

# Equity, Justice, & Making Meaning of COVID-19

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## **Redefining “Normal”**

Those who work to advance equity and justice have always borne witness to and sat squarely within efforts to dismantle oppressive systems. Tragically and ironically, we are often handed the most powerful leveraging tools when the so-called “normal” status quo is disrupted in a major way. Think Hurricane Katrina; the deaths of Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, Michael Brown, Sandra Bland, Philando Castile, Freddie Gray, Eric Garner, Heather Heyer, and so many more; and now, COVID-19.

It is difficult to imagine a more overwhelming disruptor than COVID-19. This virus has laid bare our society's ubiquitous “just in time” mentality of pared-down efficiency and hollowed-out infrastructure, where there are literally not enough ventilators, masks, and lifesaving supplies to go around. It has also upended our understanding of what – and who – in our daily lives is considered essential and has fundamentally altered how we connect with one another. We must do all we can to make sure the heightened awareness created by this painful, disruptive space is leveraged to build a new, more equitable normal.

## **What COVID-19 Reveals About Inequity**

As the COVID-19 pandemic takes its terrible toll, it reveals tremendous disparities that oppressive structures have created over time.

Early data already show [Black](#), [Latinx](#) and [Native](#) communities being devastated by the virus at many times the rate of their white counterparts. Structural racism means lack of access to health care, which, in turn, leads to underlying conditions like diabetes, asthma, hypertension, underemployment, food insecurity and inadequate housing and physical safety, creating ample opportunity for COVID-19 to wreak havoc on communities of color. We also know that people of color are more likely to work in jobs defined as essential, placing them at greater risk of harm from the virus. As we shared in our [previous blog post](#), these realities require equity & justice advocates to sustainably attend to those communities at greatest risk of harm from this pandemic, ensure that our institutions support these communities through and beyond COVID-19, and leverage our privileges and resources to center and support the voices and needs of those who are most affected.

## How We Can Make Meaning of What Is Happening

As we consider the work we must undertake personally, interpersonally, institutionally, and across communities and systems in times of crisis we can break down our responses into four phases:



**Phase 1: Crisis Phase:** In this initial stage, we move through denial, uncertainty, confusion, fear, and grief, and we yearn for clear leadership and messaging. We signal an "all-hands on-deck" mentality to encourage survival and cope with getting through another hour/day/week/month with the least harm done. Here we rise to meet the immediate crises of escalating disease, domestic violence, eviction, loss of income, and inadequate protection for those already confined to carceral institutions. We see seeds of hope as the values of community and mutual aid take hold.

*What more can we do?* In this time, our equity & justice community can continue to prioritize mobilizing alongside communities who are being most harmed and advocate for the collection and dissemination of race and ethnicity data that is needed on testing,

patients, and outcomes to ensure equitable allocation of society's energy, time, and resources. We must also give ourselves grace and space to attend to our own physical and psychological safety and needs.

**Phase 2: Mitigation:** As initial urgency abates and the extent of the threat becomes known, we become able to activate our coping skills. Some structure and guidance start to surface as decisionmakers start putting prevention and intervention practices and supply-chain and distribution systems into place. Communication infrastructure begins to form, and we start to see purposeful leaders and programs engaging in creative, adaptive responses to the pressurized systems. For instance, courts are going virtual in unprecedented, but practical ways; distilleries are generating needed hand sanitizer; agencies facing their own crises are quickly uniting to create and deliver emergency meals.

*What more can we do?* The equity & justice community can mobilize its communication resources to counter toxic, racist messaging used by those seeking to distract and deflect attention from their own lack of responsibility and accountability. We can maintain our commitment to directly hear from communities being harmed and advocate for safeguarding policies and procedures that protect those most adversely affected by the pandemic.

**Phase 3: Recovery:** As the acute threat abates, we move from sprint mode to marathon mode. We develop a clearer understanding of the support infrastructure needed for long-term recovery and mobilize resources and responses both for the immediate aftermath as well as continuing threats. Through recovery we must put watchdog measures in place to ensure equitable access and treatment by groups most harmed by the disease and the disastrous economic ramifications of the virus.

*What more can we do?* The equity & justice community can embrace Professor John A. Powell's "targeted universalism" approach to recovering, which means targeting our strategies and resources toward those most harmed and at risk of harm from the pandemic.

**Phase 4: Creating Durable Systemic Change:** To prevent future harm and achieve lasting change we must aim toward universal values of belongingness and analyze:

1. What crises and inequities already existed that are being made worse by COVID-19?
2. Which Target groups suffered greatest harm and continue to suffer greatest harm from the crisis, and conversely, which privileged Agent groups are suffering least?
3. What systems are collapsing in ways that reveal disparities and inequities previously unnoticed by privileged groups?

4. What opportunity do the collapsing systems create, where something new and different must be built to ensure durable, equitable structural change? Dismantling structural racism forces us to acknowledge historical harms while also shaping a new future that has not yet been seen.
5. What is my/my team's/my institution's most important role(s) moving forward? Where are there existing partnerships and collaborations we should activate, and where are new collaborations needed?

### **Essential Adaptive Leadership Behaviors**

As with any painful experience, the only way out of this crisis is to move through it. JustLead works with eight core leadership competencies in our programming, each of which can help us navigate COVID-19 and which will be more deeply explored in later posts:

1. *Building Competence for Anti-Racism & Pro-Equity Work* is a threshold prerequisite to understanding and addressing any disparity.
2. *Engaging in Strategic & Systems Thinking* allows us to understand the interconnectedness of failing institutions, the intersectionality of experiences our clients face, and the devastating impact of unintended consequences.
3. By *Communicating Strategic Intent*, we can leverage this disruptive moment to change pre-COVID-19 status quo narratives that are grounded in white privilege and the oppression of those who can be "othered."
4. *Achieving Workable Unity Across Difference* is necessary in order to mobilize collective responses and engage in strategic systems change.
5. *Delivering on Strategic Intent* requires us to stay focused on our mission and vision while being responsive and accountable to communities most harmed by the pandemic.
6. *Developing Leadership Capacity in Others* encourages those with positional authority to take this moment to lift-up emerging community leaders and those who are most harmed.
7. Through *Increasing Self-Awareness and Other-Awareness* we open our growing edges to discomfort and learning, transforming crisis into opportunity.
8. *Fostering Processes of Renewal* encourages us to engage ourselves, our organizations, and our communities in practices that build responsiveness as well as resilience and stamina for the long haul.

Equity & justice advocates were made for these difficult times, committed to being both rapid responders and social change agents. If we can hold fast to each other and to our collective commitment to furthering justice we can create a better, more inclusive, and more equitable new "normal."

## ***Additional Resources***

- Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine* (2007) reminds us to keep an eye out for those who will manipulate and exploit the crisis for opportunistic profit, and to hold them accountable.
- "Who Will Win the Fight for a Post-Coronavirus America? Every disaster shakes loose the old world order. What replaces it is up to us." Rebecca Solnit, Opinion Column, New York Times, March 29<sup>th</sup>, 2020
- "The Morals in Our Stories", Eric Liu, Citizen University Civic Saturday Sermon, March 28<sup>th</sup>, 2020
- Center for Community Reinvestment's Triage Tool for Reimagining Strategy in Context of the COVID-19 Crisis
- SeaChange's Tough Times Call for Tough Action: A Decision Framework for Nonprofit Leaders & Boards
- Grassroots Policy Project: Stepping into the Moment: The Coronavirus as an Opening for Transformative Change
- Up with Community: Strategic Thinking in a Long-Term Crisis: One Approach