



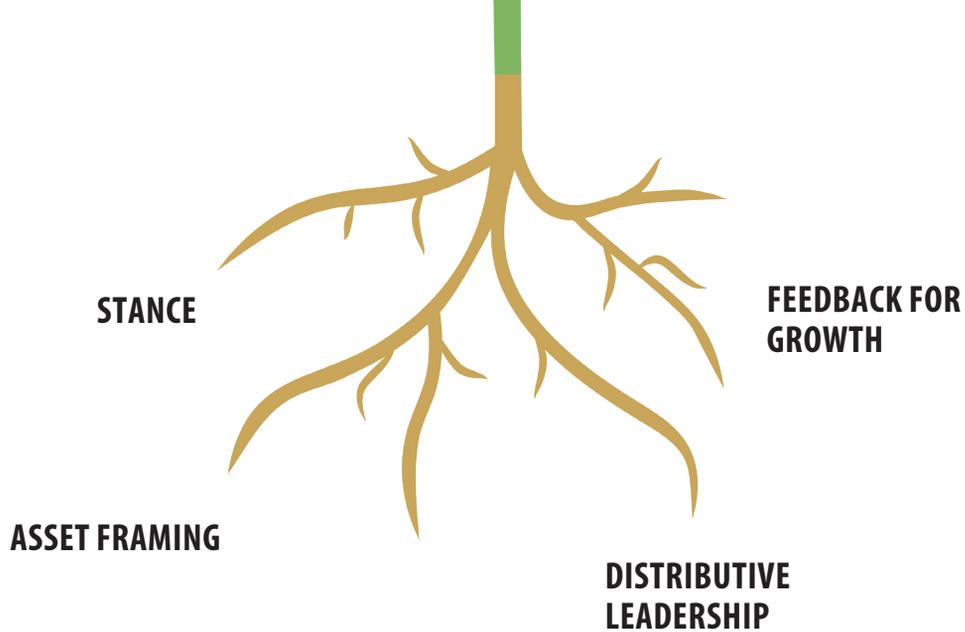
# 4 roots of anti-racist leadership — AND HOW TO CULTIVATE THEM

BY KIMBERLY HINTON AND JAMES T. SCHWARTZ

**M**arta Robertson, principal of Plainview High School, finished a long day invigorated by the senior leadership team meeting she had just left. The team had worked together for the past two years to develop leaders who could cultivate anti-racist policies and practices schoolwide. Composed of leaders

from various teams in the building, including instructional leaders, grade-level leads, and postsecondary leaders, the senior leadership team was committed to making space for the voices of those who are traditionally marginalized in schools and inviting them to co-construct practices and policies for more inclusive and engaging classroom and school environments.

To that end, the team planned a project to better engage Black male students in their classes, and they were excited to test it out, learn from it, and apply the lessons learned, all in collaboration with students and community members. Robertson looked forward to meeting with her network of principals from across the city to share the team's ideas and get feedback.



Collaborative efforts like this one are key to transforming schools into communities of powerful learning where all students excel academically and develop the agency, integrated identity, and competencies necessary to have successful lives as adults. Such efforts start with leaders, like Robertson, learning to cultivate anti-racist systems, structures, policies, and practices. A school cannot be a place of success for all unless its leaders recognize the barriers posed by systemic racism and implicit bias and engage the whole staff in understanding and dismantling those barriers.

As a first — and ongoing — step, school leaders must nurture the growth of anti-racist leadership within themselves and their leadership teams. This leadership establishes a foundation for whole-school anti-racism efforts that make possible the transformation we seek for our students.

At the Network for College Success, we help schools to take up this work by supporting and coaching a network of principals to engage in cycles of transformational learning. Our theory of change is this: If we build the capacity of principals to develop and apply their anti-racist leadership, then the principals will create systems to disrupt inequity across their schools and nurture anti-racist school cultures for their students, staff members, and communities.

### ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

To enact our theory of change, we started with an essential question that we posed to the principals and worked together to answer over the course of a year. The essential question was created by our team’s leadership coaches, drawing from practice data (coaching, observations) and feedback (from the principals’ network and school leaders).

Over time, the initial question led to additional essential questions. As principals engaged in cycles of reflection and action, the essential questions gradually shifted from broad theory and reflection (e.g. What does leadership for equity look like?) to more specifically defined actions and practices (e.g. How does anti-racist leadership create systems to disrupt inequity within and across school teams?).

We focused on the following essential questions over a period of four years:

- Year 1: What does leadership for equity look like?
- Year 2: What does leadership for equity look like in stance and action?
- Year 3: What does leadership for equity look like for advancing anti-racist practices in remote learning?
- Year 4: How does anti-racist leadership create systems to disrupt inequity within and across school teams?

The shift in year 4 to using the language of anti-racism was intentional. The two concepts are closely related but not the same. Equity recognizes that each young person is unique and requires different resources to achieve a certain outcome. Anti-racism focuses on the specific recognition that all racial groups are equal and that we must continuously work to disrupt and deconstruct systems, structures, and policies that create inequities on the basis of race. As a community, we made the shift in language because principals began to recognize the role of race in the inequities they saw, especially during the pandemic and as they learned from the uprising against racial injustice in summer 2020.

As principals in the network engaged with these essential questions, they began to understand how their identity as leaders impacted their ability to recognize, dismantle, and disrupt inequitable practices and policies in their schools. They also began to explore how to replace those structures with liberatory practices and policies. They looked critically at their systems to better understand their least served population, actively worked to dismantle inequitable policies, and co-created equitable policies with their community members. Simultaneously, many of them supported their teacher leaders and teams as they learned to become culturally responsive.

**FOUR ROOTS OF ANTI-RACIST LEADERSHIP**

As principals grew in this work, we repeatedly observed four distinct grounding practices that helped them move from theory to action. We call these the four roots of anti-racist leadership:

- **Asset framing:** Identifying, reframing and leaning into the wealth of knowledge and leadership in teachers, staff, and students;
- **Stance development:** Intentional reflective work to examine one’s identity and how it impacts leadership, resulting in articulation of daily commitment to anti-racism;
- **Distributive leadership:** Working in a collectivist manner that trusts and gives authority and intentional autonomy to multiple members of the team; and
- **Feedback for growth:** Engaging individually and collectively in systematic methods of receiving feedback on one’s leadership.

In this article, we explain why these roots are important and describe some of the moves that leadership coaches or other facilitators can play in nurturing them with school leaders. These moves draw on our own experience as coaches and facilitators in high schools. We also illustrate what the four roots of anti-racist leadership look like in practice, using the fictional Plainview High School as an example. This school represents a composite of schools and situations from our work with a network of Chicago public high schools.

**1. Center asset framing.**

Centering assets requires us to keep the strengths of each student, family member, and staff member at the forefront of our conversations. In addressing racist systems and conditions in our schools, it can be easy to fall into deficit thinking about those with whom we work. We must push back against that racist conditioning by lifting up what we each do well and what we each add to a community.

When leaders center assets, they focus others’ attention on competence, thereby increasing intrinsic motivation — the desire to do something for its own sake rather than for rewards. Psychologists Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, experts in motivation, have found that intrinsic motivation is nurtured by experiences of both autonomy and competence. The corollary is also true: “Negative feedback or excessive difficulty which undermine perceived competence also diminish intrinsic motivation” (Ryan et. al., 2021). When leaders focus on staff or students’ deficits, community members often feel defeated and progress toward equity moves backward.

Coaches can help leaders develop this root using tools to identify and leverage assets in the school community. One example is the High 5 Strengths Test, which can be found online at [high5test.com](http://high5test.com). Coaches can also help leaders identify and discontinue the use of deficit language and framing by observing and providing feedback about leaders’ interactions with and conversations about teachers and students.

**What centering assets looks in practice:** In working to improve the experiences of Black male students at Plainview High, senior leadership team members realized that often they spoke about students and teachers from their own negative or deficit mindsets. They realized that they could not improve students’ experiences if they didn’t believe that young people deserve positive experiences and that teachers should provide them. So the team made an intentional effort in meetings to speak about the assets and worth that each student and teacher possessed — their unique gifts, their knowledge, and their humanity.

**2. Develop and hold an equity stance.**

Anti-racist leaders ground their leadership in their equity stances. A stance functions as a stable platform from which the leader can act toward justice and react toward injustice. This stance generates a strong understanding

of the leader’s own identity, the connections between themselves and others, and what they must stand for as leadership challenges arise in their context (San Francisco Coalition of Essential Small Schools, n.d.).

Leaders nourish this root through the examination of “the skin they are in” — their prominent identity markers, their relationship to their identity, and the relationship between others’ identities and their own. Leaders must also reflect on the formative experiences that have shaped their conceptions of race and other identities and then determine their nonnegotiables.

Anti-racist leaders also work with those they lead to support them in cultivating their own equity stances. This is especially important for those who work directly with students because how educators show up has an enormous impact on the daily experiences of young people.

The coach’s role in cultivating equity stances is to act as a mirror for the principal, helping them examine their beliefs as well as whether and how their decisions and actions align with their stance. The coach can also help the leader examine how those decisions impact those they lead and the school as a whole.

**What developing an equity stance looks like in practice:** When Robertson first formed her senior leadership team, she identified school staff who already embedded strong anti-racist practices in their daily work and had the potential to lead teams to engage in that same kind of work. But she knew that it was not enough to select these leaders and rely on their preexisting practices and beliefs — she had to support them to form individual and team equity stances.

At the team’s first meeting, Robertson asked team members to speak about their own identity markers and how their identities affect how they show up as educators. Each leader wrote and spoke about their priorities, nonnegotiables, and core beliefs. Over time, each leader codified all of these into individual equity stances and the team developed a collective stance — the moral and ethical ground on which they stand when making leadership decisions.

Each member of the team also worked with the teams they lead to develop individual and collective stances. Some of their team members were resistant to this work, expressing reluctance to name and reflect on their own racial identities. Senior leadership team members shared these challenges with and supported one another to stand firm in the vital nature of this work.

### 3. Design and catalyze distributive leadership.

Distributive leadership is essential to anti-racist leadership because a leader cannot make significant anti-racist change in a school by working alone, regardless of the strength of their leadership qualities. Nourishing this root means helping the entire team take responsibility for creating anti-racist changes.

To develop this quality on their team, a principal must support the team's members to take on the team's

stance and work as their own. Although individual team members may take the lead in certain areas (e.g. leading a subcommittee), they must see these as connected to the whole and not as separate “buckets” or “lanes” that they own.

Principals also need to build trust within the team so that members maintain their commitment to collective goals, count on one another to fulfill their responsibilities, and feel comfortable to take risks and learn from missteps.

Coaches play an important role in this process by helping leaders facilitate collaborative assessment and analysis of current school policies. Coaches can then support leaders in strategically planning and implementing antiracist change ideas.

In our network, we have seen some evidence of a connection between

distributive leadership and student outcomes. When we looked at the 11 schools that had a consistent principal and consistent coaching over the past two years, all five schools that had freshman on-track rates over 95% had evidence of distributive leadership in a key leadership team, meaning that most or all team members consistently regarded the team's work as their own, worked together in alignment rather than on separate projects, and trusted one another to uphold their equity stances and work toward their collective goals.

In addition, four out of six schools where more than half of freshmen earned a 3.0 GPA or higher had evidence of distributive leadership. However, some schools who had distributive leadership in place had lower on-track and 3.0+ rates, so this quality may be beneficial but not sufficient to raise student outcomes.



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**What distributive leadership looks like in practice:** As the Plainview High School senior leadership team members developed their stances, they needed to determine what systems at Plainview were most in need of change. They started by organizing themselves into subcommittees to perform a collective investigation of how they currently support Black male students.

The team empowered these subcommittees to lead and make critical decisions about their assigned area of work. One subcommittee engaged Black male students in focus groups, another administered surveys to teachers and students, and a third organized observations of students in classes, the counselors' offices, and the climate office.

As these subcommittees did their work and brought their data back to the whole senior leadership team, the team uncovered that many adults in the school didn't know how to connect with their students as a whole and engage them in learning, and that this issue was especially strong with their Black male students. The senior leadership team members came to consensus on the idea that each of their teams would invite a group of Black male students to give deep feedback on one aspect of their work, then the teams would share with the whole senior leadership team.

#### 4. Seek and give feedback on practice.

Feedback is a powerful tool for both student and adult learning because we need to understand the impact of our efforts to improve them (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). This process grounds us in a growth mindset because feedback, when authentically requested or given, reflects a belief in the capacity for improvement.

For leaders, including those aiming to be anti-racist leaders, that feedback should include learning about our impact on others' learning and growth. Inviting and expecting feedback helps leaders reflect and builds trust that enables leaders to foster a team culture where members bring their dilemmas for collective problem-solving, own those dilemmas together, and use protocols to unpack and address the dilemmas with a focus on growth.

Coaches can help leaders develop

feedback processes and habits by engaging them in reflection learning cycles and introducing tools such as tuning, success, or dilemma protocols, as well as other reflective processes. They can also support principals to regularly request feedback from team members, thereby modeling the importance of feedback for others.

**What feedback looks like in practice:** To cultivate the habit of seeking and incorporating feedback, the senior leadership team at Plainview developed a rhythm of meetings in which they would present dilemmas and give one another feedback on their practice. Each team member regularly presented a dilemma from their own leadership practice so the team could hear the dilemma, push the presenting team member's thinking, and support the presenter to think differently about the dilemma.

Presenting team members would leave with new insights into their dilemmas, and hearing leadership dilemmas would often prompt new insights for other team members as well. In addition, as the senior leadership team members heard the similarities and differences among dilemmas in their various teams, they developed a stronger understanding about their work to engage Black male students, and they engaged in collective feedback on that project as well.

#### INITIAL STEPS

The four roots of anti-racist leadership operate in interconnected ways. There is no one right way to apply the four roots, and no one right place to start. For those looking to get started, we recommend exploring the following initial steps and questions.

**Start by reflecting on your own asset framing.** Consider: What assets do you see in your own leadership and your key leadership team? What assets do you see in your staff members? In your students?

**Create a draft of your own equity stance.** What are the most important aspects of your leadership identity? How does your race play a role? How does your identity inform your nonnegotiables in leadership?

**Engage your team in learning about the four roots.** We have listed

some resources we believe are good starting places for each:

- *Asset Framing: The Other Side of the Story.* [www.comnetwork.org/resources/asset-framing-the-other-side-of-the-story/](http://www.comnetwork.org/resources/asset-framing-the-other-side-of-the-story/)
- *How We Can Bridge the Cultural Gap.* [learningforward.org/journal/october-2016/how-we-can-bridge-the-cultural-gap/](http://learningforward.org/journal/october-2016/how-we-can-bridge-the-cultural-gap/)
- *Leading Together / Power to the People.* [www.ascd.org/el/articles/power-to-the-people](http://www.ascd.org/el/articles/power-to-the-people)
- *Seven Keys to Effective Feedback.* [www.ascd.org/el/articles/seven-keys-to-effective-feedback](http://www.ascd.org/el/articles/seven-keys-to-effective-feedback)

**Engage your team members in developing their own individual equity stances, and then in developing a team equity stance.**

All four roots are necessary to support anti-racist leadership. When leaders and teams nourish these roots together, they grow collective anti-racist leadership, fostering schools that honor the brilliance and insights of the Black and Latinx students they serve.

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