

Questions about Google's anti-racism actions

[\[go/anti-racism-questions\]](#)

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Note (September 2020): This is an external version of a document which I published internally at Google. I have only edited it to remove the name of one employee and to add square brackets “[]” around links to resources only accessible from inside of the company. This document eventually led to my termination from Google. For those outside the company, Googlegeist refers to an annual employee survey, the Daily Insider is an internal newsletter for employees, and Sundar Pichai is Google's CEO.

Preface

Googlegeist asks repeatedly if we are proud to work for Google. As many other questions in the questionnaire, that one might be answered in different ways depending on what you are thinking about at the moment. I was certainly proud to pass the interviews and to get an offer. I was proud to get a chance to work for the company that was advancing technology. I was proud to work with the brightest people.

The same time I am certainly not proud to work for the company that plays identity politics at the cost of the company's culture and the quality of products. Not proud to work with the management that seems to worry more about words like “public relations” and “liabilities” than about internal communications with employees. I acknowledge that leaks do not help the trust, but as a solution I would prefer better communications to no communications.

I would like to use the current “anti-racism” topic as an example. I see the approach as divisive - one that might provide short-time PR benefits but would increase racial tensions, thus undermining the effort.

I would really like to discuss and to address what I see as an underlying issue of company's actions being inconsistent up to a point of being hypocritical, of the company being either unable or unwilling to have internal conversations on difficult topics, of the company not hearing much disagreement with its actions simply because a lot of people that disagree believe that expressing that disagreement might cost their jobs.

But let's start at least with some questions. Answering them might already be helpful for communications.

Questions

- “[Antiracist allyship starter pack](#)” circulated inside of the company has a section [[“On whiteness”](#)] that lists links to various articles like an assertive “White people have no culture” that denies good things that the Western culture has created or “What do we do with white folks?” that talks about race-based reparations while starting with [[a friendly picture of a Molotov cocktail being thrown](#)] right after the title as almost an answer to the question.

- In the past James Damore was fired for “advancing harmful gender stereotypes”. Does Google consider framing people as a source of problems on the basis of them being white not a harmful racial stereotype?
 - If we consider the approach in that pack acceptable, would the company circulate and promote hypothetical articles “Black people have no culture” that would deny the existence of everything wonderful black talents have created and “What do we do with black folks?” that would start with the same picture of a Molotov cocktail?
- The same pack [\[has\]](#) a link to “In defense of looting” article that argues that burning and looting is useful to draw attention to the protests.
 - Does Google support the notion that breaking laws - specifically burning and looting properties of random people including properties of black people as it happens - is acceptable as a method to deal with alleged racism?
- “White fragility” book is being promoted everywhere including pages like [\[go/core-dei\]](#): [\[screenshot\]](#). The book uses various forms of argument cheating like “if you disagree that you are a racist, you ARE a racist”. It also attributes flaws to people and judges people based on their skin color - which is the definition of racism. [The book is criticized](#) for other significant flaws as well.
 - Google, at least in the past, was a company based on science and data. Why does the company advise people to learn from a book that uses such bad practices? Clearly there are supposed to be coherent books on the topic.
- The term “Black Lives Matter” suffers from semantic overload. At the same time it is both a statement that I’ve never heard anyone arguing against, and the name of the movement with claimed goals that are far outside of the former statement. For example, the movement [aims to disrupt the nuclear family](#) and is led by people that [self-identify as Marxists](#).
 - Is it allowed to express disagreement with the movement’s goals and methods? What HR team is going to do if someone is reported for disagreeing with the movement or for refusing to acknowledge that “black lives matter” without a caveat that the statement is fine, but the movement is not?
 - Does the company support the statement, or does it support the movement? The company obviously supports some version of “BLM”. It would be nice for the company to avoid the ambiguity and to state if the company supports “defund the police” request etc as well.
- Top level management of the company in EMEA was sending around messages promoting [Juneteenth](#) - the event that celebrates emancipation of slaves in the US in 1865.
 - There is no doubt that the emancipation was good. But why does the company push US-specific events onto the rest of the population when, for example, the British Empire has [abolished](#) slavery in 1833, more than 30 years before the event celebrated by Juneteenth?
- Former Google class Sojourn ([\[go/sojourn\]](#)) was a class designed to some extent based on the “White fragility” book ([\[go/sojourn-syllabus\]](#)). The main page of that class [\[has a video\]](#) with opinions of the people who attended the class. The class is inactive at the moment, but it is probably still relevant, as “White Fragility” book is being promoted while Googlers externally express their regret over the class not

being active and the company states that such programs are merely being redesigned ([example](#)). Here are two quotes from the video:

- (0:44) “It reminded me that I am not White. I think I forget that sometimes. I forget I’m a person of color.” + the same person (1:27) “I’m from a privileged background. I have a great job. I’m at Google. And you look around and you’re like “Oh man! 80 percent of people in this room have more privilege than me and I thought I was doing great”.
- (0:52) “I was struck by the fact that being biracial means that I’m Black, more than I’m half White”.
- The class has been obviously heightening the perception (real or imaginary) of racial differences and inequality at the company. How does the company expect racial tensions to be solved if the company reignites the perception of racial tensions? I am aware that there are cases when things have to become less comfortable before an issue can be solved. But how making things less comfortable for people of color, how heightening their perceptions of being mistreated is useful here? Unless someone needs and conditions these people to push some agenda or just to justify the existence of the class and related programs.
- The reignition of the perception of the tensions might be a result of our bureaucracy trying to use whatever short-term solutions are known to the bureaucracy (training and policy making) in order to demonstrate that the company does something, even if such company actions are going to worsen the situation long-term. How do we plan to mitigate the long-term damage from our short-term solutions, if that’s the case?
- Does the company use the same approach - short-term solutions at the potential cost of long-term damage - in the company’s business decisions, or is this approach reserved to DEI programs specifically?
- If the company believes this to be net positive, not to have lasting long-term damage, would it be possible to hear the rationale for why does the company disregard the negative consequences of such company’s actions?
- We were told multiple times that “covid-19 disproportionately affects black communities”. That might mean totally different things: it might be due to genetics, it might be due to such communities having some troubles that might be rooted in past injustices against black people, but that are not connected to genetics directly - like a lack of access to medical care or certain societal conditions that make it easier for the virus to spread. Currently it is tempting to avoid specifics like “this is due to the communities not having enough funds”, as it provides a possibility to present such an issue as a racial instead of a socio-economic one, and publicly worrying about racial issues right now seems to be more beneficial from PR perspective than publicly worrying about issues stemming from people being poor.
 - Would it be possible for the company to be specific with such statements? As incorrect diagnosis of an issue has a cost of preventing a good solution for the issue.
 - If the issue - the covid-19 one or any other - disproportionately affects black communities not due to racism or genetics, but because of other factors - can we address the issue as such? E.g. if “it disproportionately affects poor people” - can we help poor people instead of dividing people on the basis of

race? If black communities are disproportionately poor, then a solution to poverty is going to be disproportionately beneficial to black communities, but at least the diagnostic and the solution would have a chance to be more efficient, and it is not going to be racially divisive.

- We've been receiving company-wide messages about racism being bad. These messages started with the CEO's email and then cascaded down the chain of command in almost a copy&pasted form. There is something to be said there about the ability (or the lack thereof) of many people from the top level management to make their own decisions and to have their own points of view - be it their own shortcomings or the company's culture.
 - The messages started after the tragic death of George Floyd. How such messages are supposed to prevent a similar tragedy from happening again? Right now the messages look like a purely PR action by the management in order to demonstrate support without actually addressing the situation. Both PR actions and demonstrations of support are useful at times. It is just not clear whether the management wanted to demonstrate support or wanted to actually affect something.
 - If messages were intended not as a demonstration of support, but as an attempt to change something - after all, the messages were educating the employees - is it believed that in the company there is a noticeable amount of people that either didn't know about racism being bad or were simply waiting for a confirmation from the top management to finally start believing that? What was supposed to be achieved by those messages?
- On June 12, 2020 Daily Insider [[shared a story of a black employee](#)] who had a bad interaction with the police and then, as a result, was afraid to reveal oneself to police officers sweeping YouTube office after the shooting there.
 - It is totally understandable that the employee after past bad interaction was cautious and was not trusting the police. But there was nothing supporting the claim about those officers in YouTube offices actually being racist. Yet Google chose to present to us the story with the narrative of "it is hard to reveal yourself to the police, because the police is racist". What was the company's goal? How often does the company present ungrounded personal assumptions as the state of the world?
- On March 7, 2019 (yes it is an old one, but is relevant here) Daily Insider [[shared a story](#)] about color-balancing images called "Shirley cards". The story basically said that for decades models on those images had been all white, but that Google had put an effort into making things more diverse. A quick search reveals that it is a misleading presentation of the case: for example, [this article](#) talks about Kodak recognizing and working on solving the issue back in the 1970s. [Wikipedia says](#) that at least some color-balancing images with models of different races have been around since the 1990s.
 - Google chooses what stories to tell in Daily Insider. This particular story looked worse from racial perspective than it really was. Was it the inability of editors to perform a quick check to see whether the world really was as bad as they were going to tell us, or was it an intentional attempt to make things look worse? How often such mistakes by the company happen and how big is the difference between the reality and the company's portrayal of the reality?