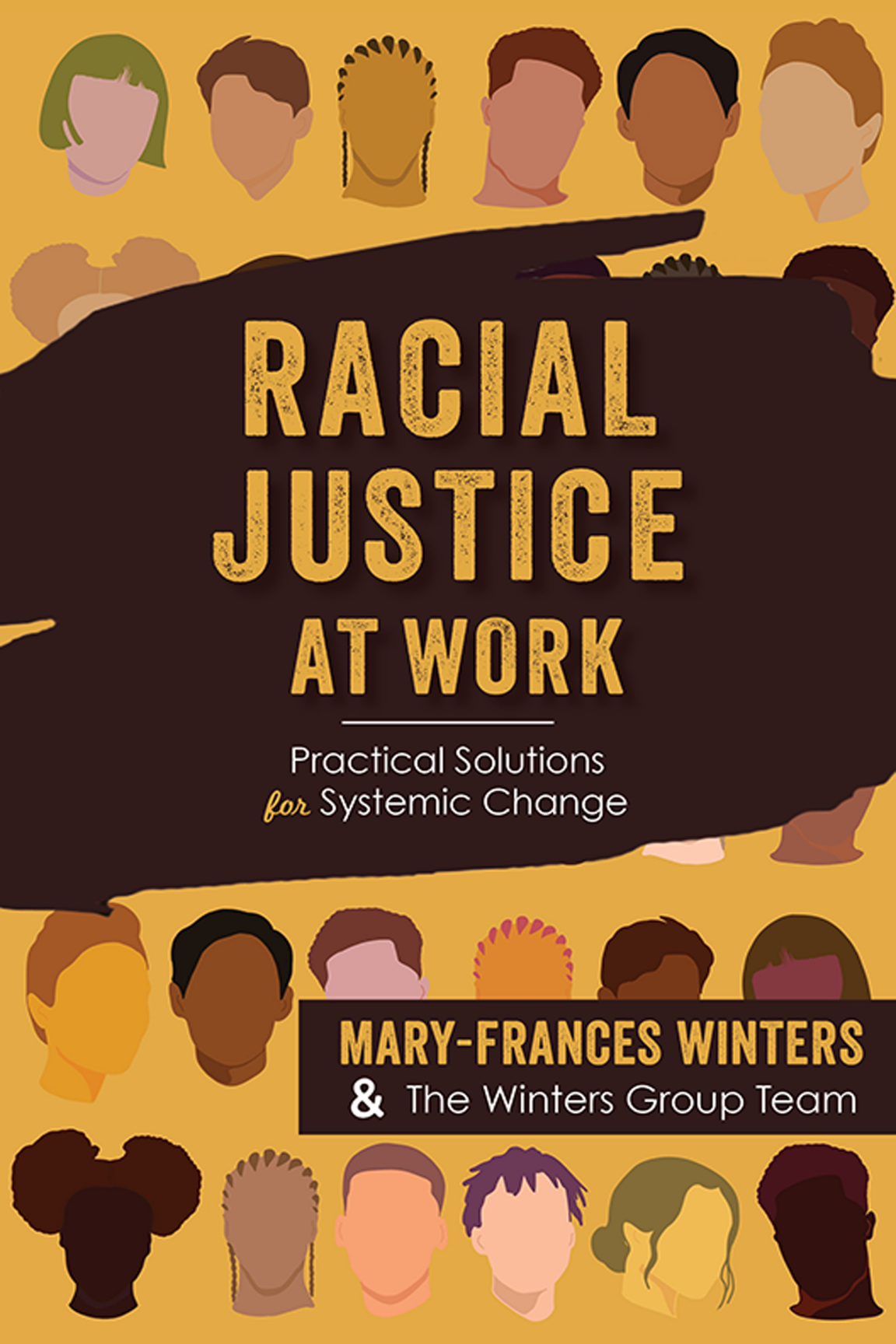
RACIAL
JUSTICE
AT WORK
Practical Solutions
for Systemic Change
MARY-FRANCES WINTERS
& The Winters Group Team

RACIAL JUSTICE AT WORK

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Practical Solutions for Systemic Change

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Berrett–Koehler Publishers, Inc.

Racial Justice at Work

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PREFACE

Note on terms: Language describing various identity groups is ever-changing. There is no universal agreement and, in our attempt to be respectful of different perspectives, we acknowledge that the terms we have chosen may not resonate with all readers. The term BIPOC *(Black, Indigenous, and people of color) is used in the book to recognize that while every identity has had its unique journey with racism, there are shared experiences that we attempt to capture. When not citing language directly from a study or quote, we use* Latine *to describe individuals who have historically been identified as Hispanic, Latino, or Latinx. Latine, created by LGBTQIA+ Spanish speakers, adopts the letter* e *from the Spanish language to represent gender neutrality.*[1] *SWANA is a decolonized term for the South West Asian/North African region that was created by its own community members to be used instead of names that are Eurocentric in origin, such as the Middle East or Near East.*[2]

We wrote *Racial Justice at Work: Practical Solutions for Systemic Change* in the midst of intense culture wars in the United States and other parts of the world. There are diametrically opposing views on the meaning of equality, equity, and justice—and who has the right to decide. At this critical juncture in our history of civil and human rights, *Racial Justice at Work* is an attempt to provide clarity and guidance for leaders in every sector, social justice advocates, and everybody who desires to create equitable workplace systems that truly work for all.

This book invites the reader to reimagine what is possible with chapters from different Winters Group team members who represent a variety of lived experiences, cultural backgrounds, and generations. The book focuses on Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) in the workplace. It is a guidebook with actionable solutions for workers everywhere in every industry. It is especially crucial for leaders with decision-making power to create just and fair work environments.

Those who believe justice is not being served for BIPOC will have to be courageous and steadfast. Justice means that we face the ugly truth about systemic racism and the harm caused, and change those systems so that we can move closer to "liberty and justice for all." As culture wars intensify, we see attempts through proposed and enacted legislation to deny that systemic racism even exists.

Luckily, amid the attempts to uphold systems of racism are many countereforts to enhance workplace equity, inclusion, and justice. Since the murder of George Floyd and other Black people in 2020, organizations have made bold commitments to combat systemic racism in the workplace, including aggressive hiring and philanthropic goals. We have seen a surge in organizations filling diversity-related roles. Research by LinkedIn found that the number of people with the title "head of diversity" more than doubled between 2015 and 2020, and in the sixteen months after the murder of George Floyd, it almost tripled.[3]

It is encouraging that many organizations recognize the need for such roles. Unfortunately, too much of the work continues to be performative (commonly referred to as "check the box"). According to Russell Reynolds Associates, chief diversity officers have an average tenure of only 1.8 years.[4] There is a great deal of effort put into hiring BIPOC and other programmatic activities such as employee resource groups and mentoring programs, but not enough emphasis on the organizational systems perpetuating inequities. The focus is on fixing the *people* rather than the *systems* that harm people. *Racial Justice at Work* focuses on correcting harmful systems. There are bold

organizations, some of which are highlighted in the book, directing their efforts on systemic change. We need more.

The Winters Group has consulted with organizations for over three decades, and we realize that a justice-centered approach is very different from traditional corporate DEI work. Many leaders who signed up to focus on antiracism and social justice in their organizations did not understand the distinction between *equity* and *justice*. Many have even added the "J" to DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) and are struggling to operationalize it. There is resistance to the culture change required to center justice and the experiences of those most impacted by racism. This book acknowledges the adverse reaction to change and how to address it. By providing specific, actionable strategies, this book maps the intersection between traditional corporate solutions and those advocated in social justice spaces.

Racial Justice at Work reimagines policies, practices, procedures, and ways of working and being that foster fairness, equity, and opportunity for all. The recommendations in this book are bold and audacious. Some of the solutions may seem unrealistic, improbable, or even outlandish, especially in the backdrop of the culture wars. We invite you to be curious about those solutions you may disagree with and ask yourself why. For those recommendations that you might agree with but think will never happen, try to reimagine what would need to happen to make them a reality. If not what we recommend, then what?

Actualizing justice is not for the faint at heart, not for those who prioritize comfort over progress. It will not be easy as the culture wars intensify. It is for those who have the courage to act.

Is that you? If so, read *Racial Justice at Work*.

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INTRODUCTION

It's about Correcting Harm

MARY-FRANCES WINTERS
Founder and CEO
The Winters Group, Inc.
(she/her/hers)

After the murder of George Floyd in 2020 and the protests that ensued, there was a racial reckoning of sorts in the United States and around the world, with a focus specifically on inequities that persist for Black people. Even though there has been much legislation throughout history outlawing unequal treatment, Black people and other marginalized identities (Indigenous, Latine, Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, Pacific Islanders, and the SWANA community)—referred to as BIPOC throughout the book—continue to suffer significant disparities in all aspects of society, including education, healthcare, the workplace, and the criminal justice system.

Racial Justice at Work explores workplace inequities and offers practical solutions to address them that go beyond equality, beyond equity to justice. Why *justice* and not racial *equity* at work? Even though the idea of equity is new for some organizations and not without its controversy, justice goes further. Most people really mean *equality*—treat everyone the same—when they use the term *equity,*

which means differential treatment based on need. *Justice* means we will correct past inequities. *Racial Justice at Work* is written to examine the underlying systems that preserve the status quo and prevent us from achieving equity and justice.

While the term *social justice* is not new, and many of the civil rights laws are grounded in these ideals, the way we think about justice is transforming. *Social justice* can be defined as the way in which human rights are experienced in the everyday lives of people at every level of society. Social justice entails the fair distribution of wealth, opportunities, and privilege. And since we know that the distribution has not been fair, justice necessitates the redistribution of wealth opportunities and privilege. Justice-centered approaches require us to consider who has been or is harmed by workplace systems, who benefits from the status quo, and what we need to do to correct policies, practices, and belief systems.

Affirmative action in the United States is about social justice. Albeit controversial, the goal is to correct past discrimination and exclusion of certain groups in the workforce—called *protected classes*—by requiring employers with more than fifty employees who do more than $50,000 in business with the government to set hiring and promotion goals. These goals are designed to achieve parity—that is, equal representation based on labor force availability in government job classifications. Affirmative action is not without its critics. This legislation continues to be challenged as "reverse discrimination," and certain aspects have been upended over the years since it was first enforced by Executive Order 11246 in 1965.[1]

Affirmative action is primarily about hiring and promotion, a part of the HR function in organizations. Often diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice (DEIJ) are thought of primarily as HR issues. Chief diversity officers often report to the chief HR officer. This book examines what justice looks like beyond the HR office, revealing practices, policies, and systems that uphold the status quo and harm BIPOC in such areas as procurement, marketing and advertising, investment strategies, and software algorithms.

Racial Justice at Work is a series of essays written by members of The Winters Group team in two parts. Part I explores racial justice at work from a strategic perspective—opportunities such as justice-centered leadership approaches, addressing resistance to change, and becoming comfortable with racial justice concepts. Part II offers specific solutions to achieving racial justice in different organizational functions. You may find some redundancy in our thinking and recommendations. This is intentional for you to see justice from different interpretations and intersections.

After the murder of George Floyd in 2020, many corporate leaders claimed not to know that there was still such a significant racial divide. With this supposed newfound knowledge, they vowed to give more attention to racial inequities that persist in the workplace and society in general, specifically for Black employees. Corporate responses included more aggressive hiring and promotion goals, more attention to amplifying racial diversity in their marketing and advertising campaigns, increasing philanthropic dollars to Black-led organizations, and enhancing supplier diversity to include more BIPOC-led companies. These goals, while well-intended, are not likely to bring about sustained change. All of these ideas have been tried before to no avail.

We need new, radical remedies that disrupt these stubborn patterns of disproportionate outcomes. This book, while not exhaustive, offers justice-centered ideas to correct harm and remove barriers that continue to leave BIPOC employees disadvantaged in the workplace. We recognize that these ideas will seem very "radical" to some readers, and we expect they will be controversial and not without critics. We believe that if we are serious about racial justice, these are the types of remedies that organizations need to consider, and some already are doing so.

We focus primarily but not exclusively on racial justice related to Black employees because we believe that if we can figure out ways to create policies and practices geared at eliminating or at least alleviating the burdens faced by Black people in the workplace, they will also alleviate and perhaps one day eliminate injustices that continue

to harm other marginalized groups—the Indigenous, Latine, Asian, SWANA, LGBTQIA+, people with disabilities, women, and those with intersectional identities.

Compounding the issues of racial injustice, of course, was the global COVID-19 pandemic, which has had its own set of repercussions for the workplace as a whole. And there is clear evidence that we are now in the throes of culture wars where so-called conservative values are clashing with so-called progressive values. I say "so-called" because as you look deeply into the polarization around certain social issues such as racial justice, reproductive rights, and LGBTQIA+ rights, for example, it is not clear what constitutes progressive or conservative. We are weaponizing terms that keep us from gaining clarity and from coming to any semblance of common ground. I write about the weaponization of terms in Chapter 2.

As a result of the pandemic, many people reevaluated their relationship with work. The Great Resignation, as it has been dubbed, resulted in millions of people leaving traditional jobs that were unfulfilling for a variety of reasons. Research shows that women and BIPOC led the mass exodus, primarily because of systems that perpetuated inequities, whether intentionally or unintentionally. "Quiet quitting" describes a trend where people who stay in the workplace are no longer willing to perform outside of their defined job description. Workers around the world are exhausted and demand a more humanistic approach to leading and managing.

The culture wars see us fighting over whose values will dominate on topics like critical race theory and whether it is or should be taught in schools; reproductive healthcare rights—decisions that can have more impact on women of color; gun control; and transgender rights (e.g., Florida's "Don't Say Gay" bill). Thamara Subramanian explores clashes of cultural values in Chapter 8, asserting that dominant group values that define only one right way leave little opportunity to include other ways of thinking and being. These cultural issues, which some might say are political in nature and therefore should not be discussed in the workplace, have a profound impact on workers and

are being (and should be) discussed. The Winters Group has been asked to support employers in developing equitable policies around abortion rights and to lead discussions on gun violence. For example, a grocery store chain asked for listening sessions after the racially motivated killing of ten innocent Black people in Buffalo, New York, at the Tops supermarket in 2022. The Black employees of this other food store chain feared that they could be the target of something similar.

I believe that many organizations have good intentions as they grapple with the ongoing injustices in society. They are committed to seeking solutions that create inclusive, equitable, and just work environments. They recognize that they are not islands unto themselves and cannot ignore the external events that impact their employees. Yet progress continues to be slow. Organizational cultures are steeped in ways of being, which often unwittingly continues to harm Black and other marginalized identities.

This book aims to consider the complexities of all that I mentioned above and yet distill some very actionable approaches for reimagining a racially just workplace. It is about the three Ps—people, policies, and practices.

People. How do people from different racial identity groups experience the current systems? Who is impacted by the policies and practices? Who is harmed? Who benefits? Who holds the power and control to uphold unjust systems? People in power control systems. How do you support people in power to address the resistance (e.g., claims of reverse discrimination) that is inevitable when you are trying to change systems?

Which belief systems need to be challenged? Which belief systems are ignored or disregarded? As Thamara Subramanian asks in Chapter 8, how safe are BIPOC employees to speak up about their lived experiences? In Chapter 9, Scott Ferry says that employees will not feel safe until they are safe. Leaders will need to recognize the limitations of their own lens and center the experiences of those most impacted without judgment.

Policies. The purport of *Racial Justice at Work* is that we must go beyond the current notions of inclusion and belonging and strive for justice. If we do not, we will continue to make lackluster progress in achieving the espoused desire for true fairness. I love this definition of equity: *when we can no longer predict outcomes by one's identity*. Justice is the path to achieve that goal. We need to ask, what are some policies that disproportionately harm Black and other marginalized groups? How do we find and interrogate these policies? What is the process for evaluation and change? The book does not include an exhaustive identification of all policies that could potentially inhibit racial justice. Rather, it attempts to highlight some beyond traditional HR policies that may not immediately be considered.

Practices. Beyond written policies, what are accepted ways of being and doing that harm Black and other marginalized workers, yet go unchecked? For example, as Tami Jackson asks in Chapter 12, do we have notions of professionalism that uphold dominant culture norms and thwart individuals from contributing fully and authentically? In Chapter 17, Gabrielle Gayagoy Gonzalez offers how recruiting practices that favor referrals from current employees to fill job openings limit the pool of recruits. Often, representation of BIPOC employees is lower than the organization desires. Therefore, if the primary recruiting strategy is referrals, they will likely continue to get people from the dominant group in the employee population.

We have not succeeded in dismantling systems that perpetuate harm to marginalized communities. Many of the efforts have failed because they are programmatic, focusing on fixing the marginalized communities rather than fixing systems that uphold inequities. Even the well-researched and proven business case for diversity (that more diversity positively impacts organizational outcomes) isn't compelling enough to bring about sustained change.

Racial Justice at Work is framed around four key strategic requirements to uncover and correct systems: committing, understanding and acknowledging, reimagining, and actualizing.

Committing

Organizational leaders claimed to be committed to doing something different after George Floyd's murder, to achieve racial justice in the workplace. They asked for training and education on the history of racism. They wanted to teach their employees how to be "antiracists." They wanted comprehensive equity audits—or as some call them, civil rights audits—to not only examine the compliance aspects around nondiscrimination but also review the environment, including the attitudes and perceptions, especially of their Black employees. As time passes since the George Floyd murder that sparked the racial reckoning, we are beginning to see the commitment wane. There is much more resistance to digging deep into racial injustices. In Chapters 6 and 7, Kevin A. Carter goes into detail about how to recognize and address resistance using theories of culture change.

For example, we have experienced quite a bit of resistance to using terms that describe the systemic nature of racism, such as *white supremacy culture*. I discuss this in more detail in Chapter 2, on the weaponization of racial justice terms. The term *white supremacy culture* continues to be mischaracterized as labeling all white people as white supremacists—extreme hatemongers in white sheets—rather than being understood as a belief system, whether conscious or unconscious, that the ways of the dominant group are prioritized and seen as better than other cultural values.

The commitment to persevere and work through the backlash and resistance is necessary to achieve racial justice at work. In Chapter 4, I lay out the commitments that leaders need to make, including an acknowledgment that injustices prevail everywhere; accountability for outcomes; the need for individual learning and reflection; allocating ample and ongoing resources—and accepting resistance, conflict, and discomfort as a part of the path to success.

Understanding and Acknowledging

What is justice? What does it mean to be justice centered? These questions are answered in Chapter 1. Justice, as I stated earlier,

requires us to repair harm and develop new ways of thinking and being that ask the questions, *Who will benefit from this decision? Who will be harmed by this decision?* This book does not cover the history of racism, but that is fundamental to understanding how to correct racially unjust systems. So many leaders and influencers claim not to have a historical comprehension of racism, and the attempts by some ultraconservatives to block such education make the work of racial justice that much harder. For example, Nikole Hannah-Jones's historical account of racism in her *The 1619 Project*, for which she won a Pulitzer Prize, has come under attack and has even been banned in certain school districts. We provide resources on where to find helpful historical references on our website at www.wintersgroup.com.

Understanding and acknowledging also means that we appreciate that actualizing racial justice in the workplace is fundamentally about culture change. It cannot be reduced to a litany of programmatic initiatives that become performative and do not focus on systems. Kevin A. Carter discusses the theory of culture change related to dismantling racism in Chapter 6. Understanding requires interrogating systems through comprehensive auditing. This has to be done transparently without fear of the consequences when disparities are uncovered. In Chapter 14, I discuss the problem with DEIJ data, including the historical penchant to mitigate legal risk by not allowing certain data to be interrogated. Often the legal perspective is that it is best that we don't know about it. In Chapter 15, Thamara Subramanian outlines a four-step process to interrogating data with a racial justice lens, including organizational alignment, uncovering overlooked insights, applying a racial equity and dominant culture analysis to the data, and transparently revealing the results, even when they are not positive, with actionable recommendations for change.

Understanding is also about listening to the lived experiences of employees by creating a culture where there are no negative repercussions for speaking up, as Katelyn Peterson points out in Chapter 10, "Closed Mouths Don't Get Justice," and as Scott Ferry points out

in Chapter 9, "Employees Can't Be Safe until They Feel Safe." Other chapters in Part II are written to enhance understanding of hiring and recruiting systems that perpetuate bias with job descriptions that require excessive years of experience, as outlined by Gabrielle Gayagoy Gonzalez in Chapter 17; training approaches that can harm BIPOC learners by retraumatizing them with reminders of injustices, as pointed out by Leigh Morrison in Chapter 19; and procurement policies that harm BIPOC vendors with long payment terms, as shared by Mareisha N. Reese in Chapter 20.

Reimagining

We cannot reimagine something different until we understand the harm that current systems cause. Each chapter offers reimagined ways of thinking, being, and doing that dismantle the status quo. Chapters in Part I ask readers to reflect on what is possible and what could be if there was courage to challenge the current system. In Chapter 6, Kevin A. Carter writes: "You may strive for a bold new idea that proclaims your mission is alive and well or a grand gesture to say you are no longer part of the problem but part of the solution." That grand gesture for a leader might be taking a pay cut to fund reparations for BIPOC employees or paying employee resource group leaders for their extra work, as Leigh Morrison and Tami Jackson tell us about in Chapter 16.

Tami Jackson implores us in Chapter 12 to reimagine professionalism by challenging dominant group notions about what "professional" looks like in name, appearance, speech, attire, and more. Scott Ferry asks us in Chapter 13 to reimagine allyship as "more than putting a black box in a social media profile, sharing an Angela Davis quote, or starting meetings and seminars with a perfunctory land acknowledgment." Instead, he says, consider "the conversations that these gestures are theoretically meant to spark and find or make the spaces to *actually have them* with others who do not yet agree."

In Chapter 16, Leigh Morrison and Tami Jackson invite us to reimagine the possibility of reparations in the form of such things as funding