

# Stakeholder experiences: The connections between brand management and listening

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# Goal for the session

- Build understanding about how to create a listening architecture that plays a key role in an organization's reputation and brand management.
- Key term: Resident experience of being heard (UX)
- Key change: Less general content output, more listening and communicating about solutions
- Key questions
  - How does your organization listen to stakeholders, and what should happen next?
  - How might you build a robust system of listening that's connected with brand management, boosting your organization's reputation?

## THE PITCH

**Brand experiences that prioritize listening and inclusion matter more than our communication output routines. Changing to a focus on resident-generated solutions built after listening to resident experiences can lead to:**

- **stakeholder wellbeing, and**
- **the wellbeing of our communities.**



“The future does not fit the  
containers of the past.”

Rishad Tobaccowala

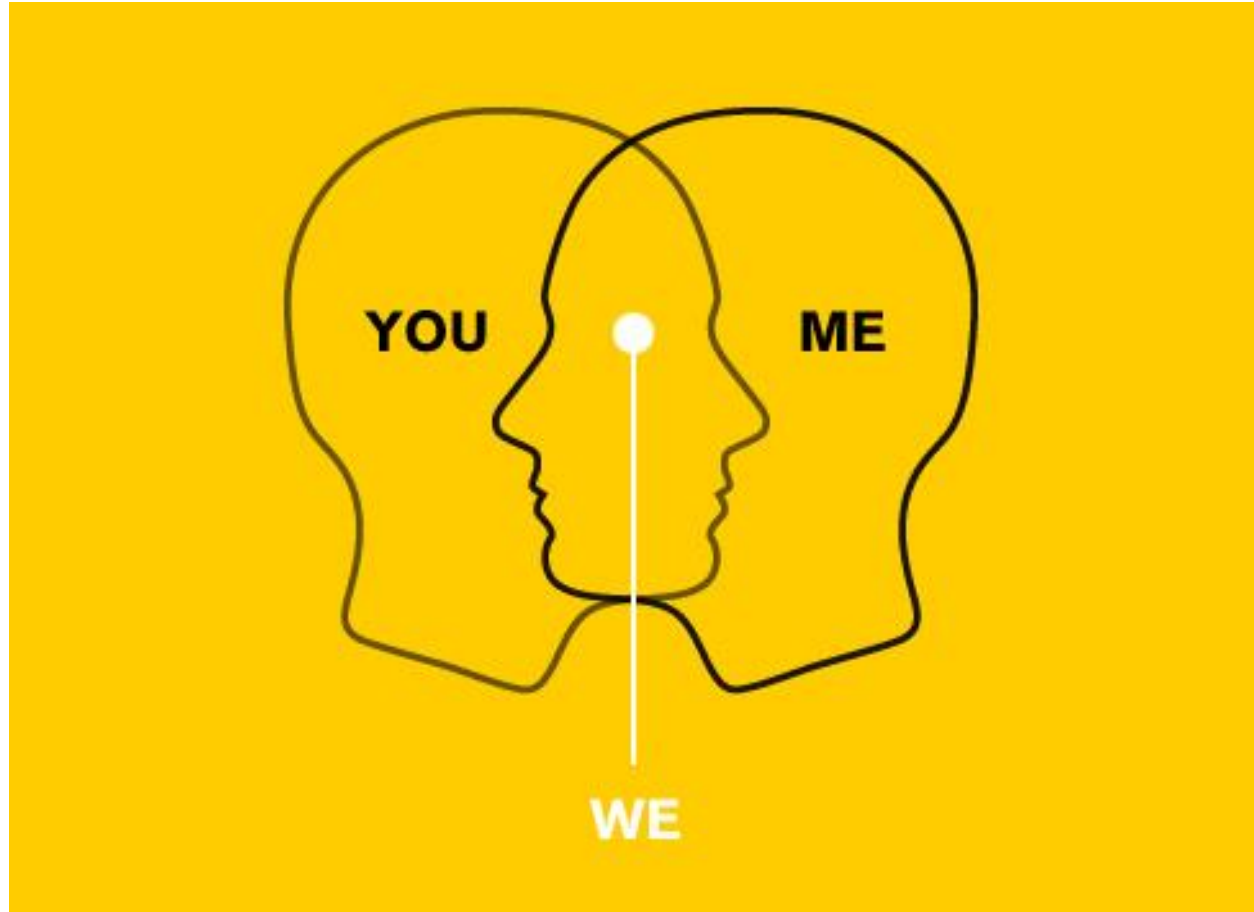
“(Audra Lorde said in 1980 that) ‘we have no patterns for relating across our human differences as equals.’ To be antiracist is a radical choice in the face of this history, requiring a radical reorientation of our consciousness.”

Ibram Kendi

“The future does not fit the  
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# Start with why



What is your “why” for a change to more listening?

# How does your organization listen?



Ask your team to list all the ways that your city or county listens.

# Audit the ways that your organization currently attends to and prioritizes listening

- Who has listening as part of their job descriptions?
- Who should have listening as part of their job descriptions?
- How do you inboard new employees to become good listeners?
- How do you train current employees to do this? How do you incentivize this?
- Where is crucial listening already occurring? Where should it be?
- Who is “rounding up” listening from all places, seeing patterns, and solving problems?
- Who is or could be your organization’s listener-in-chief?

# Listening and communication planning

- Might be called feedback, input, meetings, complaints—be sure to upgrade your language to include listening.
- Call centers, front-line/public-facing employees, managers who handle complaints that have escalated, meetings, email, social media platforms, elected officials, internal stakeholders who understand the core mission of your organization, and more.
- The word “listening” should be a foundation of any engagement plan, project, or activity that you create for external and internal stakeholders.

Here's the biggest **change** for communicators: We spend a lot of time developing outbound channels, but we should redirect resources to developing inbound channels, i.e. listening and engagement.

The list of your listening channels should be as long or longer than your outbound.

No new resources may be coming in,  
so shift away from communication to  
customer experiences as a builder of  
trust, linkages, and solutions.

This is the brand connection:

**Your brand is in the mind of the people you serve—not in your own mind, not in your logo, not in your communication packages.**

Debrief

# Public participation in the public sector is an empty ritual.

... and possibly dangerous.

What is your experience with Stop-Watch listening, i.e. the 3-minute comment?

# Three types of listening

- **Compassionate (empathetic) listening**

(Good for consolation, bad for solutions). You feel marginally better, I'm released from follow-up.

- **Stonewall listening**

(You talk and I hear you, but I'm not open to change. Called "cataphatic" listening by Dobson, 2014). In history, this is what kings and landowners used to do. It's oppressive and privileged.

- **Zen listening**

(I am still. I don't talk. You get to take the mic and drive later action. Called "apophatic" listening by Dobson). It means to lay down power and control.

An exercise for your team: Think of a time when your city or county has used each one of these modes of listening.

- Compassionate
- Stonewall
- Zen

# A model (built with Kevin Lyons)

|                 | To Change/Act                                                                                                                                     | Not Going to Change/Act                                                                                       |
|-----------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| With Empathy    | <p><b>“So sorry we messed up.<br/>We want to do better, with your<br/>help, and we will.”</b></p> <p><b>Ideal zen   Stillness + solutions</b></p> | <p><b>“I feel your pain.”</b></p> <p><b>Compassionate   Just feelings</b></p>                                 |
| Without Empathy | <p><b>“What’s the problem?”</b></p> <p><b>Cold zen   Complaint dept.</b></p>                                                                      | <p><b>“Someone told me I had to show<br/>up here and look interested.”</b></p> <p><b>Stonewall   Sham</b></p> |

# 6 ideas for better listening

## Phase out

- ✗ • Traditional “town halls”
- ✗ • Voices of usual suspects and trolls, receiving too much attention
- ✗ • Celebrations and state-of-the-city back-slapping events for elites
- ✗ • One-way digital messaging in toxic spaces online
- ✗ • Communicators **pushing out** content that you’ve always produced
- ✗ • **One 3-minute comment**

## Phase in

- ✓ • Trained listeners in breakout rooms
- ✓ • Scientific surveying of residents for representative input
- ✓ • Meeting residents at their own special neighborhood events
- ✓ • Face-to-face discussions and boots on the ground
- ✓ • Communicators as the ears of your city or county’s administrators
- **Shorter but multiple structured inputs**

# What Black stakeholders told us about Fort Worth and beyond (English, Lambiase, O'Neil)

- 25 depth interviews with Black stakeholders (n=19) and other activists (n=6) in Fort Worth in spring and summer 2020.
- 500 survey responses from Black stakeholders from across the country in 2021.

## THEMES

- Public participation does not equal listening;
- A privileged speaker is more likely to be heard;
- A lack of attention and acknowledgment means the listening process is racist; and
- Listening seems like publicity, not real dialogue, especially if **changes** do not follow.

# Quotes from participants

- “To be a listener means to be an active listener, to demonstrate that you understand what’s being said and you model that back.”
- “I don't think they listen at all. I don't. I think that it's defensive first. If they are listening, they're tone deaf. It's one of the two.”
- “If they're going to systematically ignore you over and over and over again every time you come in, then there's no reason to have a forum.”

# “PR sucks” theme

- “The mayor launched this huge PR campaign about ‘y'all means all’ ... but they'd rather do that then actually substantively talk to their own constituents.”
- Communication with (city) is “more of slick campaigns and photo opps than real dialogue.”
- “They would serve punch and cookies and say, okay, here's what we are doing, and we're going to do this next. But it was never really any input from those members of the community about the real issues facing the city. Again, it was public relations.”
- “I feel like it was all for show so that way they didn't have another Ferguson happening in Fort Worth.”

# Let the change begin ...

For your consideration, think through these five topics or similar ideas with your team, once you build awareness for the need for change.

# 1. Diversify, intensify, scrutinize your team

- **Diversify internal teams.** Who's on your team now? Who were the last 3-4 hires your comms/marketing department made (race, gender, age)? Who can informally join your team until you can hire?
- **Intensify work with external partners and listen to them.** How many BIPOC partners do you have? How can you recruit more? "You can't keep going to the Black church to understand Black people."
- **Scrutinize your past work** to make your future work better. Be aware of your oversights, omissions, neglect. All are a form of racism. Using only English in your messaging is a form of white supremacy.
- **How does your team listen?** Understand stakeholder experience?

## 2. Commit to resident participation planning

- Leader briefings for every neighborhood
- Dialogue with and brief activists and their organizations
- Media briefings
- Information on website
  - FAQ
  - Highlight decision-making process
  - Process flowchart
  - Document repository
- Required public hearings
- Communication of council decisions
- HOA communication networks
- Open-house meetings
- Blogs for specific projects/initiatives
  - Input & feedback
- Social media outreach and listening
- Multi-language communication
- Listening tours without an agenda

Based on model provided by Will Hampton,  
City of Round Rock

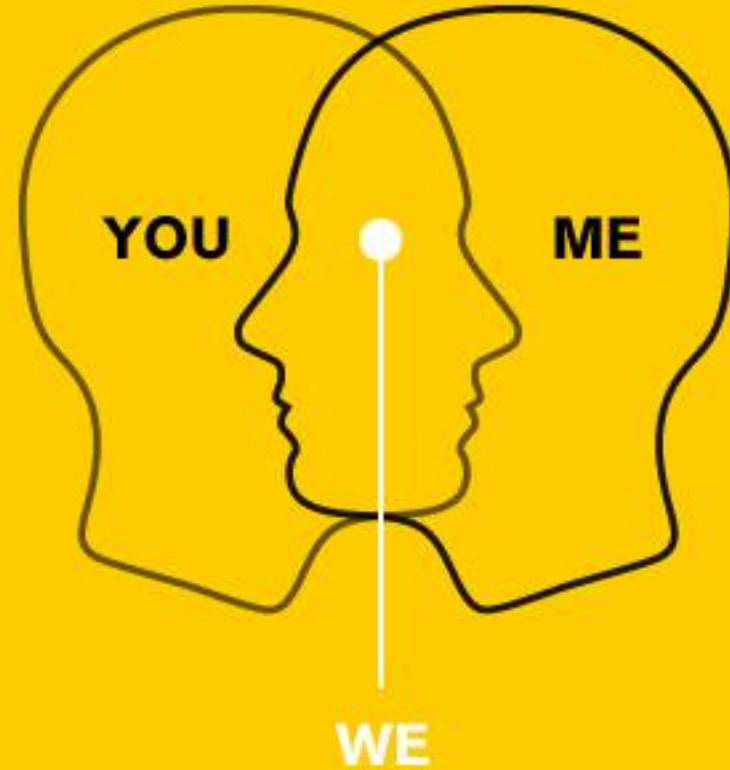
### 3. Focus on outcomes, not output

Every communication goal, objective, strategy, tactic should be tied to the ways it boosts:

- Listening
- Actions
- New community engagement
- New relationship-building efforts and partnerships
- Solutions
- **Change**

## 4A. Embrace zen listening. Be still.

- There is no “them” — there is only “us.”



## 4B. Develop responsive listenership/leadership

Responsiveness, expressed through

- Listening, then reflection;
  - Action, not silence (silent allies aren't allies);
  - Empathy;
  - Friendliness;
  - Compassion;
  - A focus on relational aspect of daily communication.
- 
- It is risky. It requires you and others to lay down control and power.

## 4C. Audit listening in social media spaces

- Pertinent response: Did you mention the subject of the speaker's message?
- Elaboration: Did you address the speaker by name? Did you address the speaker's emotion? Did you expand on the speaker's thoughts?
- Advice, opinion, perspective: Did you offer the speaker advice or help through resources, such as a weblink or phone number? Did you provide an opinion or viewpoint on the speaker's situation or topic?
- Answering and asking questions.
- Use multiple strategies and techniques.
- Respond like a human.
- Be sympathetic and empathetic.
- Use emojis to display emotion.
- Address speaker's feelings.
- Provide web links/contacts.
- Use GIFs and humor, if they are appropriate and align with your voice.

## 5. Know and Teach Your History

- Understand the founding of your city and its surrounding community. Seek to learn more about groups/voices that are missing from that narrative.
- Learn about the chronically underserved areas of your communities. How has your city leadership responded to those areas in the past? Are those actions impacting your communication today?
- Talk to residents and activists with deep knowledge about community dynamics and their interactions with leaders.
- Create a plan to educate staff and residents about this history. Is it time to update the “About Us” tab, or can you provide a page just about the history of your city or county?



**Sankofa Bird**

## 5. Key questions about your city's history

- Who is and has been overserved? (Too much listening to these folks)
- Who is and has been underserved? (Too little listening to these folks)

# Next steps

- Use better listening strategies to help your city or county improve engagement with all audiences, especially with people who are underrepresented in decision-making spaces.
- Take an inventory of your organization's listening architecture and create new pathways for communication through old channels and new.
- Build listening ambassadors inside your city or county, who with you can welcome new ideas and change as you begin to hear more about your stakeholders' needs.
- Adopt stakeholder ideas to spark new programming, activities, and community engagement in new ways.

# For your team: What kind of listening is happening in your community now?

- Where does it occur? (virtual, in-person, email, social media)
  - What channels? (official, unofficial, observation, from powerful people, from less powerful people, digital, analog)
  - **Who summarizes or finds themes across these spaces and channels?**
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- **Turn and talk**
  - **Debrief**

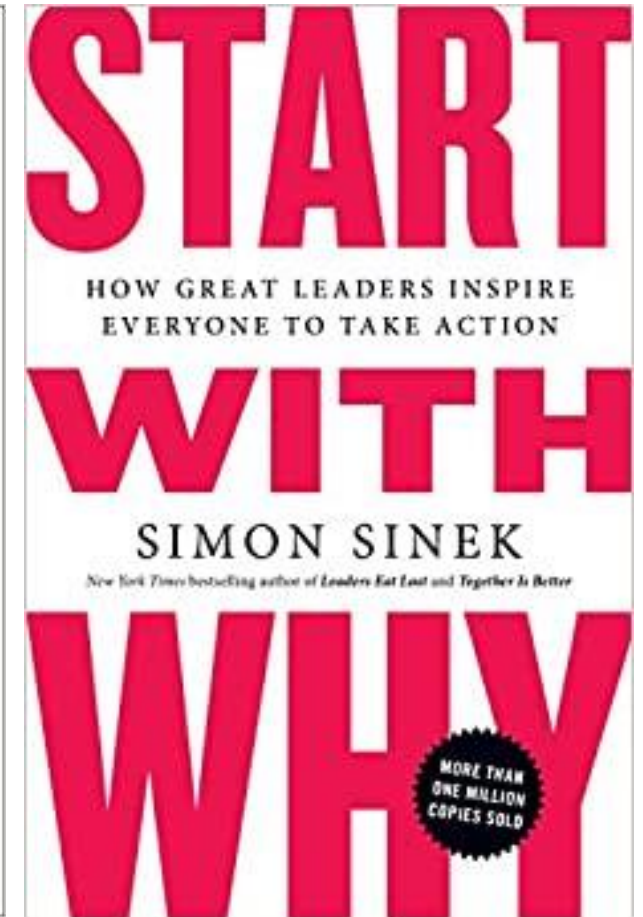
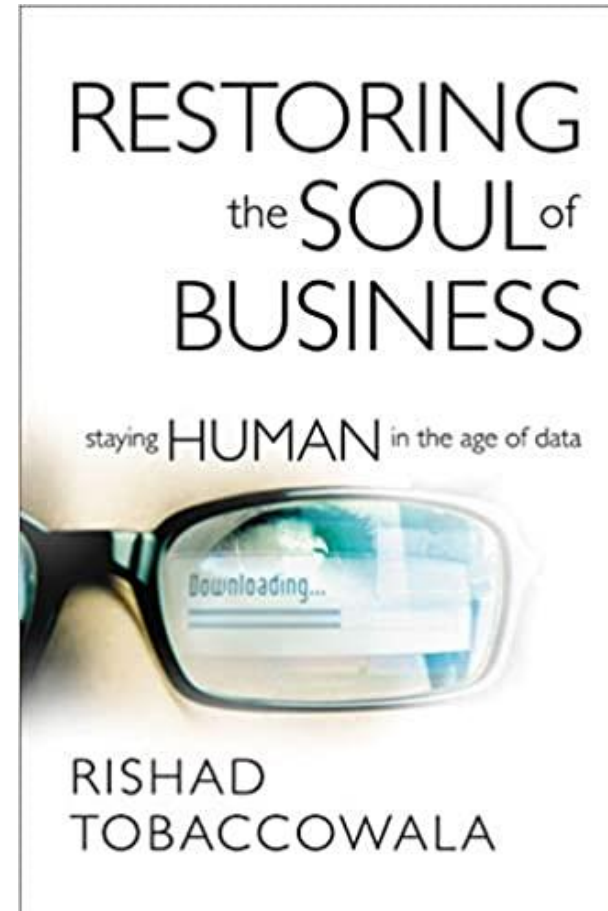
# More resources

- <https://mrsc.org/Home/Explore-Topics/Governance/Citizen-Participation-and-Engagement/Community-Engagement-Resources.aspx>
- <https://hbr.org/2019/04/to-change-the-way-you-think-change-the-way-you-see>



# Resources for connecting your employees to your stakeholders

- Experiences over communication (input/solutions over output)
- Purpose-driven (the “why”)
- Employee joy (a Southwest Airlines pilot might tell you the score of a game in flight, based on destination, but a United pilot acts like the game doesn't exist).



# TED Talk

Video: How words change minds (framing and anthropology)

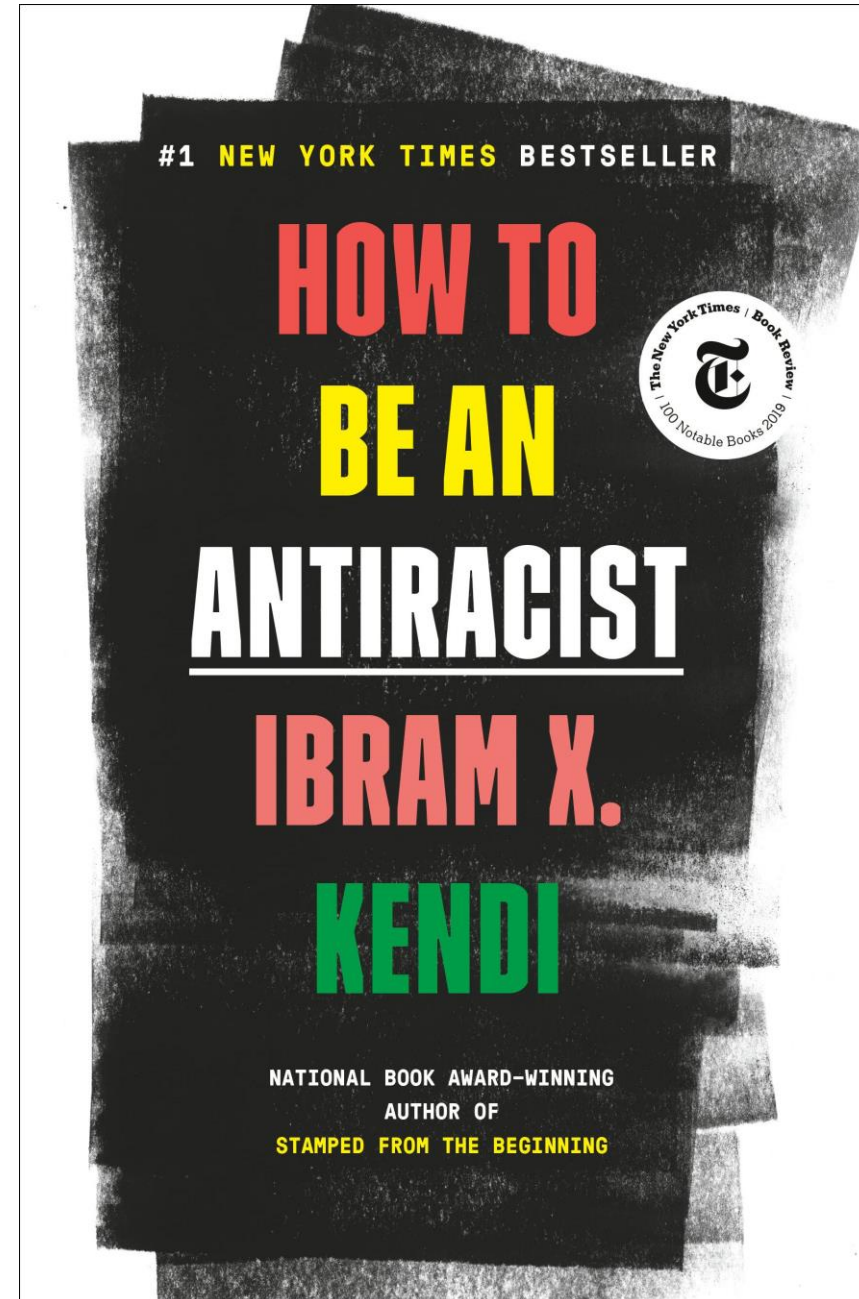
- As you listen, think about what is interesting? What is useful?
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y8wol2nGSpY>

Figure 1. *Listening to Black Communities in a Municipal Setting*

| <b>Culture</b>                                                 | <b>Politics/People</b>                                                                                                                       | <b>Structures/Processes</b>                                                                                                                         | <b>Articulation of Listening</b>                                                        |
|----------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Show care, connection, and empathy                             | Listen to working poor and people of color—hearing from them directly, not by proxy (e.g., via Black places of worship/chambers of commerce) | Intentionally reach out to communities, particularly those outside of the typical power structure                                                   | Be willing to admit mistakes amidst dialogue and working toward solution with residents |
| Create a welcoming and inviting environment                    | Listen to residents from underrepresented neighborhoods and groups                                                                           | Rely less on mainstream digital outreach through the city website or social media posts                                                             | Intentionally reach out to diverse communities to share acknowledgement of racism       |
| Use affirming postures, body language, attire                  | Listen to young people and dissenting voices (activist allies)                                                                               | Include city employees working for racial and diversity improvement                                                                                 | Provide authentic response from city leaders following major event, tragedy or crisis   |
| Acknowledge past and current racism and civil rights problems  | Listen to city employees and police officers                                                                                                 | Incorporate rolling townhalls, neighborhood action meetings, budgeting meetings with planned public participation, and bottom-up visioning meetings | Take action to authenticate the listening process                                       |
| Use proactive issues management and problem-solving approaches | Listen to those most closely connected to the problem; most impacted by the issue                                                            | Develop key listening performance indicators to document progress                                                                                   | Report back on key listening performance indicators                                     |

# Resources on antiracism

- Ibram Kendi's book --->
- PDF about inclusive research, listening, language choices:  
<https://fleishmanhillard.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Life-Beyond-the-Labels-The-Role-of-Intent-and-Inclusion-in-Authentic-Brand-Connections.pdf>





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