
Negotiating Race in the Workplace after Trump

Michael Z. Green

Introduction

As we approach the two-year anniversary of Donald Trump's election as the forty-fifth president of the United States, this seems an appropriate time to consider his ongoing impact as a negotiator. I do so with some reluctance. Unfortunately, President Trump's negotiation posture and explicit communications have both directly and indirectly pandered to white supremacist, neo-Nazi, and other racially hostile organizations. This seems to have galvanized such groups to more openly pursue their divisive and racist activities since the Trump presidential campaign began, including in the workplace.

As an illustrative example, after one Latina woman mentioned to her colleagues that she was upset by Trump's referral to Mexican immigrants as "rapists" during his presidential campaign, several white co-workers tormented her by posting pictures of an angry-looking Trump as her computer screensaver, sending her racist memes and "jokes," signing her up as a Trump campaign volunteer, and repeatedly calling her an "illegal immigrant," despite the fact that she was a natural-born U.S. citizen (Foley 2016).

Because of Trump's explicit and implicit messages, employees of color now face intensified hostility as they navigate matters of race that arise in workplace disputes. As someone with a career focus on fairly resolving workplace disputes who has recently authored a publication entitled "Negotiating while Black" to help employees negotiate race-based workplace concerns (Green 2017), I don't expect analyzing Trump's effect on racial conflict in the workplace to be a pleasant endeavor.

The first black man to hold the position of U.S. president, Barack Obama, may have spoiled us for eight years with his eloquent and thoughtful communications on matters of race. I found analytical explorations of Obama's impact on race-based negotiations in the workplace exhilarating. With his unique background, he recognized that members

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of our society sometimes treat race matters as a zero-sum game (Green 2012), for example, by perceiving efforts to offer benefits to historically deprived racial groups as inherently disadvantaging majority groups (Green 2012; Berlatsky 2018). Obama worked to combat this zero-sum thinking through continued dialogue, and helped to create a climate in which matters of race could be explored in the workplace with an eye toward finding mutually beneficial outcomes for all stakeholders (Green 2012).

This brings us to the Trump presidency. These two years under Trump have been jarring with respect to his controversial comments about race. Providing a thoughtful commentary on his drastic and open indulgence of offensive communications – including those related to race – requires some precision. Although one is tempted to respond in kind to his comments, this risks launching an unproductive diatribe rather than considering a more theoretical and constructive perspective on negotiation and race.

Consequently, I will tread carefully in this commentary, focusing primarily on Trump's comments regarding racial matters. I will then explore narrowly how his communications may affect workplace negotiations based on race without taking any normative position about the overall value of those communications.

The Trump Exception: Getting Away with Offensive Communications

Recent U.S. history is replete with stories of public figures who have suffered professionally as a result of offensive and racist comments. More than thirty years ago, Jimmy “the Greek” Snyder, a noted gambling and football commentator for the CBS television network, suggested in an interview that black athletes were better than white athletes because they had been bred for physical prowess through slavery. Snyder also suggested that if more blacks became coaches, there would be no roles left for whites in professional football. Backlash against these comments was swift, and resulted in Snyder's firing (Sharbutt 1998).

Perhaps due in part to their visibility, similar cases involving sports commentators abound. In 2003, conservative radio show host Rush Limbaugh left his sports position at the ESPN sports network after he suggested that a black quarterback was more popular with the media because of his race than because of his skill set (Sandomir 2003). In April 2007, CBS fired nationally syndicated radio host Don Imus after he referred to black women players on the Rutgers University basketball team as “nappy-headed hos” (Carter 2007). Similarly, in 2014, the National Basketball Association (NBA) banned for life the former owner of the Los Angeles Clippers, Donald Sterling, after a recording of him

surfaced with comments criticizing a friend for associating with black people (Zillgitt 2014).

Professional consequences for racist comments have not been limited to sports commentators. As recently as May 2018, the actress and producer Roseanne Barr was fired by the ABC television network for racist comments on Twitter.¹ Notably, Trump did not criticize Barr's comments (Rogers and Cochrane 2018); instead, he complained about ABC's decision to apologize to Valerie Jarrett, an advisor to Obama and the target of Barr's tweets, for Barr's comments. According to Trump, ABC had not apologized to him after ABC employees made unfair and offensive statements about him and his presidency (Garrity 2018; Rogers and Cochrane 2018).

Unlike Snyder, Limbaugh, Imus, Sterling, Barr, and many others who have faced professional consequences for racist comments, Trump has made many upsetting comments about race with no apparent penalty. Despite repeatedly generating controversial statements during his presidential campaign, he lost no meaningful momentum or support. To the contrary, he won the Republican Party nomination and subsequently the presidency.

As president, he has continued to pursue an aggressive posture on racial matters and to make offensive comments related to race. Indeed, by the midpoint of his term, Trump had openly communicated more racially offensive statements than any other sitting American president in my lifetime (and probably in my parents' lifetime as well). While a sitting president is not vulnerable to firing, and while racially discriminatory comments alone are unlikely to be viewed as an impeachable offense (see Greabe 2018), Trump could conceivably suffer professional consequences such as ostracization by other world leaders, resistance, or censure from members of his own party in Congress (not just the Democrats), loss of support from his political base, or high-level staff resignations explicitly citing racism. For the most part, these consequences have not materialized.

Specific Communications Related to Race

Trump's hostile commentaries are not reserved for people of color alone. While campaigning, for example, he mocked or expressed contempt for people with physical disabilities (Haberman 2015), military prisoners of war (Rhodan 2018), and women (Burns, Haberman, and Martin 2016). On matters of race, however, his recurrent remarks have not only caused offense, but have fanned the flames of racial discord.

At the beginning of his presidential campaign, Trump disparaged Mexican immigrants by broadly referring to them as "rapists" who are "bringing crime" and "bringing drugs" into the United States (Finnegan

and Barabak 2018). This vilification of Mexican immigrants apparently bolstered enthusiasm among Trump's supporters to pursue financing for building a wall between Mexico and the United States to help limit undocumented immigration (as evidenced by repeated chants of "build the wall" during President Trump's campaign rallies). In June 2017, Trump reportedly said that Haitian immigrants all "have AIDS" and that Nigerian immigrants will not "go back to their huts" (Finnegan and Barabak 2018).

He made his arguably most notorious race-centered comments in 2017 when a protester was run over and killed in Charlottesville, Virginia by a white nationalist during a march by members of the Ku Klux Klan and neo-Nazi groups. Trump responded to the incident by declaring that "there was blame on both sides" and "very fine people on both sides" – with the anti-racists on one side and the white supremacists on the other (Shear and Haberman 2017). Former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke expressed appreciation for that response and claimed that the white supremacist organizations that had attended the protest had also helped elect Trump in 2016 and were continuing to assist him in achieving his campaign promises (Cummings 2017).

In August 2017, led by the example of Colin Kaepernick, black players in the National Football League (NFL) began kneeling during the playing of the national anthem to raise awareness of racially biased police brutality. Trump has attacked these players and has asked fans to boycott NFL games as long as the anthem protests continue. More specifically, he called for NFL team owners to "get that son of a bitch off the field" if a black player participated in the anthem protest, and to fire him for allegedly being unpatriotic. Trump has simultaneously failed to acknowledge the concerns that prompted the protest, particularly the disproportionate instances of police brutality against black people (Jenkins 2017a).

The controversial and divisive remarks have continued. In November 2017, Trump referred derisively to Senator Elizabeth Warren, who has claimed Native American heritage, as "Pocahontas" (Jenkins 2017b). In January 2018, he reportedly questioned why the U.S. would want immigrants from what he called "shithole countries" in Africa and the Caribbean (Finnegan and Barabak 2018; Barron 2018). In August 2018, he called black CNN news anchor Don Lemon and black NBA player LeBron James "dumb" on Twitter (Caron 2018).² Although many Americans – ranging from media commentators to ordinary citizens to elected officials within the president's own party – have expressed dismay or outrage at such remarks, as of this writing he has faced no meaningful political or personal consequences.

Race-Based Workplace Negotiations after the Trump Presidency

Following these and other incidents, it is no surprise that many Americans, especially people of color, do not feel positively about Trump. A Pew Research Center study (Pew Research 2018) in September 2018 noted that overwhelming “majorities of blacks (84 percent) and Hispanics (71 percent) disapprove of” Trump’s performance, and that “[w]hites are evenly split” at 47 percent for and 47 percent against Trump.³

The Pew Study also found, however, that Trump received high ratings for standing up for what he believes (Pew Research 2018). These ratings suggest Trump’s negotiation style has an impact on his behavior with regard to race as well as how the public perceives him with regard to racial issues. If Trump promises to pursue a course of action, he apparently will negotiate to achieve that result without any qualms about how offensive his comments may be in achieving his goals and delivering on his promises to his base (see Shell; Kogan in this issue). And because people tend to emulate the behavior of those who lead them – especially if that behavior is perceived as effective – his supporters could be emboldened to pursue similar tactics (Purtill 2018; see also Coleman in this issue).

Negotiation theory would suggest that Trump’s take-no-prisoners strategy is not the best approach, especially if the negotiator has or seeks an ongoing relationship and has concerns about her or his reputation. Trump may not believe, however, that he has an ongoing relationship. He knows that at most he will only hold this position for eight years.

If Trump were to be re-elected for a second four-year term, his behavior could have a lasting and transformative effect, especially if few in his party challenge his behavior, which has been the case thus far. Within the workplace, some employees could become increasingly emboldened to make openly hostile comments toward or about workers of color and other historically disenfranchised groups, leading to unproductive interpersonal conflict. Moreover, even when race is not an underlying issue in a particular workplace conflict, race could become increasingly injected into the negotiations about that conflict, and some employees may negotiate more aggressively with people they perceive as “other” – due to their race, ethnicity, gender, religion, disability, sexual orientation, or immigration status.

Recent studies have begun to document behavioral changes coinciding with the Trump presidency. Jennie Huang and Corinne Low (2017) found that men negotiated more aggressively with women after the 2016 election than they did before the election – even though the male

negotiators acted against their own interests and had worse outcomes (Huang and Low 2017; Levin 2017; Purtill 2018). A more recent unpublished study by Brian Schaffner finds that Trump's rhetoric on race has led whites to express more bigoted views about non-whites (Schaffner 2018; Holland 2018). Another recent study suggests that white supremacist views and racial intolerance, which had been growing since the Obama presidency, have intensified from the "Trump effect" (Berlatsky 2018).

How workers will respond to any increased racial baiting is unclear, but two cases since the election suggest that students have responded to many of Trump's statements by pursuing racist activity (Berenson 2016; Reilly 2016). Black first-year students at the University of Pennsylvania were targeted by being placed on a racist text messaging account (Reilly 2016). The account included racial slurs, a calendar invite for a daily lynching as well as references to then President-elect Trump's comments about grabbing women by the genitals without their consent and references to "Trump is Love" as well as "Trump lovers" and "Trump disciples" (Reilly 2016; Ferner 2016). In Michigan, middle-school students chanted "build that wall" in response to Trump's promise to build a wall along the southern border with Mexico, which upset their Latino classmates (Berenson 2016; Wallace and LaMotte 2016). A noose was also found at the school (Wallace and Lamotte 2016).

If this "Trump effect" extends to relations in the workplace, employees of color should be prepared for heightened racialized negotiations. I suggest they respond in several ways. First, they can seek to level the negotiation playing field by gathering and using factual information that can help them respond and deflect those pursuing racist positions. Test studies of racist negotiations have repeatedly found that people of color fail to do as well when they lack the same information as their white counterparts or when their white negotiation counterparts assume they have less information than them (Green 2017). As a workplace example, negative racial stereotypes (such as being lazy or angry) may be raised or implied in negotiating a promotion.

As a result, for employees, conducting sufficient research is essential (Purtill 2018). They should be prepared with factual information that supports their negotiation position, including documentation of their own performance. They should also be prepared to engage in frank conversations focusing on positive facts in a non-confrontational manner to reduce the counterpart's bigotry by seeking empathy for their own situation (Lopez 2018).

If distributive or competitive bargaining increases as a result of the "Trump effect," as it did in the study by Huang and Low (2017), then employees of color must be ready to overcome this irrational bargaining

behavior. The win-win negotiation model of the Obama administration has now become the “I-win-you-lose” model under the Trump administration (Purtill 2018). In response to this competitive approach, employees might also choose to (a) sidestep the attacks by refocusing on interests, exploring options for mutual gain, or by searching for independent standards of fairness; (b) negotiate with explicit reference to their legal rights or sources of potential power; or (c) not negotiate at all, but rather choose to “fight” the attack (e.g., through a formal complaint, lawsuit, or media interview) (Mnookin 2010).

Conclusion

As president, Trump has repeatedly made derogatory and inflammatory comments about race. From a negotiation standpoint, one could argue that Trump is using game theory to extract concessions: by establishing himself as an unpredictable, potentially over-reactive “madman,” he is in a stronger position to achieve what he wants (Hankla 2018). Because he has achieved some of the goals that parts of his base wanted (getting elected, a tax cut, two conservative Supreme Court appointments), workers who support him could view him as a positive role model for their negotiations in the workplace. These workers might be more likely to engage in explicitly racist communications or other divisive and racist behavior in the workplace as a reflection of Trump as their role model.

The long-term effects of Trump’s behavior will depend significantly on how long he stays in office and his ability to continue to effectuate his agenda. For now, his directly offensive communications regarding race send a clear message to people of color that negotiating while black or brown or as a member of any of the other disadvantaged groups that have suffered his attacks will continue to be a challenge.

Unfortunately, this adds yet another burden to people of color negotiating within their places of employment. Some will be forced to address or tolerate racially hostile remarks; some will be forced to deal with explicit or implicit racial bias even when negotiating workplace issues entirely unrelated to race. In many cases, workers of color (all workers, even) may find that workplace negotiations have become more competitive and they face greater risk of losing. The best means for combating this outcome is for employers and human resource managers to recognize that the current administration does not set the standard for professional behavior in the workplace (White 2017). If employers continue to expect fair and respectful treatment of all workers, then the worst of the Trump effect may be avoided.

NOTES

1. In early 2018, ABC rebooted the popular 1990s situation comedy show “Roseanne” starring Rosanne Barr. The revived show was a rousing success, garnering particular support from Trump and his base and was renewed for a second season (Garrity 2018). In May 2018, however, Barr commented on Twitter that “[if] muslim brotherhood & planet of the apes had a baby=vj,” clearly referring to Valerie Jarrett, a black woman and a key senior adviser under Obama (Garrity 2018; Koblin 2018). ABC fired Barr shortly after these comments.
2. Trump referred to Lemon as “the dumbest man on television” and stated that Lemon had even made “Lebron look smart” (Caron 2018).
3. The Pew study also found that Trump gets lower midterm ratings for personal traits such as being trustworthy, empathetic, and well-informed compared with his predecessors Presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama.

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