

## RACIAL EQUITY AS A PRISM FOR EFFECTIVE CONSULTING: A White Capacity Builder's Perspective

*Editor's Note: In this commentary, an Alliance member offers reasons for making race a central consideration in capacity building, with an emphasis on white practitioners acknowledging racism and taking the initiative to advance equity in their capacity building practice.*

By Beth Applegate

I have spent my entire professional career working with and among the civil society sector as local organizer, state executive director, national field director and now as an organization development (OD) practitioner. I have focused my OD practice on progressive advocacy organizations in three social change movements – reproductive rights; lesbian, gay bisexual and transgender (LGBT) civil rights; and environmental and conservation rights. In my experience, what is distinct about the advocacy portion of the sector is its commitment to the values of social justice.

Although the portion of the nonprofit sector I serve is deeply rooted in the values of social justice, we have not yet fully realized those ideals. Daily we are reminded that racism, a system of oppression embedded in cultural messages, institutional policies and practices, as well as in the beliefs and actions of individuals, persists in the nonprofit sector (Tatum, 1997). Clearly, race continues to be a societal and organizational challenge. However it may also be viewed as an opportunity.

One of the ways that I respond to the opportunity that racism provides is by facilitating white antiracist learning groups for OD practitioners. I have intentionally chosen this work not only to positively impact the work of white OD practitioners, but also primarily to provide myself with an opportunity to remain vigilant in my own consciousness raising and in my own efforts to work against racism. The purpose of the group is to offer the OD practitioner community a container in which we explore our role and responsibility as OD practitioners to partner and take action to address institutional racism in the organizations and communities in which we work, consult and live. During our gatherings we have focused on key areas such as:

- Ourselves as white people – where we are in our individual journeys, and how to continue to deepen our understanding and effectiveness in addressing institutional and structural racism
- Our practice – becoming aware of our own cultural lenses and how we can use our white social identity group in our work as an OD practitioner to address racism within our client systems
- Our Systems – how we partner to take action for systemic change

As a white OD practitioner committed to the values of social justice, and the conscious and intentional use of (my) self as a means to systemic change, it was hard at first to

embrace that I'm simultaneously committed to social justice AND that I have biases. Part of my own learning edge was to affirm that I could be both the subject of bias (gender, sexual orientation) AND be a member of the dominant group at the same time. In my own journey, I have come to realize the question is not, "How can I get rid of my racism?" but rather "how can I use this awareness to be more effective?" I am slowly realizing that working with my own racism does not concern itself with getting rid of anything. Rather it is about fully accepting all aspects of my humanity and changing what is hurtful to others and myself with forgiveness and compassion.

According to Tatum, "Cultural racism is the cultural images and messages that affirm the assumed superiority of Whites and the assumed inferiority of people of color – it is like smog in the air. Sometimes it is so thick it is visible, other times it is less apparent, but always, day in and day out, we are breathing it in." Because I had unwittingly breathed in the smog around me, I never really examined my own racial and cultural identity, and membership. As a result, for years I remained oblivious to the systematic advantages of being white, (also known as white privilege) and sometimes acted counter to my core values.

I believe we must clear the smog before our eyes. Instead of relying on people of color to do the work for us, we as white organizational consultants must take full responsibility for educating ourselves about the impact of white culture, white privilege and racism—as well as educating ourselves about other cultures - so that we can more effectively join with people of color as partners and change agents.

Through my own journey I have had the opportunity to dig deep and get into touch with the positive and negative aspects of my whole self. The good news is that the more aware of, nurturing and forgiving I become of my whole self, the more accepting, flexible and compassionate I become of others. Embracing my dual nature, can help me stop sabotaging my own efforts in combating racism in myself and others and enables me to be more open to learning and growing as an integrated human being.

Kurt Lewin, a founder in the field of Organization Development, once said, "There is nothing so practical as a good theory." A theoretical framework that helps us make sense of what we observe in our client systems is a very valuable resource. Typically, OD practitioners guide our interventions with client systems using a systemic focus, recognizing that change in one area also affects others areas in the organization. If we truly are committed to systemic change and justice for all we must intentionally and repeatedly do our own work as white professionals and ask and answer questions like:

- How do we use our white social identity group and the unearned advantage in our work to weaken overt and covert systems of advantage and address racism within the nonprofit organizational systems we serve?
- How do we identify ways to better partner within and across racial differences?

As white nonprofit OD practitioners, we must continue the journey of self-reflection and learning to ensure that we are qualified to best serve our clients systems and help end racism.

In order to be effective organization consultants we must continue our personal journey to expand our knowledge and understanding of ourselves, and the harm that racism causes all of us and then take intentional action to dismantle it. Our central challenge is to sustain progressive values by continuing to unite and partner across racial lines to face and address racism that permeates our society, communities and organizations. As a life-long-learner I will remain a work in progress and continue to strive to fine tune and use myself as a positive instrument for organization, human and social change.

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Beth Applegate will lead a Breakfast Roundtable at the Chicago'05 Conference, **White Consultants Against Racism**.

#### **References:**

Bell, Ella and Nkomo, Stella. 2001. Our separate ways: Black and white women and the struggles for professional identity. Massachusetts: Harvard Business Scholl Press. Kivel, Paul. 2002. How white people can work for racial justice. Canada: New Society Publishers. Lewin, K. 1951. Field theory in social science. New York: Harper & Row Publishers.  
Marrow, A.J. 1969. The practical theorist. New York: Basic Books.  
Tatum, Beverly D. 1997. Why are all the black kids sitting together in the cafeteria. New York: Basic Books.

Readers may also appreciate a very practical analysis by Peggy McIntosh about everyday experience of "white privilege." [www.augustana.co/rdx/eng/activism/backpack.htm](http://www.augustana.co/rdx/eng/activism/backpack.htm)