

BEYOND DIVERSITY AND MULTICULTURALISM: TOWARDS THE DEVELOPMENT OF ANTI-RACIST INSTITUTIONS AND LEADERS

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The Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services has a century long tradition of helping New Yorkers, which began with services to poor Jewish families and immigrants and has now expanded to include more than 70,000 clients annually, from all racial, ethnic, economic and religious backgrounds.

We are a social work run organization and pride ourselves with providing quality services. The agency offers a continuum of services that has been shaped by the needs of its clients, from residential services to day treatment, to outpatient mental health services for adults, children and families. Many of our clients are people of color, and large numbers speak languages other than English, such as Spanish, Russian, Mandarin, Hebrew, Creole, Yiddish, and many other languages.

The staff of nearly 3,400 is also racially and culturally diverse and represents a range of professional and paraprofessional disciplines. This article describes the agency's journey from diversity and multiculturalism toward antiracism in its leadership, management and supervision. The author, an African American woman, is Assistant Executive Director of the agency and a central figure in the process of the organization's anti-racist evolution.

BACKGROUND

Due to our increasingly diverse client population, the nature of our original sectarian mission to serve

the Jewish community, our name, and the way that we were perceived in our local community, we saw a clear need to address diversity and multiculturalism in order to improve our competence in serving culturally diverse populations. From the onset, this effort was viewed as a long-term goal. We assumed that it would require years of work to truly change the agency's culture.

Our diversity work has taken many different forms over the past years, which has sometimes meant that we met as a task force, in subcommittees, as triads or dyads. These varied efforts created a deep bond among the members which included directors and senior management staff who were male and female, Jewish and Christian, Black, White and Latino, Gay and Lesbian, old and young, psychiatrist, psychologist, and social worker.

We entered our multicultural work at different levels and struggled with our own differences in worldview, philosophy, and experience. While we had many successes in our diversity journey especially as it related to gender and religious diversity, we discovered that issues of race had gotten short shrift in our diversity effort. Each time race matters emerged, they were quickly overshadowed by many other legitimate issues which occur in the life of an extremely large and complex organization.

Hindsight has shown us that since we lacked a common language and a clear vision for addressing structural racism, each time the organization attempted to openly discuss race, experiment with new processes, programs, and ideas, and begin to reappraise its mission in light of race related matters, tensions would arise and the subject would be tabled in lieu of another pressing matter.

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During our process, we became clear that race and racism greatly burden and impact the lives of all people of color which includes both our staff and clients. We later came to understand that racism is race prejudice and power, and it manifests itself, individually, culturally, and institutionally. This new understanding led to a shift in our efforts from an individual to an institutional focus. Thus began our clarity about the need to focus on the roles of our leaders, managers and supervisors as it relates to policies and procedures as well as the tone and tenor of our institutional environment.

Addressing structural racism is one of the toughest jobs that any leader can face. Although the reasons are indeed complex, the major difficulty for us is that many white staff viewed racism as individual acts of meanness and viewed any discussion of racism in our institution as a personal affront. They saw the agency and themselves as culture carriers of the agency as dedicated to *doing good*, a value that was inconsistent with a view of either as incorporating racism. They saw racism as being individual and intentional instead of structural and systemic.

Since we pride ourselves on being a *learning institution*, we were clear that we needed additional knowledge to move forward. We knew from past experiences that any major institutional culture change requires *top down* buy in. Thus, we sought some of this country's best minds on race and race matters for their consultation on this process all of whom helped us in ultimately formulating our anti-racist organizational development plan that began with our leaders, managers and supervisors.²

2 Those consulted included: David Thomas, Ph.D, Harvard Business School, Boston, MA; Cheryl Franks, Ph.D, Columbia University, New York, NY; Sandra Bernabei, LCSW, Anti Racist Alliance, New York, NY; A.J. Franklin, Ph.D, City College and Graduate School of the City University of New York; Nancy Boyd-Franklin, Ph.D, Graduate School of Applied and Professional

ANTI-RACIST MODEL FOR ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

Our anti-racist model for institutional change was derived from 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 foremost 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.

All of our executive staff and managers were required to attend the Peoples' Institute's two and one half day undoing racism training workshop in order to create a common language and to lay the foundation for our agency's anti-racist organizational plan.

Through the Undoing Racism workshop we learned that structural racism refers to practices, policies, procedures and – most important – the *social culture* of institutions. In a society set up to support white-skin privilege, the inherent social culture of that society's institutions will naturally reflect

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bias unless there is deliberate action to counteract that bias. In institutions where there is little or no consciousness of racial bias, the social culture of unconscious racism will influence basic policies and practices. Unfortunately, even in institutions that have a fairly 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. Leaders, 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 leadership must be taught how to help white staff as well as staff of color to better understand how systemic racism works and impacts all staff and clients, and be prepared to offer strategies and support for systemic change. Through a series of workshops that we described as Difficult Race Dialogues our managers were offered training on handling difficult race based discussions. These workshops were lead by outside consultants who shared our common language and principals of anti-racist work as developed by the People's Institute.

In choosing trainers, we used the guidelines that were developed by Gail Golden (2005):

- Teams should be diverse, multicultural and multiracial. One person cannot address all the issues.
- The trainers should have a power analysis. This means that they need to go beyond racism just as prejudice based on skin color.
- They must also teach that what we understand as racism requires that those who hold prejudice based on skin color also have power, and control access to power based on skin color.
- The trainers must emphasize systemic, organizational and institutional manifestations of racism rather than emphasizing racism as manifested in interpersonal relationships.
- The trainers should teach extensively to the phenomenon of white culture and its manifestations in organizations.
- Trainers need to be able to teach to the link between racism and poverty.
- Trainers should have a global understanding of racism.

These workshops offered opportunities for managers to practice race dialogues, learn new techniques, and ask questions as well as learn from each other.

Additionally, it became clear that our managers needed specialized training in order to be able to fully integrate anti-racist principle into the core of their management. To realize this goal, we contracted the services of Sola Winley, the President of ProVision Consulting who aided us in developing our leadership institute and acts as its facilitator. The Leadership Development Institute (LDI) was designed to strengthen the leadership and management capacity of our agency. The LDI approach to management development is psychologically based and built on the premise that leaders and organizations are interdependent. It is a cohort-based experiential leadership and management development program that provides mid-to-senior-level managers with leadership development tools and formal training opportunities. Elements of the program were custom tailored to fit our desire

to produce anti-racist leaders. The program has several interconnected goals including: seeking to develop self-awareness through intensive exploration of personal issues that impact career objectives; examining real-life management issues and discussing concrete examples of challenges that leaders face; and improving and enhancing skills and creating and developing projects/programs that benefit the organization. Several of these projects were focused on our anti-racist mission. The entire group attended The People's Institute's two and half day Undoing Racism workshops which ultimately promoted authentic dialogue among the racially and culturally mixed group members. The structure of the program allows participants to incorporate and implement what they learn. The program has been an incredible success and has enhanced leadership skills as well as produced unexpected connections between managers who in the past had had little or no relationship with each other.

RACE, RACE MATTERS, POWER, AUTHORITY, AND CHANGE

Diversity is focused on helping people of color to achieve the goals and resources defined as important by the white society. Assimilating in this way may bring them into the dominant 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 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.

THE ROLE OF TOP LEADERSHIP

The organization's leadership must consistently demonstrate its commitment to the process to all

employees by setting a tone for honest discourse by openly acknowledging tensions. Friction must be resolved respectfully and swiftly when possible, and staff must be helped to accept a degree of uncertainty and discomfort. Since attitude change cannot be mandated, much thought and consultation is needed along with honest dialogue and an understanding that anti-racist work is a process.

A degree of backlash/pushback should be anticipated as some members of the dominant group 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. Indeed white staff may fear they will have to give up position, access and power if their institution is guided by anti-racism. A leader cannot successfully guide this initiative without listening and creating a safe space for these divergent views and fears about issues of race and racism. It is important that a leader provide a space where shame, blame and judgment are not supported in these discussions about race and racism.

Structural racism exists everywhere. With this in mind it is important for the top leadership to ask the hard questions, such as:

- 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?

The challenge is to acknowledge the value of diverse views and incorporate them into the

organizational culture, clinical practice, administration, 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. The leadership must establish policies and procedures that support institutional change, keep communication flowing and be open to hearing all sides of the race issues.

The ultimate role of an organization's leader in an anti-racist institution is to create an organizational atmosphere of inclusiveness which tends to produce an environment of participation. According to Mahdi Fard, as he describes Human Relationship Waste (HRW), the individual in the organization has unused and misused human resources. All organizations are pushed forward by human energy which manifests itself as enthusiasm, passion, creativity, uniqueness of purpose and clarity of vision. Human energy is unlike any physical fuel source, because as long as a human being is focused on doing something evoking passion and enthusiasm, human energy will remain high. By burning human energy inefficiently, the productive activity of the organization slows down, falls out of harmony and loses its natural timing or rhythm, thus, causing the organization to be unable to function at its full potential. This can lead to the loss of important opportunities that drain the organization's fiscal and psychological resources as well as cause its staff to have to do more with less. All of which can lead to low morale, internal power struggles, sabotage, and sub-standard productivity. Healthy relationships allow the organization to operate at full potential. Additionally, the organization needs perspectives and vision from all staff which allows the institution to have vision from many different angles. Racism destroys uniqueness and nullifies

the experience and vision that could be offered by staff of color, thus leaving the organization with less than optimum vision for providing leadership and service. Mr. Fard further states that helping all staff to feel both appreciated and honored is key to reducing Human Relationship Waste.

We have learned that everyone is for change, in general, but may be opposed, in particular, when they themselves have to change. A shift in values takes time, and even if successful, it takes months and years to realize the full benefits. Systems can only absorb but so much change at any one time.

ROLE OF MANAGERS

Managers must become aware that culturally sensitive social work practice requires more than diverse entry level staff. In some situations "diversify" becomes entangled with the difficulty in finding the "right applicant," who could clearly articulate treatment issues, and have the "right image" to fit in to the existing white-centric culture setting. On closer examination, it becomes clear that some managers want diverse applicants to think, speak and behave as if they were white. Their expectations, reflected in an article written by Valerie Batts (1998), were derived from cultural norms for U.S. citizens where evaluation is made based on how close one was to being a white, heterosexual, U.S. born and U.S. English speaking, middle-class and physically able male.

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Managers must face the fact that most organizations, schools of social work, and most of society reflect the values of this "normative" group and thus *learn to uncover and acknowledge white-centric bias*. This awareness clarifies the need for further training as well as the need to hold people accountable for making the changes happen, just as one might do for other organizational goals. It is clear that if conformity to the dominant culture is viewed as "normal"

it is likely that multicultural staff would be expected to change their behavior to fit in, to be considered competent, desirable, talented and capable of supervising or managing white staff. Therefore it is exceedingly important for managers to understand agency 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 in order to reap the full benefits offered by a diverse workforce.

True team work can only occur after many of the staff have learned how to resolve conflict, respect one another's differences, and are ready to work cooperatively, not just side by side. If the manager is psychologically or ideologically blocked, perhaps out of fear of the unknown, achieving coexistence is very difficult, if not impossible. One of the manager's roles is to help some white staff to get over their initial fear that they will be beaten up, criticized, or made to feel guilty once issues of race and racism are raised. If the manager sets a tone of non-judgment, no guilt-tripping, no attacking and encourages staff to speak for themselves and not take things *just personally*, there is less chance of white staff fears being realized. It is also important for managers to encourage white staff to listen non-defensively to staff of color and to encourage staff of color to find and use their voice. Ken Hardy expands on the concepts stated above in his delineation of the *tasks of the privileged* and the *tasks of the subjugated* when discussing racism or other forms of social oppression in a mixed group.

The manager's ability to help his/her staff openly discuss issues of race and racism greatly enhances the team's ability to work toward developing healthier relationships and gaining full staff participation on committees, in case conferences, treatment planning, policies, office ambiance, general office operation and service delivery. This participation is essential to help staff move from defensive or neutral behavior to coexistence with others whom they found to be strange and/or threatening. These approaches can enhance productivity, staff morale, retention and cut down on burnout.

A clear understanding and awareness of white-centric dominant thought will cause a racially conscious manager to explore the larger question, that is: how diverse is the staff in decision making positions, such as senior clinicians and supervisors? These employees control policy, programming, treatment choices, program location, promotion, hiring, and other key factors. In other words, how is the money spent and who has power?

THE SUPERVISORY ROLE

It is often said that people do not leave jobs, they leave supervisors! Thus the role of the supervisor is key to the development and retention of staff of color. Supervisors must be prepared to discuss issues, or even perceived issues, involving race and racism with the understanding that due to the power differential, most staff will be unable to initiate these issues without permission. They must become familiar with microaggressions, which were first described in 1970 by psychiatrist Chester Pierce, as a specific, less known form of individual racism that merits special attention. *The American Psychiatric Glossary* (2003) defines micro-aggression as "offensive mechanisms or actions by a person that are designed to keep other individuals in an inferior, dependent or helpless role. These actions are nonverbal and kinetic and they are well suited to control space, time, energy, and mobility of an individual (usually non-white or female) while producing feelings of degradation." These stunning, automatic acts of disregard stem from unconscious attitudes of racial superiority and may be unintentional. Examples include assuming that a black physician is an orderly, automatically presenting your valet parking check to a black man in a suit and tie standing at the entrance to a restaurant, or automatically asking a patient with non-European features to present his welfare card when seeking treatment. Such examples, though seemingly subtle and innocuous, are perceived by the victim as racist and accumulate over time to burden the target of such acts.

These unaddressed racial attacks block both the worker's and the team's potential, which ultimately jeopardizes the organization's ability to provide quality services. Such attacks are a part of non-white workers' daily lives, and are not confined to the workplace. Whether they come as full-scale frontal attacks or smaller assaults to the flank, these subtle indignities are hard hitting. Since microaggressions strike at the core of a worker's identity, an emotional response is normal. It is crucial to first acknowledge that *microaggressions* exist and become familiar with the various forms that they take. Workers who experience micro-aggressions need validation.

According to Dr. Richard G. Dudley Jr. (1988), repeated invalidated insults will eventually begin to destroy the worker's self esteem and sense of competency. This battle can consume an enormous amount of energy and the worker needs emotional support and direction. Although it is difficult to assign *energy points* expended in each race-related encounter, it is clear that the personal cost is lofty. It is important that a supervisor is *aware* of the amount of time and energy that workers of color are forced to spend addressing these issues. This time and energy must come from somewhere, and it appears that it is taken from the more personal side of the ledger, which ultimately leads to burn-out and retention issues.

Learning to distinguish between racially-motivated and substantive criticisms requires time, sophistication and intense awareness of one's strengths and challenges. The supervisor's role can be extraordinarily helpful to this process. Self-assessment is often quite difficult for the worker at these times, since some forms of racial insults may have been internalized and can affect the worker's self perception. Therefore, at some level, the worker may have lingering questions about his/her ability and self-assessment may be inappropriately harsh.

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Some workers, however, may be so well defended against race related insults that they tune out the insult and do not explore their own affective experience, especially vulnerability and pain. At the other extreme, some workers believe that all conflict is race-related, and tend to use racism as an excuse for not exploring personal and professional shortcomings. This could cause them to deny any substantive concerns that are raised and therefore find it difficult to grow and develop in their work.

Some supervisors may worry about being seen as racist thus denying workers of color vital feedback rather than confronting and dealing with difficult situations. The supervisor must play a vital role by helping the worker to sort out what is legitimate race bias, and what are professional development issues that need improvement on the worker's part. The supervisor must also be instrumental in helping the worker focus on selecting realistic alternatives and strategies for coping. Workers can be helped to recognize that some situations are unworthy of a response. On the other hand supervisors must support workers by taking action on issues that require *immediate* supervisor and/or senior executive response.

The worker must be provided with an avenue to express feelings, since hurt and rage may initially take over the worker's sound judgment. With support and time, workers will learn that intense feelings stirred by racism can be managed, and that they can develop healthy alternatives for dealing with unhealthy situations.

Race-related crises need to be responded to swiftly. Each issue of racism or perceived racism should be acknowledged, with the understanding that the feeling of assault is equally as painful to the worker. The supervisor's feedback is not only acceptable but important for promoting the worker's professional growth, preventing burnout and promoting job retention.

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED

Our original goal was to attract a multicultural staff to better serve our broad array of multicultural clients, however, something even bigger happened. Over the years, in pockets of our agency, our demographically representative workforce brought fresh new perspectives. They were able to pursue and maintain cases that previously all-white staff had not been able to engage. They did outreach to the community's natural support systems that the traditional white staff would not have thought relevant or appropriate because their link to clinical treatment was not obvious to them. We have learned that having multi-cultural staff can affect the work in terms of expanding our notions of what are treatment issues and taking on those issues and reframing them in creative ways that we had never done before. We have also learned that a racially diverse staff can really change the substance and enhance the quality of our work. We have become clear that leaders, managers and supervisors all need anti-racist training in order to identify, analyze and nurture these culturally based skills, beliefs, and practices so that we can learn from them and teach others. The goal of our anti-racist organizational development plan is to integrate these skills into the very core of the organization's culture. All of these changes require systemic and institutional change in order to truly impact our agency and our practice.

For today, we are stuck between yesterday and tomorrow. Our goal is to build a bridge to the future while valuing our history. We passionately

believe that our future can be better than our past. The future of our agency is our professional life's work; 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. We have seen the future and want to go there. For change to be lasting in our organization, we must sustain these efforts on all levels, beginning with the leadership, encouraged 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 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; we must develop a higher organizational pain threshold in order to stay the course.

Dr. Nancy Boyd-Franklin taught us that the hope is in the struggle; therefore for today, we will continue to hope and dream as we *struggle* to move our beloved traditional Jewish organization towards an anti-racist mission.

We are mindful of the contemporary usage of the phrase *Tikkun Olam*, the Hebrew term literally translated as *world repair*, which has come to connote public policy and societal change, and with the Kabbalistic notion that the world is profoundly broken and can be fixed only by human activity. ■

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