

Facing the Challenge of Racism and Race Relations

LEARN BY DOING: HOW TO ADDRESS TOUGH ISSUES

Community leadership is about action—taking specific steps to solve problems and improve lives. We all learn by doing. The interactive format of the nine *LeadershipPlenty* modules creates opportunities for participants to learn and practice key leadership skills.

This practicum takes the learn-by-doing philosophy a step further than is possible in the context of the six-hour format of the modules by creating the opportunity for group members to participate in substantive dialogues about one of the toughest issues facing communities—racism and race relations.

Having this dialogue among the *LeadershipPlenty* group will give them a chance to build trust, strengthen relationships, and develop a greater awareness of others' experiences and views about an important issue. It will also provide a "sample" of the kind of dialogue *LeadershipPlenty* participants may want to organize more broadly in the community.

WHY DISCUSS RACISM AND RACE RELATIONS?

We suggest that *LeadershipPlenty* groups use this practicum as an opportunity to hold conversations about racism and race relations because this is an issue with which most communities in America are grappling. To move forward on a wide range of areas—from quality education, to affordable housing, to living-wage jobs—communities and individuals must examine how racial issues affect the current situation.

This is not easy and it takes time. Race is a very difficult issue to discuss and groups need to have a certain comfort level with each other before open and frank conversations can occur. At the same time, delaying these conversations for too long can inhibit the building of trust within the group. For this reason, we suggest that *LeadershipPlenty* groups incorporate this practicum on racism and race relations into a retreat at a midway point in the training program—ideally between Modules Five and Six. At that point, participants will have been introduced to key skills, such as active listening, meeting management,

facilitation, and conflict resolution, and will be poised to put them to greater use. The practicum will allow the group to practice these skills while deepening their own relationships with each other and gaining greater awareness of the challenges of race and racism in all communities.

Finally, the practicum serves as an example of an ambitious project—the possibility of organizing a communitywide series of study circles—that participants might want to consider undertaking as they move into the last four modules on building partnerships, action planning, project implementation, and program evaluation. With the experience of organizing and participating in a substantive dialogue about solving community problems “under their belts,” the group may want to consider launching a larger scale series of study circles in the community as an important project to address urgent concerns.