

## A Mission of Eliminating Racism, but Where Is the Advocacy?

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We recently came back from a terrific national conference, with most of its focus on racial justice advocacy work and eliminating racism! Very exciting! Our delegation was energized by connecting with different representatives from around the country whose boards are actively working on these issues. At our last board meeting, we provided a report-back and presented on some specific ways the whole board could become more active as part of their governance work, but after our report, there was complete silence. Also, we were given 45 minutes for the presentation and discussion, and after 15 minutes, we were told to quickly wrap it up. Although we tried to get some discussion going, not one board member had questions or comments, and with no discussion, the board president moved the agenda to the next item. We were extremely disappointed and angry! (Co-chair of the regional YWCA's Racial Justice Task Force, personal communication, October 2017)

This regional YWCA, located in a racially diverse urban community, has a powerful mission: to eliminate racism, empower women and promote peace, justice, freedom, and dignity for all, modeled after the national YWCA (n.d.-b) mission statement. For most of its 125-plus years as an organization, the regional YWCA's work has been service-oriented, focusing on empowering women including programs such as domestic violence services, child care, after-school activities, wellness and health, and women's economic empowerment. In the early 1990s, the national YWCA became more engaged in anti-racism and in 2007 established the Stand Against Racism advocacy campaign, which spread to 39 states and was adopted by this regional chapter as well (YWCA, n.d.)

### The Regional YWCA's Situation

As the national YWCA increased its focus on eliminating racism and encouraged their local affiliates to engage in advocacy efforts on this issue, the staff of this regional YWCA began discussing how to integrate racial justice work into their programs. The

organization has an annual budget of about \$6 million with a diverse funding base including foundation and government grants, individual giving, membership dues and program service fees, and the organization includes over 100 part- and full-time staff (YWCA, 2016). There has been little turnover of staff at the regional YWCA including the executive director, who has served for more than 20 years.

As part of the national initiative, the executive director, who is White, actively encouraged the board and organization as a whole to support racial equity initiatives in their community. As a result, the YWCA began to engage in some advocacy activities, including the national YWCA's Stand Against Racism campaign, although the work has been organized primarily through the efforts of the executive director acting alone.

Because of the regional's mission to end racism, community stakeholders encouraged and supported the regional YWCA's leadership role in the racial equity advocacy work in the community. The regional YWCA formed a racial justice task force comprising board members, community stakeholders, and the executive director. Supporting this development, the executive director asked two board members of color to co-chair the task force and help recruit additional community stakeholders to serve on the committee. The committee was charged with planning and implementing several yearly educational and advocacy events focused on racial justice and supporting the YWCA's mission of eliminating racism (personal communication, October 2017; YWCA, 2012). For the past several years, the co-chairs have planned and implemented a series of educational and advocacy events focused on racial justice, such as community forums on racial justice and gender and international women's day events focused on racial equity issues.

## **New Strategic Plan**

Recently, as part of a yearlong comprehensive strategic planning process, the board, staff, and key stakeholders developed a dynamic strategic plan that called for the organization to better integrate its mission of eliminating racism into its own governance activity and to expand its existing racial justice programs and advocacy efforts. As a component of the planning process, the board and senior staff developed a theory of change that described the board and staff's projected advocacy initiatives, in addition to services which would contribute to outcomes supporting racial equity (YWCA, 2015).

More specifically, the new strategic plan called for (a) the hiring of a full-time racial justice director who would focus on increasing this work within the organization and support the board in its external advocacy efforts; (b) the board to engage in ongoing racial justice trainings and dialogues about how to better integrate their mission of eliminating racism within its own practices and policies; (c) the board to increase its advocacy work of all board members with the community; (d) the board to assume a more active role in developing and cultivating partnerships with communities of color, in coordination with the executive director; and (e) an increase in the racial/ethnic diversity of the board to better reflect the composition of the community that consists of large African American, Latina, and West African communities (at the time of the strategic plan, only four of the 21 board members were persons of color); and (e) the board to develop and implement more intentionally inclusive board practices.

## The Challenge

Despite the efforts of the racial justice task force, the hiring of a new director of racial justice, and the stated interest of the executive director in racial justice advocacy, the board as a whole had not implemented the racial justice goals outlined in the strategic plan. Although the task force successfully implemented well-attended community forums focused on advocacy issues (e.g., “Taking a hard look at women and politics through a racial and gender lens and what you can do about it!”), the advocacy work has been isolated to the task force. Nor has the board adopted any significant changes to address racial justice advocacy in the 2 years since the strategic plan was approved (personal communication, October 2017).

Some board members felt that the Racial Justice Task Force was effectively addressing the YWCA’s mission of eliminating racism and no other whole-board work was needed or required. However, according to one of the task force’s co-chairs (personal communication, October 2017), there had been no internal board dialogues, trainings, or discussions about the board’s racial equity practices and policies, or any plans for advocacy efforts by the whole board. Rather, the board focused its work during their regular meetings on listening to reports from committees—the board’s practices remained unchanged. Although board members voiced interest in diversifying the board’s composition, the diversity of the board members remained unchanged—with few members of color (personal communication, October 2017).

Early in 2018, there was an opportunity to transform the board’s leadership from a slate of all White board officers to one that included board members of color. To the dismay of the Racial Task Force co-chairs, the Board Development Committee selected a slate that included only a single person of color. Of major concern to the co-chairs, the selected president-elect was a White woman from the corporate sector who has demonstrated little interest in racial equity issues.

## Discussion Questions

1. What barriers do you think have kept this board from becoming more engaged in racial justice advocacy?
2. What types of discussions do you think the board needs to have to fully engage in the racial justice advocacy work?
3. What strategies might help this board to implement its stated plans for advocacy as described in their strategic plan?
4. What will be the challenges in implementing these new strategies and how might they overcome them?
5. What research questions, if answered through future studies, might help inform boards such as the one described in this case study?

## References

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