

Diversity Training:

Good for Business but Insufficient for Social Change

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In the past ten to fifteen years, diversity training has become a boom industry, as government agencies, corporations, and non-profits attempt to manage race and racial attitudes in the workplace. Organizations employ diversity training for reasons ranging from protection against liability to a more liberal notion that "in diversity there is strength." The belief that workplace diversity can bring increased productivity, new ideas, and therefore higher profits, appeals particularly to corporations. Although diversity training may make good business sense, the model falls terribly short of the comprehensive racial justice approach required for progressive social change.

Diversity vs. Racial Justice

The difference between diversity training and the racial justice approach embedded in Western States Center's Dismantling Racism Project begins with the definition of racism. Diversity training sees racism primarily as the result of individual action: personal prejudice or stereotyping, and intentional acts of discrimination by individuals. A racial justice definition includes these beliefs and acts, but considers individual acts of prejudice only one dimension of racism. More importantly, racism is defined as a set of societal, cultural, and institutional beliefs and practices — regardless of intention — that subordinate and oppress one race for the benefit of another.

The case of Amadou Diallo, an unarmed black man shot 41 times by four white New York City Police officers (all of whom were acquitted), illustrates the difference between these two views. While a diversity approach might pursue sensitivity training for the officers, a racial justice perspective would hold the entire criminal justice system accountable and demand systemic change.

Multi-Culturalism

In diversity training's prejudice reduction model, individual attitudes and beliefs are the focus of change. With the goal of harmony and efficiency in the multi-racial workplace, diversity training emphasizes awareness and appreciation of the contributions of different cultures.

What too often gets lost in the muddy waters of multi-cultural awareness is any analysis of power and the ways racist attitudes and organizational culture operate. How do white people gain advantages from racism? What is the daily impact of racist oppression on people of color? Why do white people regularly dominate meetings? Is the white way of doing things still assumed to be the preferred mode of operations?

While white staff may develop a greater appreciation for people of color through diversity training, it can avoid these questions and leave the dominant organizational culture intact. Multi-cultural awareness often assumes a level playing field — despite real power imbalances between white people and people of color.

Who's Got the Power?

In contrast, the racial justice approach of Western States' Dismantling Racism (DR) Project analyzes race in an institutional and cultural context, not as a problem to be solved by individual enlightenment. It develops an understanding of power, who has it, and how it gets used. As practiced with progressive groups around the region, the goal of the DR Project is to build a shared analysis of how racism is perpetuated by organizational structures, processes, norms and expectations (in addition to individual behavior and attitudes).

Jean Hardisty, in *Mobilizing Resentment*, calls for programs like the DR Project to "move white people beyond tolerance and inclusion, to envision actual power-sharing and learning to take leadership from people of color...."

The DR Project assumes that white people and people of color have different work to do. White people need to understand how their privilege operates, how they perpetuate racism, and how they can become allies to people of color. For people of color, the process of empowerment involves struggling with the impact of internalized racist oppression. The Project attempts to develop models that value and build leadership in people of color while holding white people accountable for their racism. Diversity training can ask white people to change

their consciousness while leaving their dominance intact; a racial justice approach requires an organizational transformation of power relations.

Who's at the Table?

The organizational change sought through diversity training assumes that appreciating and increasing human variety is important and necessary. The end goal is peaceful integration of people of color, rather than a strong shared analysis of racism and anti-oppression practices. This approach often leads to tokenization. *People of color are like the raisins in my oatmeal; it just takes a few to make the dish more rich.*

The diversity model's focus on who is sitting around the table can unreasonably assume individuals are speaking "for their people." Paul Kivel, in *Uprooting Racism*, warns of the dangers of tokenization: "We don't want to become complacent and believe that we understand the need of a community through hearing from a few 'representatives.'"

A racial justice analysis does not ask individuals to speak for the interests of an entire constituency. Furthermore, it underscores the importance of paying as much attention to who is not in the room as who is. In working with predominantly white organizations, the DR Project helps them struggle with how to address the interests of those not directly included.

Diversification or integration is not always the best thing for an organization. Take an all white organization, for example. A diversity approach would combine prejudice reduction with some organizational development, perhaps resulting in revisions of the personnel policies, job descriptions, and hiring practices. Yet, very little else about the organization would have changed. Even if the

organization is successful in bringing people of color on board it would be a shallow victory. Take a snapshot of the organization from year to year; you'll see a few people of color in each photo, but the faces will be different each year. People of color might get hired but they won't stay very long because they are being asked to fit into the existing dominant culture.

A DR approach with such an organization won't

start with the premise or suggestion that the organization must recruit people of color. Certain groundwork needs to be done before that is a viable or advisable goal. The organization might begin with a "white privilege training" rather than a diversity training. The goal is to create an organizational culture with a deep and shared understanding of racism where white people are committed to holding themselves accountable,

and where naming racism and other oppression when it occurs is encouraged and not avoided. Without these qualities in place, people of color may find a harsh reality beneath the welcoming organizational veneer.

Taking Action

Working for social change, it is not enough to develop a diverse, culturally competent staff, board, and membership. In the context of the horrid history and current institutional and societal practice of racism and injustice, a friendly workplace is not enough. DR education and practices are designed not only to understand racism in its complexities, but to work actively against it.

Skillful racial justice work also creates a basis for understanding systemic inequality and oppression based on other identities such as classism, sexism, heterosexism, and ableism. This approach is essential for building bridges between those who are marginalized. Nothing less is required if we want a broad, strong, and cohesive movement for progressive social change. 🐾

