

IDENTIFYING WHITE SUPREMACY CULTURE

ICE BREAKER

An organization's culture is developed by individual perspectives and influenced by persons in positions of power (formal or informal). Individuals may unintentionally support oppressive and retraumatizing norms and standards if they are unaware of the characteristics of their organizational culture that promote white supremacy thinking.

We hope that this activity provides information and insight, without evoking shame.

Instructions

1. **Read** the list below and **reflect** on your own organizations's norms and standards

2. **Introduce yourself** and **provide one example** that you have observed or experienced

3. **Discuss** the traumatizing impact that white supremacy culture has on individuals, organizations, and persons of color.

CHARACTERISTICS OF WHITE SUPREMACY CULTURE

perfectionism

- Tendency to identify what's wrong; little ability to identify, name, and appreciate what's right
- Mistakes are seen as personal and reflect badly on the person making them

remedies: develop a culture of appreciation, where the organization takes time to make sure that people's work and efforts are appreciated; develop a learning organization, where it is expected that everyone will make mistakes and those mistakes offer opportunities for learning

sense of urgency

- Sacrificing potential allies for quick or highly visible results (i.e. sacrificing interests of communities of color to win victories for the dominant community)
- Reinforced by funding proposals which promise too much work for too little money

remedies: realistic workplans; leadership which understands that things take longer than anyone expects; learn from past experience how long things take; be clear about how you will make good decisions in an atmosphere of urgency

right to comfort

- The belief that those with power are the only ones with a right to emotional and psychological comfort (another aspect of valuing 'logic' over emotion)
- Scapegoating those who cause discomfort

remedies: understand that discomfort is at the root of all growth and learning, welcome it as much as you can; deepen your political analysis of racism and oppression so you have a strong understanding of how your personal experience and feelings fit into a larger picture

individualism

- People in organization believe they are responsible for solving problems alone
- The belief that if something is going to get done right, "I" have to do it

remedies: value people based on their ability to work as part of a team to accomplish shared goals; make sure the organization is working towards shared goals and people understand how working together will improve performance; evaluate people's ability to work in a team as well as their ability to get the job done; use staff meetings as a place to solve problems, not just report

CHARACTERISTICS OF WHITE SUPREMACY CULTURE

defensiveness

- No clarification is made regarding who has power and how they are expected to use it because criticism is viewed as threatening and inappropriate (or rude)
- People respond to new or challenging ideas with defensiveness, making it very difficult to raise these ideas
- The defensiveness of people in power creates an oppressive culture

remedies: understand that structure cannot in and of itself facilitate or prevent abuse; understand the link between defensiveness and fear (of losing power, losing face, losing comfort, losing privilege); work on your own defensiveness; call out defensiveness when it is a problem

quantity over quality

- All resources of organization are directed toward producing measurable goals
- Little or no value attached to process
- No understanding of the difference between issues that stem from content (the agenda of the meeting) and those that stem from process (people's need to be heard or engaged)

remedies: include process or quality goals in your planning; make sure your organization has a values statement that expresses the ways in which you want to do your work; make sure this is a living document and that people are using it in their day-to-day work; look for ways to measure process goals

worship of the written word

- Those with strong documentation and writing skills are more highly valued, even in organizations where ability to relate to others is key to the mission
- The belief there is one right way to do things and when they do not adapt or change, then something is wrong with them (the "other", those not changing) because they don't 'know' the right way

remedies: accept that there are many ways to get to the same goal; develop the ability to notice when people do things differently and how those different ways might improve your approach; never assume that you or your organization know what's best for the community

paternalism

- The decision-making process is clear to those with power and unclear to those without it
- Those with power think they are capable of making decisions for and in the interests of those without power
- Those without power do not really know how decisions get made, yet they feel the impact of those decisions

remedies: make sure that everyone knows and understands who makes what decisions; make sure everyone knows and understands their level of responsibility and authority; include people who are affected by decisions in the decision-making process

power hoarding

- Power seen as limited, only so much to go around
- Those with power feel threatened when anyone suggests changes in how things should be done in the organization
- Those with power assume they have the best interests of the organization at heart and assume those wanting change are ill-informed, emotional, or inexperienced

remedies: include power sharing in your values statement; discuss what good leadership looks like and make sure people understand that a good leader develops the power and skills of others; understand that change is inevitable and challenges to your leadership can be healthy

objectivity

- The belief that there is such a thing as being objective
- The belief that emotions are inherently destructive, irrational, and should not play a role in decision-making or group processes
- Invalidating people who show emotion

remedies: realize that everybody's world view, including your own, affects the way they understand things; push yourself to sit with discomfort when people are expressing themselves in ways which are not familiar to you; assume that everybody has a valid point and your job is to understand their point

Source: White Supremacy Culture From Dismantling Racism: A Workbook for Social Change Groups, by Kenneth Jones and Tema Okun, Change Work, 2001.