



# Racial Equity Community of Practice: Lessons Learned From UC San Diego Health

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Photo credit: UC San Diego Health

This Early Lessons Learned brief is part of a **series** of videos and reports from the **Safety Net Institute's** Racial Equity Community of Practice, which convened public health care systems in California to advance and embed equity into their organizations.

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In 2020, UC San Diego Health named dismantling structural racism as a strategic pillar. In 2022, the health care system hired its first chief administrative officer of Health Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (JEDI) and established a JEDI department to carry out this work.

Around this time, the [California Health Care Safety Net Institute](#) (SNI) was forming the [Racial Equity Community of Practice](#) (CoP), a learning collaborative of 12 public health care systems focused on accelerating health equity. Eager to learn from and collaborate with peers, UC San Diego Health joined the CoP in 2022.

## About the Racial Equity Community of Practice

[The California Health Care Safety Net Institute \(SNI\) formed the Community of Practice \(CoP\)](#) in early 2022 as a learning collaborative of 12 public health care systems to help them accelerate health equity. These systems comprise more than half of the state's safety net providers, predominantly serving communities of color and historically underrepresented groups. Through CoP in-person and virtual learning exchanges, peer consultancies, and tailored coaching support from the [National Equity Project](#), system leaders have been working together to strengthen anti-racism strategies and embed equity in their organizational structures. The CoP is funded by the [California Health Care Foundation](#).

Improving workplace culture is a key strategic priority for UC San Diego Health's JEDI team. In this Lessons Learned document, you will learn about several workplace initiatives that the JEDI team designed and rolled out near the end of 2022 and early 2023, including conducting a series of three fishbowl radical listening events, which successfully promoted a culture of inclusion.

You will also read UC San Diego Health's advice about how to structure and lead discussions about racism in a health care workplace and how to set your workplace culture initiatives up for success.

### One of UC San Diego Health's JEDI strategic priority areas: workplace culture

Provide resources and training to support teams and leaders in creating a diverse, inclusive, and anti-racist workplace culture that promotes equity and belonging.

## UC San Diego Health's Community of Practice team

UC San Diego Health's CoP team includes the chief administrative officer of Health Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion, and associate chief medical officer — Health Equity and

members of the health system's JEDI team. These members include an implementation coach and a community health equity specialist.

# The JEDI team's first activities

Dismantling structural racism is a strategic pillar at UC San Diego Health. "But I knew that people may not understand what that meant or what would be required to achieve it," says

**Dr. Crystal Cené**, chief administrative officer of Health Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion, and associate chief medical officer — Health Equity.

## Knowledge-building sessions

Dr. Cené, **Shivon Carreño**, JEDI implementation coach, and other members of the JEDI team conducted three knowledge-building sessions for managers, directors, associate directors, and other more senior employees to help them better understand race, racism, privilege, and bias in late 2022 and early 2023.

A large learning event, some 350 UC San Diego Health leaders attended each session. Attendance at these foundational sessions was necessary for many employees to receive their bonuses.

The 90-minute knowledge-building sessions consisted of the JEDI team presenting information for 60 minutes and participants asking questions for 30. The sessions were live events via Zoom that were recorded so participants could view them again later or watch for the first time if they missed the event; the majority of attendees joined live. The JEDI team's intent was that many UC San Diego Health employees would gain the skills to name racism and understand how it was operating in the organization, including in their work areas.

### Health equity knowledge-building sessions 1-3

**Session 1**  
How did we get here? Racial equity, racism, and anti-racism 101.

**Session 2**  
Creating brave and accountable spaces for racial equity and anti-racism dialog; establishing the command climate.

**Session 3**  
Unpacking privilege, power, hierarchies, and bias.



Photo credit: UC San Diego Health

“My goal is to really ease people to a place where they feel like they can have this conversation and understand that it's not an attack on their person. We just have things to learn together.”

–**Shivon Carreño, JEDI implementation coach, UC San Diego Health**

## Questions lead to the creation of a video educational series

The JEDI team took note of questions asked by participants most frequently during the knowledge-building sessions, as well as over email and during other events, such as Dr. Cené’s “Coffee and Chocolate” rounds. These informal conversations, held at two of the system’s hospitals, were a way for Dr. Cené to meet and hear directly from staff when she joined UC San Diego Health in July 2022.

One recurring question from staff across conversations, events, and emails was, “Why do we have to talk about race?”

Recognizing that many employees might have the same question, Dr. Cené and her JEDI team created six short videos (about five minutes) publicly accessible on Vimeo. The videos answered the talking-about-race question and others frequently asked. They also mapped to other topics and information shared during the knowledge-building sessions.

To provide more equity-related information for UC San Diego Health employees to explore, the JEDI team also created an internal website that included articles, peer-reviewed research, videos, and links to podcasts and other sites.

### Health equity video educational series

- ▶ [Why lead with race?](#)
- ▶ [What is structural racism?](#)
- ▶ [Strategies for dismantling structural racism](#)
- ▶ [How to talk about race at work](#)
- ▶ [Understanding privilege](#)

## A facilitated discussion about race focused on a TED talk

For UC San Diego Health’s executive and senior leaders to become comfortable talking about race and build the skills to do so, the JEDI team launched a 90-minute watch-and-talk in-person event.

The team facilitated groups of employees to view “[Allegories on ‘Race’ and Racism](#),” a TED

talk by [Dr. Camara Jones](#), a physician, epidemiologist, and anti-racism scholar-activist. The 15-minute TED talk discussed four different allegories. After each allegory, the JEDI team paused the video and facilitated a discussion around the subject matter, which included questions, shared experiences, and thoughts.



The JEDI team facilitated 25 discussions with some 1,600 employees in late 2022 and early 2023. At the end of each learning session, the team administered three yes-or-no question surveys. Key findings from the survey results included:

- 92% of participants said the information was presented in a way that made them feel comfortable to engage
- 89% of participants would recommend this activity to others
- 73% of participants reported learning something new or something that caused them to change their mind about a previously held point of view



Carreño shares how her personal history and passion for patient care inspires her equity work. [Watch video here.](#)

## How to structure and lead discussions about racism in the workplace

For health care systems that want to hold conversations about race and racism internally, whether in the form of facilitating a large staff event or a smaller learning session, here is some advice from the JEDI team:

- 1. Ensure you have a skilled facilitator.** A session's success often rests on the ability of the facilitator to guide and navigate sensitive conversations in the workplace that are new to many employees. As such, employees may feel a range of emotions, from uncomfortable to cynical to fearful. However, a skilled facilitator focused on employees' growth can create an inclusive and positive environment where everyone feels safe contributing and walks away feeling more understood or with a greater understanding of their peers.

"The coaching we received in the Community of Practice provided a space for us to individually meet with a member of their team and ask questions around these equity challenges we had. I received advice on how to push through the equity challenges, and an opportunity to circle back and say, 'Hey, this was the result. It isn't quite what I wanted. How can we move this forward?' That coaching and that support was key in moving a lot of initiatives that I was working on at UCSD." **–Shivon Carreño**

**Lesson learned:** Although the JEDI team facilitated the vast majority of the "Allegories on 'Race' and Racism" TED talk sessions, some managers at UC San Diego Health led them instead. A few were not effective. In response, the JEDI team quickly launched facilitation training for managers who chose to conduct the discussions with their teams. The training equipped managers with the necessary knowledge and specific facilitation techniques. As of fall 2023, some 40 UC San Diego Health managers have completed facilitation training.

- 2. Prepare participants.** Before the session, share the why behind it through a Zoom call and/or detailed email and directly connect racism to participants' everyday work caring for patients or supporting those who do. Always invite questions. Such thoughtful preparation can help set both the expectations and tone for the upcoming discussion — open, direct, and welcoming.
- 3. Ease participants into the session.** To make participants feel comfortable from the start, and as Dr. Cené says, "to lower the emotional temperature in the room," consider beginning your discussion with a breathing exercise, meditation or reflections of gratitude.
- 4. Start with community agreements.** Conversations about race can be challenging. Community agreements are the rules of how participants engage with each other during the session so everyone feels safe to speak. For example, "commit to learning, not debating" is a guideline that participants agree to at the start of many of UC San Diego Health's workplace culture sessions.

"Community agreements are always important because if the conversation goes left, you can always bring participants back to the community agreements you reviewed at the beginning of the session."

—Shivon Carreño

- 5. Focus the conversation about racism on structures, systems, and policies.** A common misconception that participants have before discussions about race is that it will be contentious. As a result, some participants can be defensive or disengaged before the session even begins. However, these discussions should focus on the structures, systems, policies, and laws that perpetuate inequities, not calling out individuals. This angle can

create cohesion among the group, says Carreño, emphasizing that we are all victims of racism and other systems of oppression.

"I know that it's very difficult for people to talk about racism. Just the word itself and people recoil, they shut down, they feel blamed and shamed. And I recognize that. So my approach is to always try to talk about it in a way that's disarming so you can approach the information with receptivity."

—Dr. Crystal Cené, chief administrative officer of Health Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion, and associate chief medical officer — Health Equity

- 6. Make the session discussion-based, two-way, and interactive.** Few people enjoy long lectures or passively sitting in silence taking in slide after slide. Most people want an opportunity to voice their thoughts, ask questions, and discuss the information presented with peers. You can try to meet these participant needs, even when providing information in a more didactic way by:
  - Using polls or asking questions with Zoom's chat feature
  - Embedding short videos or other media to make the material more engaging
  - Carving out ample time at the end of the presentation for people to break into small discussion groups
- 7. Build your content around stories.** When discussing "race" and racism, a story about watching butterflies in a garden or a restaurant owner flip the door sign from open to closed can draw participants in more quickly than a list of statistics. Neuroscience shows that our brains are wired for stories, and we're

more likely to remember them, especially the humorous ones. This is why TED talks, which are often grounded in stories, can be useful to include or refer to in your discussions. And it is why Dr. Cené refers to stories as “the language of leaders.”

**8. Ask for feedback at the end.** The JEDI team closes many workplace learning sessions with a survey that asks just a few quick questions. The questions usually focus on whether the participants felt comfortable during the

session, if they would recommend the session to others, and if they learned something new or became more curious about a topic.

The JEDI team includes an open comments section below these questions, which it highly recommends as participants regularly leave helpful and enlightening comments. Reading and contemplating these comments has informed much of the JEDI team’s work and programming.

## A focus on fishbowl radical listening events

In the winter of 2023, UC San Diego Health received the results of a team member engagement survey, which more than half of the organization’s 17,000 employees completed.

A common theme in the results was that many employees, particularly people of color and on the frontline, reported feeling generally unheard and unsafe to speak up at work. This low psychological safety often means staff hold back from expressing concerns and criticisms or dissenting from leadership’s opinions.

And psychological safety matters. Unless employees believe they can contribute their ideas and opinions without retribution and feel connected to their peers, teams cannot effectively pull together to do their best work. This type of low-functioning team can directly hinder performance and patient care.

### The goal of fishbowl radical listening events

To begin creating a safe and inclusive environment for open dialog that fosters understanding and empathy, UC San Diego Health conducted three radical listening events known as “fishbowls” in spring 2023.

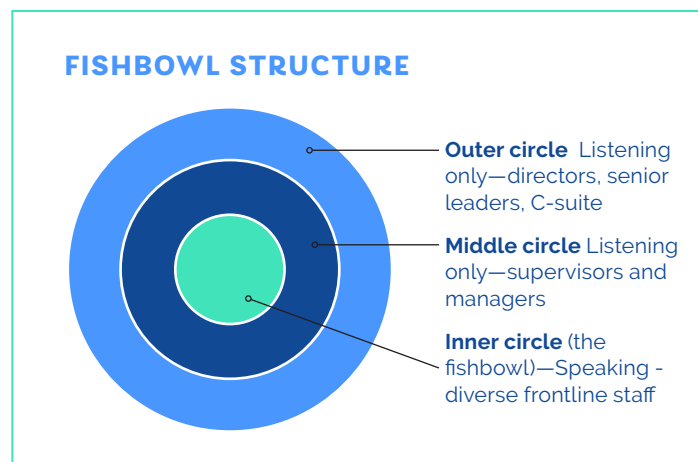
### The structure of the fishbowls

In the inner circle (the fishbowl), participants were staff on the frontline and often closest to the work. They openly discussed questions

posed by the facilitator who minimally guided the event. Besides the JEDI team’s facilitator, staff in the inner circle were the only ones allowed to speak. They shared their on-the-ground perspectives, experiences, stories, and race-related insights.

Those silently observing the inner circle were supervisors and managers in the middle circle and directors and senior leaders in the outer circle. These employees could not respond to what those in the inner circle said or contribute their perspective. Their job was to listen with the intensity normally reserved for speaking.

The events were designed so there were more staff in the inner circle than in the middle and outer circles. The purpose of this structure was to help inner circle participants feel empowered, not outnumbered. For example, in the first fishbowl event, there were 19 participants in the inner circle, 14 in the middle, and seven in the outer.



## Who participated in the fishbowls

The fishbowls prioritized physically centering the voices of Black and Indigenous staff and other staff of color, as well as other staff who might have low psychological safety.

The JEDI team knew from the health system's team engagement survey that a large percentage of respondents felt unsafe to speak. The team used a stratified sampling strategy to ensure significant representation from departments that scored low on psychological safety in the survey, emailing invitations to employees in these departments to participate in the fishbowls. The email explained how their lived experience and organizational knowledge would be valuable to the listening event.

The team also emailed 1,000 employees by job classification from departments that scored both high and low on psychological safety to ensure balanced circles in the fishbowl. And the team made other employees who might be interested in participating aware of the fishbowls through organization-wide town hall events and on-site visits. Ultimately, everyone who participated in a fishbowl had to volunteer or agree to being a part of the event if invited.

When structuring each of the three fishbowls, the JEDI team ensured:

- A balanced racial representation, which was obtained by asking staff who wanted to attend to self-identify race and ethnicity
- Representation from different titles, levels, and departments
- No inner circle participant's supervisor was in the room

## The discussion

During the 90-minute fishbowl event, a facilitator posed seven questions to inner circle participants. The questions grew increasingly specific and solution-based, and sometimes personal, as the discussion progressed, and included:

- What aspect of your racial or ethnic identity makes you the proudest?
- Have you ever been treated unfairly at UC San Diego Health because of your racial, ethnic, or gender identity? If so, how did you respond? How did it make you feel?
- What would need to happen for all employees to feel safe to speak up at UC San Diego Health if they see injustice or someone being treated unfairly?

## UCSD Health's three fishbowls: by the numbers

**94** percent of participants reported that the fishbowls helped them better understand another participant's perspective or reconsider their beliefs

**45** employees at each event, on average

**7** questions asked of inner circle employees during fishbowls

**0** supervisors in the room if one of their direct reports was in the inner circle

**90** minutes per fishbowl event

**1** graphic recorder to visually capture each event



## Evaluation data from three fishbowls

Overall, the fishbowl radical listening events effectively fostered dialog, empathy, and understanding among participants and promoted a culture of inclusion and collaboration. Key findings included:

- 96% of participants felt the dialog was facilitated in a way that made them comfortable
- 94% of participants reported the activity helped them better understand another participant's perspective or reconsider their beliefs
- 96% of participants would recommend this activity to others

"Really outstanding discussion. Emotional, but I felt well-supported. I appreciate everyone's vulnerability in sharing these sensitive incidents/ experiences. It was an eye-opening experience. I respect the middle and outer circle participants for listening without responding ... how difficult it must have been! Thank you for facilitating this incredible event."

### Inner circle participant

"This exercise was enlightening. To be able to listen to frontline staff, just listen, was a great opportunity. No trying to fix, no judgment. Powerful."

### Outer circle participant

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## Next steps

Given the success of the fishbowl events, UC San Diego Health plans to hold at least two more each year.



Photo credit: UC San Diego Health

## UC San Diego Health's advice for conducting fishbowl events

The JEDI team attributes most of the positive results from the fishbowls to the way they were facilitated, and the amount of careful preparation undertaken.

For health care systems interested in conducting fishbowls, the JEDI team shares this advice:

- 1. Facilitate with care.** Your goal should be to make people feel comfortable and create a respectful environment conducive to employees of the inner circle sharing and the other participants actively listening. Use community agreements.
- 2. Secure management support.** Email a letter from C-suite executives to the supervisors and managers of those attending fishbowls. The letter should explain the event's purpose and emphasize its value and importance. Supervisors and managers should then email their staff who are participating to voice their support.

**Lesson learned:** Some Environmental Services, Facilities, and Nutrition employees held back from speaking in the inner circles. The JEDI team believes that despite email reassurances from supervisors that it was safe to talk, these employees might have hesitated because they feared risking their jobs. The JEDI team is exploring different strategies to engage these employees that are not group based. For example, providing opportunities for them to be interviewed individually in their preferred language. The interviews would be aggregated and attention paid to who interviewed them so employees would feel comfortable speaking freely.

- 3. Prepare participating staff in detail and more than once.** Whether employees are part of the inner, middle, or outer circles, a fishbowl might be a novel experience. As such, clearly explain the goals, their roles, how it works, and the rules.

For example, communicate in advance that the middle and outer circles will only be allowed to listen, not respond, and explain that there will be no tolerance for any form of retaliation. The JEDI team shared this information in emails and a 30-minute, Q&A-heavy Zoom call with participants a few days before the event. The team also reiterated these messages in an email the week of the fishbowl.

- 4. Be intentional about how you select individuals for fishbowl events.** Carreño and the JEDI team manually dug through organizational charts and checked reporting lines to ensure no inner circle participant's supervisor was in the room. This check is a must for any organization embarking on a fishbowl.

**Lesson learned:** One of the fishbowls had several employees from the health system's HR department, particularly employee relations leaders, in the room. It was a noticeably quieter fishbowl than the others. Inner circle participants said that they chose not to talk in the presence of HR, shutting down instead. The team is examining how to rectify this for future fishbowls.

- 5. Consider using a graphic recorder to visually capture the event.** To memorialize what is heard and experienced during fishbowls through pictures and words, the JEDI team uses a graphic recorder. Unlike audio recordings, which can make employees feel less safe and potentially identifiable, this visual approach has been successful for the health system.

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## How to set your workplace culture initiatives up for success

Within a few months, UC San Diego Health designed and rolled out several significant and successful workplace culture initiatives. How did they do it? And how can you?

Below is some advice to help you start to support your health care system employees in creating a diverse, inclusive, and anti-racist workplace culture that promotes equity and belonging.

- 1. Ensure sufficient resources and position health equity strategically in the organization.** "If you are a health care system that does not provide the necessary staff and budget for health equity work, then you will not be effective," says Dr. Cené. This work must be resourced in the same way as any other department in the health system.  
  
To advance health equity at the organizational level, positioning matters too. At UC San Diego Health, the health equity lead is a C-level position that reports to the CEO. That structure provides Dr. Cené with the voice, visibility, and resources to execute objectives aimed at creating an anti-racist workplace culture and fostering community health, among others.
- 2. Hire a health equity lead with the appropriate skill set.** Find someone steeped in the professional world of health equity. An individual with a high degree of equity content knowledge, experience, and expertise will be more likely to succeed in helping to transform your organization. A background in research and understanding of data is also essential.
- 3. Always connect racism to patient and staff experiences.** UC San Diego Health regularly kicks off workplace culture initiatives by addressing the "why" of pursuing diversity, equity, and inclusion work. Specifically, how dismantling structural racism connects to the bigger picture of patient care.

"What our team members experience in the workforce is integrally tied to what our patients experience," says Dr. Cené. "So for our team members, if there's something about the structure, the policies, the practices, and the norms in our system that is perpetuating racism, then our patients are going to be harmed by that."

- 4. Use data to make the case for equity initiatives.** Persuading is unnecessary if you can simply point to data (qualitative, such as stories, and quantitative) that explains instead. Dr. Cené believes the combination of qualitative and quantitative makes the most powerful case.  
  
Leverage existing research and data that demonstrates the need for workplace culture initiatives to leadership and include relevant proof points in presentations to staff. For data-driven health care organizations, referencing the numbers is an effective way to lower resistance.
- 5. Focus on process, process, process.** How was the JEDI team able to accomplish so much, so quickly? Dr. Cené believes a key reason is the department's focus on process and strategy, which provides a clear path for the JEDI team to follow. For each workplace culture initiative (e.g., knowledge-building sessions), the team lists all milestones and matches them to timelines. She says these details — plainly and visibly plotted — maximize the team's efficiency.
- 6. Be responsive to what you hear and rework your plan accordingly and quickly.** Do you spot any themes arising in staff feedback to your equity sessions, whether through surveys, observation, conversations, and emails? What questions are team members frequently asking about equity? Have you identified a new need during these learning sessions that requires addressing? Answers to these questions should help you pinpoint what work needs to be done next and tailor your content and programming in the most impactful way.

- 7. Get creative and provide as many different resources in as many different formats as you can to reach employees.** Everyone has a preference about how they like to learn, whether through talking about concepts and experiences with peers, watching videos, or reading books. UC San Diego Health's Radiology department and the Office of the Chief Medical Officer recently started book clubs where employees read works such as [Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents](#). To successfully engage people in talking about race and racism, Dr. Cené believes you should consider fresh approaches.
- 8. Understand that to execute a workplace culture session where employees feel comfortable and curious is time-consuming.** Carreño says that the thought and preparation that goes into conducting an effective learning session is a heavy and labor-intensive lift. Plan accordingly.

Dr. Cené also emphasizes that having realistic expectations when undertaking workplace culture initiatives is critical, especially when considering the country's history.

"We have had over 400 years of systemic racism, and we are only about six decades removed from slavery and segregation. We can't correct deep-rooted racism in one, five or even 10 years. It will require many decades of sustained focus and attention," says Dr. Cené. "And sometimes it's the small shifts that actually make a huge difference but that shift happens over time. So you must have realistic expectations. Yet there is reason to hope! As stated by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., 'The moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends towards justice.' We will continue in the relentless pursuit of health justice. We hope you will join us."

To learn more about the Racial Equity Community of Practice, please visit:  
[safetynetinstitute.org/priorities/racial-equity/](https://safetynetinstitute.org/priorities/racial-equity/)