In the midst of a difficult and uncertain business environment created by a continuing global pandemic, it is notable that 1 in 5 organizations have allowed or plan to allow workers to miss work or take time off to participate in protests against racial injustice.

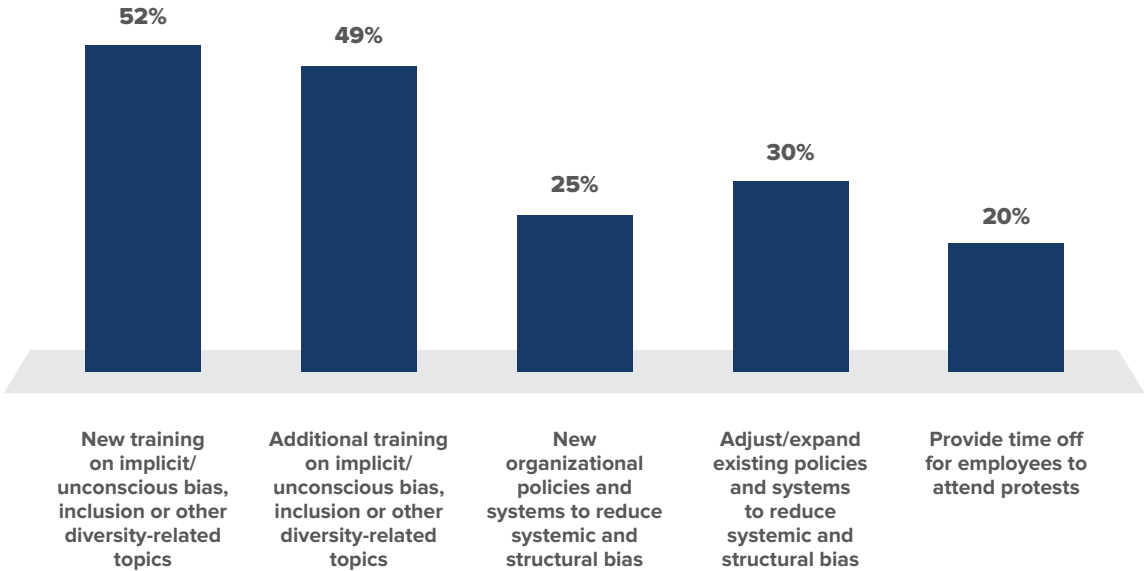
INVESTMENT

Communication and education are vital, and channeling economic resources can show an even deeper commitment. Organizations need to structure diversity programs effectively, and invest in the best talent to support them. Some organizations are putting their money where their mouth is, donating to nonprofit advocacy groups dedicated to diversity, equity and inclusion. Nearly 15 percent of organizations have added or plan to add to existing funding for initiatives supporting the Black community and racial justice. Slightly more (16 percent) have allocated or plan to allocate funding for new initiatives supporting those causes.

In challenging economic times, not all organizations have the option to increase discretionary funding. Some organizations are addressing this by diverting resources from local community initiatives to more pointedly address racial issues: 17 percent have changed or plan to change the direction of local initiatives to focus on the Black community and racial justice more specifically.

While still a minority of companies, the many organizations shifting their economic support are notable for acting with agility in what is typically a fiscal year midpoint. Similarly, while financial support does not always translate to real change, it is clear that race-related issues are climbing up the priority list for organizational leaders.

Figure 4: Actions Embraced by Employers  
Percentage of Organizations Changing or Planning to Change Training, Policies or Systems



# HOW TO TALK ABOUT RACE AT WORK

As protests make inroads, now is the time for organizations to turn their rhetoric into concrete, significant action. According to SHRM's survey data, racial inequality and inequity remains a major problem in American society, including the workplace. The onus is now on organizations to be part of the solution, which will go a long way in alleviating workers' concerns about inaction—especially Black workers who feel discrimination on a more personal level.

As we strive to make progress, communication is foundational. Leaders need to agree and lead on the right conversations about race in the workplace—and the right ways to engage in those conversations. Increasing empathy, psychological safety and the time taken to address this will create more allies and bridge current race-based disconnects. HR professionals are experts on many of the tools and techniques for tackling racial inequity in the workplace, but HR needs all co-workers to increase their competency levels for proper change. Some proven techniques for effectiveness from HR experts include<sup>3</sup>:

## ➤ LISTEN, AND DON'T CONFLATE, COMPARE OR CONTRAST.

When an individual aggrieved by overt or aversive racism describes his or her experiences, listeners have a natural tendency to be defensive or to find parallels with their own experiences. This is conflation, the most common mistake made by those guilty of inadvertent racism. We must listen to others with an open mind, hearing their story without injecting ourselves into it. All workers, leaders and HR professionals must make listening a top priority.

## ➤ DISCUSS, DON'T DEBATE.

When driving open and honest dialogue, emphasize that the purpose of getting together is to discuss, not to debate or disagree. Setting up discussion rules is important so conversations don't take a turn for the worse. Discussing matters too deeply can result in feelings of indignation and invalidation, which is not acceptable. The best course is listening to people's varying perspectives and finding ways to shape future actions.

## ➤ SET GOALS AND HONOR FEEDBACK.

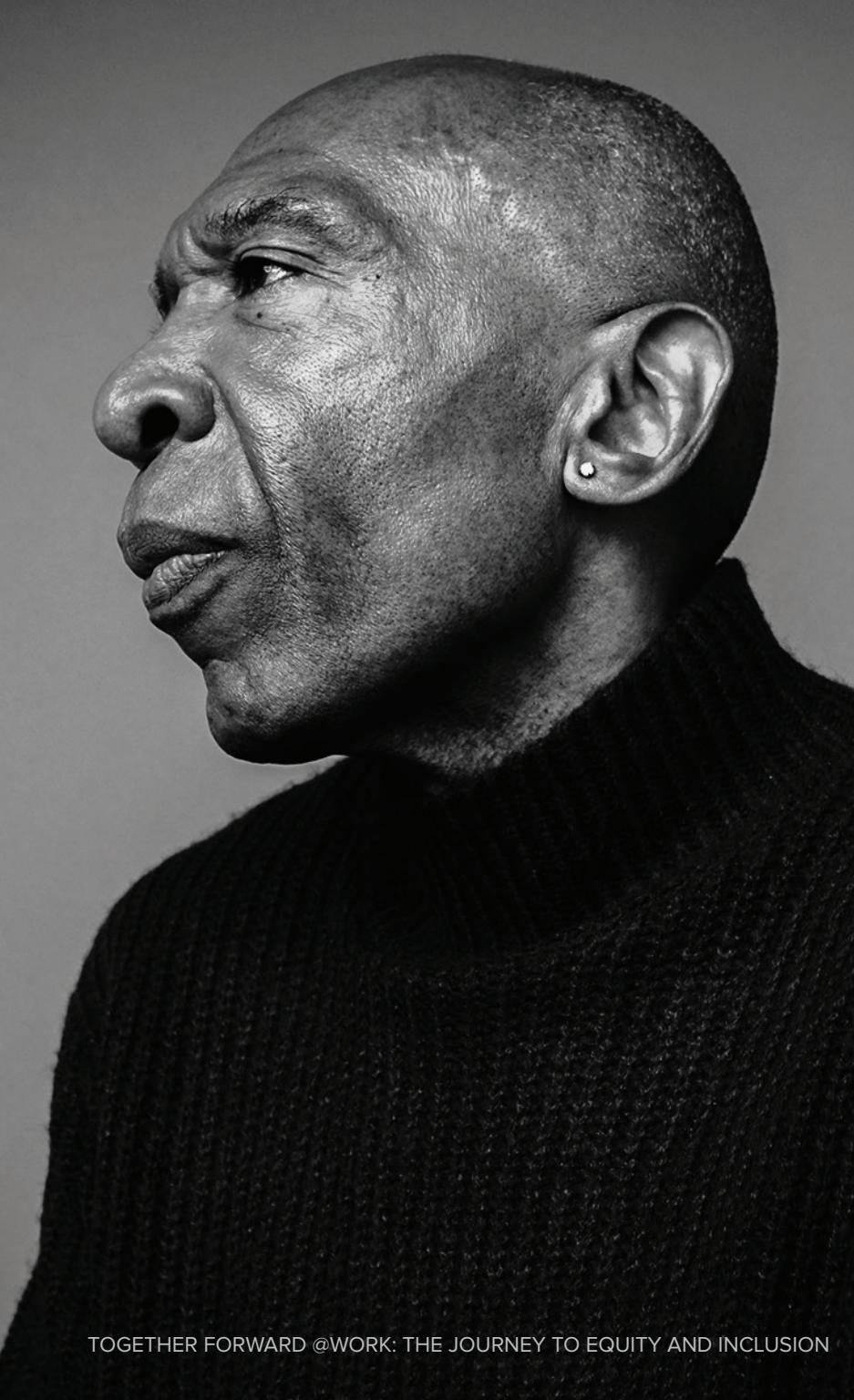
Treat open discussions about race as you would discussions of job performance. This means avoiding blame or attribution and focusing on behaviors. Consistent measurement is key, as with all other feedback. Psychologists have argued for the use of goal-setting theory in social instances for years; in today's climate, organizations must set the goal of eradicating racial discrimination. The goal is zero tolerance for racism.

At SHRM, we've long known that better workplaces equal a better world—it's why private industry often leads on social issues. Multiple sources of data repeatedly demonstrate that diverse workforces, like diverse leadership and diverse corporate boards, yield better business results on almost every dimension. Organizations in which workforces are more equitable and inclusive will succeed. Others may not even endure.

In 2020, the timetable for change accelerated dramatically. And while what should be done might seem to be a simple determination, we recognize that change itself is not. It will require us to learn openly from one another, creating real accountabilities and acting with transparency and agility. Through Together Forward @Work, SHRM is committed—on behalf of all HR professionals who understand this space—to being an ongoing resource for the organizations taking on racial injustice. Only together can we move the workplace forward. And when our workplaces move forward, our world will move forward, together.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/hr-topics/behavioral-competencies/global-and-cultural-effectiveness/Pages/Tips-for-Discussing-Racial-Injustice-in-the-Workplace.aspx>





## METHODOLOGY

### U.S. WORKER SURVEY

A sample of 1,257 U.S. workers was surveyed using the AmeriSpeak Omnibus, a probability-based panel developed by NORC at the University of Chicago that is designed to be representative of the U.S. household population. The survey was administered June 11 through June 15, 2020, and contained an oversample of Black respondents.

### U.S. HUMAN RESOURCES SURVEY

The HR survey was fielded electronically to a random sample of active SHRM members from June 11 through June 17, 2020. In total, 1,275 members responded to the survey in full or in part. Academics, students, consultants and retired HR professionals were excluded from the survey. Respondents represented organizations of all sizes—from two to more than 25,000 employees—in a wide variety of industries across the United States. HR data is unweighted. A comparison of the demographics of this sample to the population of HR professionals in the U.S. is available, if needed.



## ABOUT SHRM

SHRM, the Society for Human Resource Management, creates better workplaces where employers and employees thrive together. As the voice of all things work, workers and the workplace, SHRM is the foremost expert, convener and thought leader on issues impacting today's evolving workplaces. With 300,000+ HR and business executive members in 165 countries, SHRM impacts the lives of more than 115 million workers and families globally. Learn more at **SHRM.org** and on **Twitter @SHRM**.