



## **Build on Strength**

One of the most important factors in getting to sustained effective action is feeling competent to act. Countering racism is a challenge with a great deal of unknown and it can cause a lot of anxiety and doubt about our ability to be competent in acting to counter it.

It's true that we, as White people, have a great deal to learn - we have awareness to develop and competencies to build to be as effective as we would like to be. It's also true that we bring a lot of strengths to the game – strengths that we have developed over time in our personal and professional lives.

The best way to develop the new strengths required is to build on the current strengths. That means (1) acknowledging the strengths we bring; (2) identifying the new knowledge and capabilities to be developed, and (3) following the path of mastery to achieve them.

Some of that work needs to be done to prepare for effective action, but most of it needs to happen “in the game.” A major trap that we must avoid is getting stuck on the sidelines preparing to act.

### **#1**

#### **Acknowledge Your Strength - Lose the “Aw Shucks”**

Most White people bring more than they think to the challenge of countering racism. It usually doesn't feel that way, but it's true. We have developed a great deal of capability and character in living our personal and professional lives and overcoming challenges throughout on the paths we have followed.

To be successful countering racism we need to build on that strength and avoid the “Aw Shucks” phenomenon. Falling prey to the “aw shucks”: phenomenon is evidenced by the following thoughts or statements.

- “Aw shucks, I don’t really know much about countering racism.”
- “Aw shucks, I don’t really bring much to the effort to counter racism.
- “Aw shucks, I don’t really know how to go about even getting in the game.”
- “Aw shucks, I don’t think I have much to offer.”
- “Aw shucks, I’m not really connected to anyone doing this work.”
- “Aw shucks, I don’t even know the first steps to take.”
- “Aw shucks, people won’t really want me involved.”
- “Aw shucks, I’m just.....”
- “Aw shucks, I’m not.....”

### **“Aw Shucks” Diminishes Us and is an Excuse to Not Commit**

The “Aw Shucks” phenomenon is real. It is natural. And it provides an excuse to avoid getting off the sidelines and in the game.

- It provides an excuse to avoid engaging at all.
- It provides an excuse to stay on the sidelines preparing.
- It provides an excuse to be a “toe dipper” or to withdraw at the first sign of frustration or setback
- It infects others, and groups can collude in using it as an excuse to avoid engaging (consciously or unconsciously)

And, it reinforces our “small self” and undermines our “larger self.” That has an impact well beyond countering racism – for us as individuals and for us as organizations or communities. We need to act from our larger selves to counter racism.

### **Beware the Sideline Competency Trap**

The trap is getting caught in preparing to get in the game to such an extent that we never really get off the sidelines. We prepare on the sidelines to be competent in countering racism, but never get in the game, so racism wins by default. Awareness and education are essential, but without committed action they are useless.

However, feeling anxiety about not being fully prepared is also natural and it does need to be addressed. The fear of being incompetent – and maybe making things worse – is one of the biggest barriers to acting.

### **Getting Out of the Sideline Competency Trap**

The key is to commit to action without feeling fully prepared and “ready.” There are two reasons why this works.

1. **We naturally bring most of the needed capabilities.** We probably bring anywhere from 70-90% of the competencies required to have an impact countering racism simply because we have developed personal and professional competencies throughout our lives. So, the key is to identify and rely on those competencies and develop the new competencies and understanding we might need – mostly as we act.
2. **We can develop the other capabilities we need.** Those 10-30% of competencies are important, but we aren’t starting from scratch, and we don’t need to be expert at everything to make a difference. Plus, most of the new competencies will be developed faster and better while we are in action vs. developing them on the sidelines. We have developed competencies throughout life and can accelerate that development for the most important competencies.

*“Never be afraid to do something new. Remember, amateurs built the ark; professionals built the Titanic.”*

Unknown

### **#2**

### **Identify the New Required Competencies – with Confidence & Excitement**

The courage to be aware is essential for understanding the world in which we act, let alone the choice of actions. But it can be disturbing when we discover the inevitable gaps,

distortions, and unhappy surprises. The challenge is to discover the needed competencies with a sense of excitement, anticipation, and confidence.

This is a major and never-ending challenge for countering racism simply because there is so much for us to discover about our world and ourselves if we are to make a significant difference. We also need to discover and build the knowledge, skills, and characteristics we need to play our role(s) – and those will probably change over time.

If that awareness comes with too much guilt, shame, or regret, we can end up paralyzed, diminished and of little use. If it comes with more excitement, anticipation, and confidence, then we end up energized – particularly if we connect with others in this ongoing process.

### **Three Phases for Closing the Competency Gaps**

This is a big challenge, and it can be intimidating. It's best to capture the new strengths in three categories that keep them in perspective.

1. **Immediate – strengths required to get off the sidelines.** Are there really any capabilities or knowledge sets that I need to develop before I take significant action? If so, there should not be many. Too much prepping on the sidelines is a trap. Jump on it, get it done, and get in the game.
2. **Developmental – strengths you want to build for increased effectiveness.** Some of these knowledge sets and competencies may be evident before engaging and some will emerge with experience. These are the strengths that can make a significant difference in your ability to contribute to countering racism.

Once off the sidelines, these competencies can be developed relatively quickly and improved over time. Early on we might be “OK” at these competencies and then “good” with some experience and continued work. With continued work we might “master” some of these competencies, but to have an impact we only need to be “OK” or “good” for most of the new competencies.

3. **Stretch – the ideal strength profile for countering racism.** It's always good to have stretch goals, but they should not slow down action at all. Nor should you feel bad if you don't reach your stretch goals in the initial timeframe you set. They are stretch goals - goals you can reach if everything falls into place. These are the ideal competencies you want to develop – probably more than one or two years out.

### #3

## “Learn the Way” – Follow the Path to Mastery

If we choose excitement and action over paralysis in closing our competency gaps, then we find ourselves on the path to mastery and it's important to understand that path and the keys to following it.

1. **We don't need to master everything to be effective.** There are some things that we only need to be OK at. There are some things that we will need to be good at. There will be very few things that we need to master.
2. **There are four stages on the path to mastery.**
3. **Getting from stage two to stage three quickly is the key.**
4. **Mastery doesn't happen in a straight line.** There are spurts of understanding and competence separated by sometimes extended periods when not much seems to be developing - even with a lot of effort (the “plateaus”). “Learning to love the plateaus” and deal with the frustrations and stuck points is essential.

*“You do not need to know precisely what is happening, or exactly where it is all going. What you need is to recognize the possibilities and challenges offered by the present moment, and to embrace them with courage, faith, and hope.”*

Thomas Merton

### The Four Stages on the Path to Mastery

One way to look at the path to mastery is to look at four distinct stages of experience. The path is the same for becoming OK at something, being good at it or mastering it. It's usually just a difference in how far we go on the path.

1. **Unconscious Incompetence** – we don't know what we don't know
2. **Conscious Incompetence** – we know what we don't know or can't do (very uncomfortable – won't stay here for long)
3. **Conscious Competence** – we have developed solid understanding and competence, but have to consciously work hard at it

4. **Unconscious Competence** – we have a strong sense of understanding and are highly competent and in a natural flow that we don't have to think about

**The two key stages on the path.** The keys to success are: (a) Making the commitment to become aware of where we lack competence - going from stage #1 to stage #2 (the uncomfortable stage) - and then (b) Getting to stage #3 as quickly as possible.

**Why get to stage #3 as soon as possible?** We can take more time getting to stage #4 (and it takes time), but we need to accelerate to stage #3. The trap is getting stuck in stage #2 (Conscious Incompetence). Awareness is only useful if it leads to action. Plus, getting stuck in conscious incompetence is very uncomfortable and usually results in frustration and a retreat.

### **Getting Stuck at Stage #2 - Serious Problems**

If we get stuck at the uncomfortable stage of conscious incompetence we can become paralyzed, lose energy and hope, and easily step off the path to mastery. Unfortunately, that is a common experience.

**Paralyzed by, “But, what do I do?”** This is the classic question of stage #2. Unless that question is answered, there is no clear direction forward. This is one of the reasons it is important to take the risk to get into action quickly and start “learning on the path.”

**Feelings that sap energy and commitment.** If we are stuck in stage #2 we can be undermined by feelings like guilt, shame, feelings of impotence, being lost, unimportant, part of the problem, etc. Frustration, anxiety, and anger are common.

Being stuck in stage #2 can also include being stuck with the fear of simply being incompetent - making mistakes, being clumsy, hurting people further, failing, etc. Those feelings sap energy and confidence and end up undermining and commitment and action..

**It's tempting to step off the path.** In developing competencies, we inevitably encounter what are called “plateaus.” That is where we keep working at developing our competency, but nothing seems to be progressing – we have “plateaued.” The danger is becoming discouraged and stepping off the path. Stage #2 is the most likely stage for stepping off the path to mastery, but stage #3 is not too far behind.

IT'S EASY TO GET ON THE PATH OF  
MASTERY. THE REAL CHALLENGE LIES IN  
STAYING ON IT.

- GEORGE LEONARD -

### Getting Rapidly from Stage #2 to Stage #3

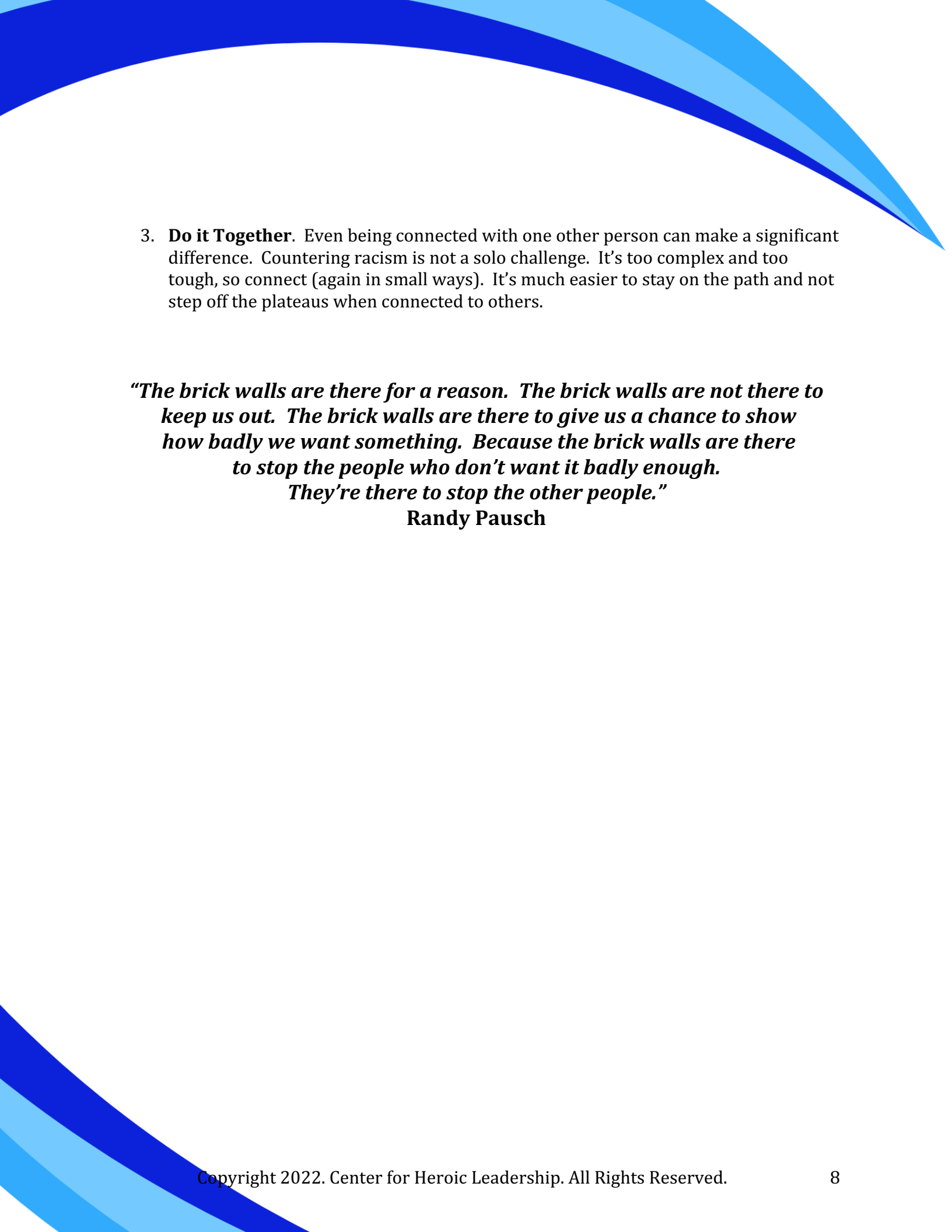
Getting to “Conscious Competence” requires taking on the responsibility to act vs. waiting to be led to action and the discipline to keep at it and refuse to step off the plateaus. And it works best if done in connection with others who are also on the path.

1. **Begin Acting.** It’s fine to start small and expand with experience. Act and risk feeling unsure, being clumsy and maybe even failing. Risk feeling inept, confused, unsure, and unready. And learn as you go. Figure some things out and try again.

The people who are going to make the difference aren’t the ones that come fully prepared – there are far too few. The people that will make the difference are the ones that take the risk to act and develop new competencies as they act – those people are off the sidelines and in the game.

2. **Persevere and “Hold the Course.”** George Leonard calls this “learning to love the plateau.” It simply means don’t quit in the face of frustration or setbacks. This is a basic key to life and is essential in effectively countering racism. It applies to groups as well as individuals. Competencies are being built on the plateaus even when it looks like progress is not being made. Progress is simply the impact of the competencies showing up – those competencies were built on the plateaus, often when it seemed like nothing was happening.

The key is to remember that, even though we can’t see the end of the plateau, if we continue to work at it we eventually do experience a significant increase in the competency pursued. This is critical to remember because it will often happen repeatedly before we reach the level of understanding or competency that we want. This is certainly the case for competencies where we want to go beyond “OK” or “good” to true “mastery.”

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3. **Do it Together.** Even being connected with one other person can make a significant difference. Countering racism is not a solo challenge. It's too complex and too tough, so connect (again in small ways). It's much easier to stay on the path and not step off the plateaus when connected to others.

***“The brick walls are there for a reason. The brick walls are not there to keep us out. The brick walls are there to give us a chance to show how badly we want something. Because the brick walls are there to stop the people who don't want it badly enough. They're there to stop the other people.”***

**Randy Pausch**