

Becoming an Anti-Racist Organization: An Anti-Racist Model for Organizational Change



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Our anti-racist model for institutional change begins with creating a common understanding of structural racism as presented by the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond in their Undoing Racism® workshop. The People's Institute is recognized as one of the top anti-racism training institutions in the nation. It moves beyond a focus on the symptoms of racism to an understanding of what racism is, where it comes from, how it functions, why it persists, and how it can be undone. The Peoples' Institute's 2 ½-day undoing racism training workshop is essential to create a common language and to lay the foundation for becoming an anti-racist organization.

Through the workshop, participants learn that structural racism refers to practices, policies, procedures and – most important – the *social culture* of institutions. In a society set up to support white-body privilege, the inherent social culture of that society's institutions will naturally reflect bias unless there is deliberate action to counteract that bias. Unfortunately, even in institutions that have a high degree of awareness of race bias, unconscious or unexamined aspects of the institution's social culture can unintentionally reinforce dynamics that continue to privilege people with white skin. It is in this manner that American institutions remain dominated by practices which produce racial inequalities (Better, 1998).

Structural racism requires institutional support and cultural nurturing. The core of anti-racist work is to seek to recognize institutional bias and to make structural changes that are supported by policies and procedures that are accountable with outcomes of equity. Executive leaders, boards, managers, and supervisors must be taught to recognize that contemporary forms of racism exist and become familiar with the various forms that it takes in the lives of all staff and clients. They must become vigilant in learning and identifying what those issues are and how they are perpetuated in the organization's policies, practices, and procedures. The goal of anti-racist work is to widen the circle of power and opportunity.

The Role of Senior Leadership

Addressing structural racism is one of the toughest jobs that any leader or organization can face. Although the reasons are complex, the major difficulty stems from a lack of a common understanding about what structural racism is. Prior to the recent "Perfect Storm" of the pandemic, police murders and racial unrest, many white people viewed racism as individual acts of meanness and considered any discussion of racism in our institutions as a personal affront. Most people saw themselves as being basically good, but this was especially true for people who work in non-profit or service-oriented organizations since they already felt that they were doing "God's Work." They perceived the organization and themselves as dedicated to "doing good," a value that was inconsistent with a view of either as incorporating racism. They saw acts of racism as being individual and intentional instead of structural and systemic. The silver lining from the events of the last few months is that many people have been awakened to issues that were once invisible to them.

To begin the anti-racist process, it is important to understand that diversity is focused on helping people of color to achieve the goals and resources defined as important by the dominant culture. Assimilating in this way may bring them into white organizational culture, but typically does not include a focus on power or decision making roles and responsibilities from a point of view that is culturally congruent to them. Undoing structural racism requires the sharing of power and decision making and presupposes that the core culture and institutional structures must fundamentally change, while also recognizing that changes in personal attitudes are also essential. Anti-racism requires a broadening of the power base. It explicitly examines power relationships and sees the parallels, intersections, and distinctions between all forms of oppression and the ways they manifest themselves within an organization.

People of Color (POC) often constitutes more than half of the clients being serviced by our organizations and yet according to the *Nonprofit Quarterly*, in a recent study by CompassPoint Nonprofit Services, 79% of nonprofit executives nationwide are white. Who better to articulate the depth, intensity, and perspective of diverse groups than a leader from that group who have lived the experience? This is not to say other leaders cannot provide credible leadership. Rather, it is to suggest **knowledge based on lived experience in a culture** creates the potential for bringing a **unique** perspective to leadership. In addition, their presence adds credibility to the organization and has extreme value to the community, the staff, and clients.

Despite the obvious need and the unique contributions that leaders of color can make to our organizations, why are there so few in leadership roles? One factor is that the mental model for leadership is a charismatic, heroic white male model, which is deeply embedded in our collective mindset. While many white female leaders have broken through the glass ceiling that was obstructing their advancement, the barrier facing leaders of color is a “concrete ceiling,” one that is dense and less easily shattered. Studies have found that, the darker the hue of the person, the thicker the concrete ceiling. As a result, senior leadership roles held by POC are still a novelty in many of our institutions, which leads to their heightened visibility and vulnerability.

Though all leaders are vulnerable to criticisms and subsequent attacks, it is exacerbated for POC. Since POC are underrepresented in leadership, they become much more visible and receive more scrutiny. This intense inspection can add pressure to assimilate into white institutional culture since they are evaluated by its norms. As a result, their credibility and authority are constantly in dispute which causes them to have to prove themselves again and again. Receiving and internalizing intense criticism not only enhances this vulnerability, but also discourages them from bringing their individuality and uniqueness to the role.

Constant scrutiny can lead to self-doubt, which often compels leaders of color to be more accommodating—accepting the status quo rather than following their instincts and offering a more authentic and diverse point of view. This results in our organizations being denied all the benefits of fresh perspectives and change that is so desperately needed in serving communities of color. The challenges proposed by increased visibility and vulnerability adds intense emotional labor, drains energy, and often causes executives of Color to lose touch with other colleagues who can empathize and act as a sounding board. The first step is to become aware of the impact of this increased vulnerability that stems from amplified visibility on leaders of color. Adopting Allyship as an organizational value and norm can play a huge role in the support and success of leaders of color and can create an internal pipeline of future leaders.

The organization’s leadership must consistently demonstrate its commitment to the anti-racist process to all employees by setting a tone for honest discourse by openly acknowledging tensions. Friction must be acknowledged and resolved as swiftly and respectfully as possible. All staff must be helped to accept a degree of uncertainty and discomfort. In other words, the goal is to increase the organization’s tolerance for discomfort. Since attitude change cannot be mandated, much thought, support, and consultation is needed along with honest dialogue and an understanding that anti-racist work is a messy process.

As a leader, you should anticipate a degree of blowback from some members of the dominant group as they begin to question the value of placing so much time and resources into race matters. One can also anticipate that other majority group members will feel left out, unsatisfied, and unclear about the role that they could or should play in addressing structural racism. In addition, they are uncertain about whether there are benefits that can be gained for them from anti-racist work. In other words, white staff may fear they will have to give up position, access and power if their institution is guided by anti-racist principals.

As a leader, you cannot successfully guide this initiative without listening and creating a brave space for these divergent views and fears about issues of race, racism and systemic change. It is important that you provide a space where shame, blame and judgment are not supported in these discussions about race, racism and other forms of oppression.

Structural racism exists everywhere. It is important for you to ask the hard questions:

- Are people of color thriving in our institution?

- Are there people of color in decision-making positions?
- Is there congruence between those in decision-making positions with those being served?
- When there is a change in client demographics, are the decision makers actively seeking to be more closely aligned with and responsive to the new group?

Your challenge is to acknowledge the value of diverse views and incorporate them into the organizational culture, clinical practice, administration, board and policy decision making. This can be achieved only if these diverse voices are consistently and prominently present at each of these tables. The politics of race itself are defeating. Both good policy and good politics are necessary to move ahead. As a leader, you must establish policies and procedures that support institutional change, keep communication flowing, and be open to hearing all sides of the race issues.

Racism destroys the uniqueness and nullifies the experience, inspiration, and vision that could be offered by staff and board members of color. Therefore, the ultimate role of a leader in an anti-racist institution is to create an organizational atmosphere of inclusiveness and belonging which tends to produce an environment of participation. The goal is to create an inclusive environment where all employees have a sense of belonging. Belonging goes beyond the concept of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion to a feeling of being fully accepted. **Belongingness** is the sense of psychological and emotional wellbeing that enables people to perform at their best, feel valued, respected, motivated, and can contribute their unique views and ideas. You may want to add **Belonging** as an integral part of your DEI initiative so that it becomes Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB).

“If we want people to fully show up, to bring their whole selves including their unarmored, whole hearts — so that we can innovate, solve problems, and serve people—we must be vigilant about creating a culture in which people feel safe, seen, heard, and respected.”

— **Brené Brown, Dare to Lead: Brave Work. Tough Conversations. Whole Hearts.**

As a leader, you may need support and/or coaching to lead the creation of a fully inclusive organizational environment. It is important that you learn to examine power, privilege, rank, and culture (PPRC), and the impact of their intersections on leadership, management, supervision, and staff relations. Understanding these principles and methods is vital in the pursuit of an inclusive, fair, and respectful workplace that values all individuals, generates a sense of belonging, and embraces diversity—with the goal of eliminating barriers to success in the workplace.

We all know from past experiences that any major institutional culture change requires “top down” buy-in and often external consultation and support. We also know that **PRIVILEGE** is often **INVISIBLE** to people who have it and **PAINFULLY OBVIOUS** to those who don’t. Additionally, the uncompensated, exhausting **Emotional Labor** that is required of People of Color in white spaces much also be understood, examined and alleviated. Indeed, there is much educating and work to be done in becoming an anti-racist organization. The journey begins with setting the **TONE FROM THE TOP**, and formulating an anti-racist organizational development plan that begins with the board, executive leaders, managers, and supervisors.

The Role of Managers

Managers must become aware that anti-racist work requires more than diverse entry-level staff. Sometimes “diverse” becomes entangled with the difficulty in finding the “right applicant,” who has the “right image” to fit in to the existing White-centric culture setting. Some managers want diverse applicants to think, speak, and behave as if they were White. Their expectations, described in an article by Valerie Batts in “Modern Racism: New Melody for the Same Old Tunes,” were derived from cultural norms for US citizens where evaluation is made based on how close one was to being a white, heterosexual, middle-class, and physically able male. Managers and staff with hiring roles must be mindful that many for profit and non-profit leadership teams, upper level and supervisory staff are all or mostly white because they reflect these values. To prevent this phenomenon from reoccurring all staff who have hiring responsibility must be trained to de-bias the hiring process, which is a training in strategies for equity-focused hiring.

Mid-management level staff must become equipped with skills and knowledge to recruit, develop, and retain a diverse team and must be held accountable for this role. Their training must include how to manage and supervise across difference which needs to consist of what collaboration means and looks

like across race, gender and culture. It is also crucial that they can facilitate cross-cultural dialogue and problem solving through supervision and program management. These managers must also be taught how to endorse affinity groups, the importance of White Anti-Racist Groups (WAG), People of Color (POC) and a diverse LGBTQIA+ group and how to support these groups within their units and departments.

It is important for managers to first understand **white body privilege** and its impact on white organizational culture and the changes needed to make the culture more inclusive, and then to address these issues with all staff. The definition of normal must become far more inclusive to realize the full benefits offered by a diverse workforce.

True cross-difference teamwork only occurs after the staff has learned how to resolve conflict, respect differences, and work cooperatively, not just side-by-side. The manager's ability to help staff openly discuss issues of race, racism, and other forms of oppression greatly enhances the team's ability to work toward developing healthier relationships in a community that values belonging and gaining full participation on committees and initiatives—which is essential to help staff move from competitive, defensive, or neutral behavior to full collaboration with others whom they found to be strange and/or threatening. These approaches can improve productivity, staff morale, and retention while decreasing burnout.

The Role of Supervisors

It is often said that people do not leave jobs, they leave supervisors. Therefore, this role is key to the development and retention of a diverse team. Supervisors must be prepared to discuss emotional labor, race, racism and other forms of oppression with the understanding that due to the power differential, most staff will be unable to initiate these issues without permission. They must also learn the constructs and intersections of race and racism with gender (including gender fluidity), LGBTQIA+, class, religious (including anti-Semitism and Islamophobia), intellectual, emotional, and physical bias and other systemic forms of oppression based on social identity.

Supervisors must also become **intensely** familiar with micro-aggressions, which were first described in 1970 by psychiatrist Chester Pierce, MD, as a specific, often less recognizable form of individual racism that merits special attention. These stunning, automatic acts of disregard stem from unconscious attitudes of racial superiority and may be unintentional (though intent does not negate impact). Unaddressed micro-aggressions and other forms of racial and oppressive attacks blocks staff potential, which ultimately jeopardizes the organization's ability to profit from the contributions of a diverse team or provide their best quality services.

Such attacks are a part of the daily lives of People of Color and other marginalized groups, and are not confined to the workplace. These subtle indignities are hard hitting. Since micro-aggressions strike at the core of a worker's identity, an emotional response is normal. It is crucial to first acknowledge that micro-aggressions exist and then become **profoundly** conversant in the various forms that they take. Workers who experience micro-aggressions need validation. According to Dr. Richard G. Dudley Jr., M.D. in his article "Blacks in Policy Making Positions," repeated invalidated insults can eventually begin to destroy the worker's self-esteem and sense of competency.

Workers must be provided with an avenue to express feelings. Race and other oppression-related issues need to be responded to expeditiously. The supervisor's feedback is not only important, but crucial for promoting the worker's professional growth, alleviating race-related emotional labor, preventing burnout, and promoting job retention. **All supervisors and others seeking promotions to the role should be trained in:**

- Micro-aggressions (racial, queer, trans, and varied abilities)
- Implicit Bias
- Cross-racial supervision
- Anti-racism and anti-oppression
- Difficult Dialogue Training: age, race, gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, gender expression, sexual identity, disabilities, language, cultural background, family or immigration status or other social identity issues.

- Unpacking the gender binary
- Working with transgender colleagues and patients
- Intersectionality of race with gender identity and sexual orientation



What Is an Anti-Racist Bystander vs. an Upstander?

Kitty Genovese was murdered in a New York City street in the presence of 38 witnesses. Not one offered any assistance or contacted police. This indicates that personal responsibility in bystander situations cannot be taken for granted. Research shows that behavior in situations of racism is often the same. One study found that while 3/4 of participants considered saying something, only 40% in fact did. Another study found that in 44% of incidents of race-based bullying at school, some or all bystanders did nothing, with 1/4 encouraging the bullying.

What keeps people from reacting?

- The need for a clear **anti-racist message** from senior leadership that there is **zero tolerance** for racist behavior.
- Lack of clarity about the best way to respond.
- No confidence or courage to respond appropriately.
- Not nurturing bystander action, which can be enhanced by knowledge, and skills in intervention.
- People will only stand up when they believe they are well equipped to act.

We often assume that the motivation behind stereotypes, racism, and discrimination is hatred.

But not all racism stems from hatred. Most structural racism is usually due to:

- The desire to win
- Addiction to power
- Competition
- Greed
- The fear of losing influence with the majority group
- The desire to maintain political capital

Political Capital is the accumulation of resources and power built through relationships, trust, goodwill, and influence with bosses, and colleagues. It can be understood as a type of currency used to achieve personal or professional goals. It is often described as a type of credit, or a resource that can be banked, spent or misspent, invested, lost, and saved.

How can we interrupt bystander complacency? “Structural Racism. It Stops with Me”: A Personal Campaign.

The very message of “It Stops with Me” can be regarded as a direct response to bystander complacency.

The idea is that we can and should do something when we see a racist incident. Bystanders do, of course, evaluate the costs and benefits of an intervention: many can quickly conclude that the potential price of speaking out against racism outweighs the benefits of doing so.

When bystanders speak out against racism, it can have profound effects. Hearing or seeing a bystander intervention can foster increased expressions of anti-racism. It can also combat some of the conditions of structural and racial prejudice. Silence causes people who are against anti-racist work to believe that their attitudes are shared by those around them.

Anti-Racist Upstander action stops the offender from thinking that the community accepts their behavior.

You should always consider actions including:

- Encouraging institutional anti-racist commitment
- Reporting of racist behavior
- Calling the person in or out
- Strategizing with your network
- Offering support and comfort to the injured party

As the debate about anti-racism inclusive environments continues, we should make sure we are asking the right questions. It is not, “Do you have a right not to participate?” The questions are:

- “What kind of person are you?”
- “What kind of co-worker do you want to be?”
- “What kind of team do you want to lead?”
- “What kind of institution do you want to work for?”

What Is an Anti-racist Ally?

An ally is a person that actively promotes and aspires to advance a culture of inclusion and belonging through intentional, positive, and conscious efforts. Anti-racist Allyship is a process, and everyone has more to learn. Allyship involves a lot of listening. Sometimes, people say "doing ally work" or "acting in solidarity with" to reference the fact that "ally" is not an identity, it is an ongoing, process that involves a lifetime of work. A white ally acknowledges the limits of their knowledge about other people's experiences but doesn't use that as a reason not to think and/or act. A white ally does not remain silent but confronts racism as it comes up daily, seeks to deconstruct it institutionally and acts in a way that challenges systemic oppression. Being a white ally entails building relationships with both people of color, and white people. White allies are able to replace their frustration with other white people who “don't get it” with the willingness to bring them along. White allies are keenly aware that a collective identity instead of stanch individualism can restore their own humanity and reduce the emotional labor of People of Color.

Qualities of an Anti-Racist Ally

- Does something daily to earn the title of “ally.”
- Recognizes that their “white ally badge” expires at the end of the day and must be renewed by a Person of Color.
- Title is not self-identified by white people but identified by People of Color.
- Understands that one person of color's white ally is not automatically another person of color's ally.
- Identifies and names racism directly.
- Takes the front line as a buffer, not as a “savior.”
- Recognizes that remaining silent, “neutral” or “objective” is a form of race privilege.
- Takes responsibility for self-education and doesn't expect a Person of Color to teach them.
- Cultivates genuine relationships with people of color that are mutually beneficial.
- Is hyper-vigilant about interrupting racism, but is not hyper-arrogant about being a “white ally.”
- Struggles every day with understanding and undoing aspects of their own privilege.
- Works regularly to develop a deeper understanding of ongoing colonial relationships.
- Understands that people of color's experiences of racism is not debatable.
- Doesn't require people of color to display proof of racist injury.
- Knows that people of color are the experts of their own experiences.
- Acts in solidarity with people of color without taking over their liberation efforts.
- Doesn't expect gratitude from people of color, or to be recognized as a white ally.
- Takes on racism as a problem because it is personally offensive.
- Is motivated by a quest for justice, rather than a sense of guilt.
- Is open to, and invites a challenge. Expects support and accountability from other emerging allies.
- Unconditionally opposes oppression with no strings attached.
- Accepts that making mistakes is part of becoming an effective ally.
- Acknowledges, apologizes for, and learns from own mistakes without retreating.
- Interrupts racist statements or behaviors whether a person of color is present or objects.
- Participates respectfully in communities of color and avoids “cultural tourism.”
- Is committed to social justice and an end to oppression in all its forms.

The Do's and Don'ts of Being a Good Ally

- Don't derail a discussion
- Do read links/books referenced in discussions.
- Don't expect your feelings to be a priority in a discussion about X issue.
- Do shut up and listen.

- Don't play Oppression Olympics.
- Do check your privilege.
- Don't expect a pass into safe spaces because you call yourself an ally.
- Do be willing to stand up to bigots.
- Don't treat people like accessories or game tokens.
- Do keep trying. Eventually we'll get it right.

Suggestions for Improving Our profession

To truly assess an organization for the impact of structural racism and to have authentic cross-racial and cross-cultural dialogue, training is key. A more diverse executive suite means more role models and opportunities to achieve professional goals. But most importantly, it means an opportunity to bring diverse voices and new aspects of leadership into our profession.

While change supported from the top is easier, I believe change can start with you, regardless of your positional authority. You might want to consider taking the following actions:

1. Take the Undoing Racism® workshop that is offered by the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond.
It changed my life and my practice.
2. Regularly visit the anti-racist alliance website: www.antiracistalliance.com for hundreds of meetings, articles, books, workshop, and more.
3. Recruit at least one other person to accompany you on your professional and personal antiracist journey.
4. Develop a close, authentic cross-racial/cultural relationship. It will help you to expand your life and your practice.
5. Support and work towards building a leadership team that reflects your organizations client population.

Based on what I witness daily, a larger number of people of color attaining and succeeding in leadership roles within our profession is not only possible – but is indeed the future! The future of our agency is our professional life's work, and there is much that still needs to be done. As we move forward, it is important that striving for perfection does not become the enemy of the good. Our pursuit of becoming an anti-racist organization is a journey and not a destination. For change to be lasting in our organization, we must sustain anti-racist efforts on all levels, beginning with the leadership, required in management/supervision, and mandated in treatment.

As leaders, we must be mindful of the unrealistic expectations that there will be a comfortable, harmonious atmosphere as diverse voices explore certain truths and biases around the human condition. We must expect a degree of discord, blowback and confusion. We anticipate that there will be a desire to let the anti-racist conversation fade into the background. Disagreement is freedom's privilege, so we must develop a higher organizational pain threshold if we're going to stay the course.

Acknowledgements

MPG Consulting builds on the philosophies and principals of The Peoples Institute for Survival and Beyond. This resource is a compilation of our own experiences built on those philosophies, as well as those of others committed to Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging (DEIB). I would like to acknowledge the work of the Annie E. Casey Foundation as well and Community Wise, and countless other anti-racist pioneers, trailblazers, activists, organizers, educators, artists, and everyday people who care deeply about antiracist/anti-oppressive organizational change and whose DEIB initiatives continue to fuel my anti-racist journey. I thank them for their wisdom, expertise, and tenacity in making this resource possible.

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