



WHITE CULTURE

Adapted From *Dismantling Racism: A Workbook for Social Change Groups*

Kenneth Jones and Tema Okun, ChangeWork, 2001

Characteristics of white supremacy culture show up in our organizations through their culture. Culture is powerful precisely because it is so present and at the same time so very difficult to name or identify. The characteristics listed below are damaging because they are used as norms and standards without being pro-actively named or chosen. They are damaging because they promote white supremacy thinking. They are damaging to both people of color and to white people. Organizations that are people of color led or a majority people of color can also demonstrate many damaging characteristics of white supremacy culture.

- Culture is powerful
- Characteristics are damaging because they promote white supremacy thinking
- They can be seen at ANY organization

One of the purposes of listing characteristics of white culture is to point out how organizations which unconsciously use these characteristics as their norms and standards make it difficult, if not impossible, to open the door to other cultural norms and standards. As a result, many of our organizations, while saying we want to be multicultural, really only allow other people and cultures to come in if they adapt or conform to already existing cultural norms. Being able to identify and name the cultural norms and standards you want is a first step to making room for a truly multi-cultural organization.

- Recognition of these cultural norms allows us to adapt or change them, allowing new norms

Note: None of these things are inherently bad – but the combination of them perpetuate a culture of white supremacy. Below you will see the characteristics and antidotes for each.

1. Perfectionism

1. Tendency to identify what's wrong; little ability to identify, name, and appreciate what's right
2. More common is to point out either how the person or work is inadequate
3. Or even more common, to talk to others about the inadequacies of a person or their work without ever talking directly to them
4. Mistakes are seen as personal, i.e. They reflect badly on the person making them as opposed to being seen for what they are: mistakes
5. Making a mistake is confused with being a mistake, doing wrong with being wrong
6. Little time, energy, or money put into reflection or identifying lessons learned that can improve practice, in other words little or no learning from mistakes

Perfectionism: Antidotes

1. When offering feedback, always speak to the things that went well before offering criticism
2. Ask people to offer specific suggestions for how to do things differently when offering criticism
3. *Develop a culture of appreciation, where the organization takes time to make sure that people's work and efforts are appreciated
4. Develop a learning organization, where it is expected that everyone will make mistakes and those mistakes offer opportunities for learning
5. Separate the person from the mistake and create an environment where people can recognize that mistakes sometimes lead to positive results

2. Sense of Urgency

1. Continued sense of urgency that makes it difficult to take time to be inclusive, encourage democratic and/or thoughtful decision-making, to think long-term, to consider consequences
2. Frequently results in sacrificing potential allies for quick or highly visible results, for example sacrificing interests of communities of color in order to win victories for white people (seen as default or norm community)
3. Reinforced by funding proposals (or RFPs) which promise too much work for too little money and by funders who expect too much for too little

Sense of Urgency: Antidotes

1. Develop realistic work plans that include focus on positively impacting people
2. Leadership which understands that things take longer than anyone expects and learns from past experience how long things take
3. *Discuss and plan for what it means to set goals of inclusivity and diversity, particularly in terms of time
4. Write realistic funding proposals with realistic time frames
5. Be clear about how you will make good decisions in an atmosphere of urgency

3. Defensiveness

1. People respond to new or challenging ideas with defensiveness, making it very difficult to raise these ideas
2. Because of either/or thinking (see category below), criticism of those with power is viewed as threatening and inappropriate (or rude)
3. A lot of energy in the organization is spent trying to make sure that people's feelings aren't getting hurt or working around defensive people
4. The defensiveness of people in power creates an oppressive culture
5. The organizational structure is set up and much energy spent trying to prevent abuse and protect power as it exists rather than to facilitate the best out of each person or to clarify who has power and how they are expected to use it

Defensiveness: Antidotes

1. Discuss the ways in which defensiveness or resistance to new ideas gets in the way of the mission
2. Work on your own defensiveness
3. Name defensiveness as a problem when it is one
4. Understand that structure cannot in and of itself facilitate or prevent abuse
5. Understand the link between defensiveness and fear (of losing power, losing face, losing comfort, losing privilege)
6. Give people credit for being able to handle more than you think

4. Quantity Over Quality

1. All resources of organization are directed toward producing measurable goals
2. Things that can be measured are more highly valued than things that cannot, for example numbers of people attending a meeting, newsletter circulation, money spent are valued more than quality of relationships, democratic decision-making, ability to constructively deal with conflict
3. Little or no value attached to process; if it can't be measured, it has no value
4. Discomfort with emotion and feelings
5. No understanding that when there is a conflict between content (the agenda of the meeting) and process (people's need to be heard or engaged), process will prevail (for example, you may get through the agenda, but if you haven't paid attention to people's need to be heard, the decisions made at the meeting are undermined and/or disregarded)

Quantity Over Quality: Antidotes

1. *Include process or quality goals in your planning
2. Make sure your organization has a values statement which expresses the ways in which you want to do your work
3. Make sure this is a living document and that people are using it in their day to day work
4. *Look for ways to measure process goals (for example if you have a goal of inclusivity, think about ways you can measure whether or not you have achieved that goal)
5. Learn to recognize those times when you need to get off the agenda in order to address people's underlying concerns

5. Worship of the Written Word

1. If it's not in a memo, it doesn't exist
2. Does not take into account or value other ways in which information gets shared
3. 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 antidotes: (for example, the ability to build relationships with those who are important to the organization's mission)
4. The belief there is one right way to do things and once people are introduced to the right way, they will see the light and adopt it, when they do not adapt or change, then something is wrong with them (the other, those not changing), not with us (those who "know" the right way)

Worship of the Written Word: Antidotes

1. Accept that there are many ways to get to the same goal
2. Look for the tendency for a group or a person to keep pushing the same point over and over out of a belief that there is only one right way and then name it
1. *Never assume that you or your organization know what's best for the community in isolation from meaningful relationships with that community
2. *When working with communities from a different culture than yours or your organizations, be clear that you have some learning to do about the communities ways of doing
3. *Once the group has made a decision about which way will be taken, honor that decision and see what you and the organization will learn from taking that way, even and especially if it is not the way you would have chosen
4. *Work on developing the ability to notice when people do things differently and how those different ways might improve your approach

6. Paternalism

1. Decision-making is clear to those with power and unclear to those without it
2. Those with power think they are capable of making decisions for and in the interests of everyone, especially those without power
3. Those with power often don't think it is important or necessary to understand the viewpoint or experience of those for whom they are making decisions
4. Those without power understand they do not have it and understand who does
5. Those without power do not really know how decisions get made and who makes what decisions, and yet they are completely familiar with the impact of those decisions on them

Paternalism: Antidotes

1. Make sure that everyone knows and understands who makes what decisions in the organization
2. Make sure everyone knows and understands their level of responsibility and authority in the organization
3. *Include people who are affected by decisions in the decision-making

7. Either / Or Thinking

1. Things are either/or, good/bad, right/wrong, with us/against us
2. Closely linked to perfectionism in making it difficult to learn from mistakes or accommodate conflict
3. No sense that things can be both/and
4. Results in trying to simplify complex things, for example believing that poverty is simply a result of lack of education
5. Creates conflict and increases sense of urgency, as people are felt they have to make decisions to do either this or that, with no time or encouragement to consider alternatives, particularly those which may require more time or resources

Either / Or Thinking: Antidotes

1. Notice when people use either/or language and push to come up with more than two alternatives
2. *Notice when people are simplifying complex issues, particularly when the stakes seem high or an urgent decision needs to be made; slow it down and encourage people to do a deeper analysis
3. *When people are faced with an urgent decision, take a break and give people some breathing room to think creatively
4. *Avoid making decisions under extreme pressure

8. Power Hoarding

1. Little, if any, value around sharing power
2. Power seen as limited, only so much to go around
3. Those with power feel threatened when anyone suggests changes in how things should be done in the organization, feel suggestions for change are a reflection on their leadership
4. Those with power don't see themselves as hoarding power or as feeling threatened
5. Those with power assume they have the best interests of the organization at heart and assume those wanting change are ill-informed (stupid), emotional, inexperienced

Power Hoarding: Antidotes

1. Include power sharing in your organization's values statement
5. Discuss what good leadership looks like and make sure people understand that a good leader develops the power and skills of others
6. Understand that change is inevitable and challenges to your leadership can be healthy and productive
7. Make sure the organization is focused on the mission

9. Fear of Open Conflict

1. People in power are scared of conflict and try to ignore it or run from it
2. When someone raises an issue that causes discomfort, the response is to blame the person for raising the issue rather than to look at the issue which is actually causing the problem
3. Emphasis on being polite
4. Equating the raising of difficult issues with being impolite, rude, or out of line

Fear of Open Conflict: Antidotes

1. Role play ways to handle conflict before conflict happens
1. Distinguish between being polite and raising hard issues
1. Don't require those who raise hard issues to raise them in "acceptable" ways, especially if you are using the ways in which issues are raised as an excuse not to address the issues being raised
1. Once a conflict is resolved, take the opportunity to revisit it and see how it might have been handled differently

1.

10. Individualism / I'm the Only One

1. Little experience or comfort working as part of a team
2. People in organization believe they are responsible for solving problems alone
3. Accountability, if any, goes up and down, not side-ways to peers or to those the organization is set up to serve
4. Desire for individual recognition and credit
5. Leads to isolation
6. Competition more highly valued than cooperation and where cooperation is valued, little time or resources devoted to developing skills in how to cooperate
7. Creates a lack of accountability, as the organization values those who can get things done on their own without needing supervision or guidance
8. if something is going to get done right, I'll have to do it
9. Little or no ability to delegate work to others

Individualism / I'm the Only One: Antidotes

1. Evaluate people based on their ability to delegate to others
2. Evaluate people based on their ability to work as part of a team to accomplish shared goals
3. Include teamwork as an important value in your values statement
4. Make sure the organization is working towards shared goals and people understand how working together will improve performance
5. Evaluate people's ability to work in a team as well as their ability to get the job done
6. Make sure that credit is given to all those who participate in an effort, not just the leaders or most public person
7. Make people accountable as a group rather than as individuals
8. Create a culture where people bring problems to the group
9. Use staff meetings as a place to solve problems, not just a place to report activities

11. Progress is Bigger, More

1. Observed in systems of accountability and ways we determine success
1. Progress is an organization which expands (adds staff, adds projects) or develops the ability to serve more people (regardless of how well they are serving them)
1. Gives no value, not even negative value, to its cost, for example, increased accountability to funders as the budget grows, ways in which those we serve may be exploited, excluded, or underserved as we focus on how many we are serving instead of quality of service or values created by the ways in which we serve

Progress is Bigger, More: Antidotes

1. *Create seventh generation thinking by asking how the actions of the group now will affect people seven generations from now
1. *Make sure that any cost/benefit analysis includes all the costs, not just the financial ones, for example the cost in morale, the cost in credibility, the cost in the use of resources
1. Include process goals in your planning, for example make sure that your goals speak to how you want to do your work, not just what you want to do
1. Ask those you work with and for to evaluate your performance

12. Objectivity

1. The belief that emotions are inherently destructive, irrational, and should not play a role in decision-making or group process
2. Invalidating people who show emotion
3. The belief that there is such a thing as being objective
4. Requiring people to think in a linear fashion and ignoring or invalidating those who think in other ways
5. Impatience with any thinking that does not appear “logical” to those with power

Objectivity: Antidotes

1. Realize that everybody has a world view and that everybody’s world view affects the way they understand things
2. Realize this means you too
3. Push yourself to sit with discomfort when people are expressing themselves in ways which are not familiar to you
4. Assume that everybody has a valid point and your job is to understand what that point is

13. Right to Comfort

1. The belief that those with power have a right to emotional and psychological comfort (another aspect of valuing “logic” over emotion)
2. Scapegoating those who cause discomfort
3. Equating individual acts of unfairness against white people with systemic racism which daily targets people of color

Right to Comfort: Antidotes

1. Understand that discomfort is at the root of all growth and learning, welcome it as much as you can
2. 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
3. Don’t take everything personally



Photo by Annie Spratt on Unsplash

Attachment 1 – “I Am From” Poem

Please use this template to draft your poem, and then write a final draft to share on blank paper.

I am from _____
(specific ordinary item)

From _____ and _____
(product name) (product name)

I am from the _____
(home description)

_____, _____, _____
(adjective) (adjective) (sensory detail)

I am from _____,
(plant, flower, natural item)

(description of above item)

I'm from _____ and _____
(family tradition) (family trait)

From _____ and _____
(name of family member) (another family name)

I'm from the _____ and _____
(description of family tendency) (another one)

From _____ and _____
(something you were told as a child) (another)

I'm from _____ (representation of religion or lack of),
(further description)

I'm from _____
(place of birth and family ancestry)

_____, _____
(a food item that represents your family) (another one)

From the _____
(specific family story about a specific person and detail)

MCOD Developmental Stage Model

(Jackson, 2006)

Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4	Stage 5	Stage 6
The Exclusionary Organization	"The Club"	The Compliance Organization	The Affirming Organization	The Redefining Organization	The Multicultural Organization



Stage 1: The Exclusionary Organization

- Openly maintains the dominant group's power and privilege
- Deliberately restricts membership
- Intentionally designed to maintain dominance of one group over others
- Overt discriminatory, exclusionary, and harassing actions go unaddressed
- Unsafe and dangerous environment for subordinated group members
- Monocultural organization

Stage 2: "The Club"

- Maintains privilege of those who have traditionally held power and influence
- Monocultural norms, policies, and procedures of dominant culture viewed as the only "right" way: "business as usual"
- Dominant culture institutionalized in policies, procedures, services, etc.
- Limited number of "token" members from other social identity groups allowed in IF they have the "right" credentials, attitudes, behaviors, etc.
- Engages issues of diversity and social justice only on club member's terms and within their comfort zone

Stage 3: The Compliance Organization

- Committed to removing some of the discrimination inherent in the "Club"
- Provides some access to some members of previously excluded groups
- No change in organizational culture, mission, or structure
- Focus: Do not make waves, or offend/challenge dominant group members
- Efforts to change profile of workforce (at bottom of organization)
- Token placements in staff positions: Must be "team players" and "qualified"
- Must assimilate into organizational culture
- Must not challenge the system or "rock the boat"
- Must not raise issues of sexism, racism, classism, heterosexism...

Stage 4: The Affirming Organization

- Committed to eliminating discriminatory practices and inherent advantages
- Actively recruits and promotes members of groups that have been historically denied access and opportunity
- Provides support and career development opportunities to increase success and mobility
- Employees encouraged to be non-oppressive awareness trainings
- Employees must assimilate to organizational culture

Stage 5: The Redefining Organization

- In transition
- Moving beyond “nondiscriminatory,” “non-oppressive”
- Working to create environment that “values and capitalizes on diversity”
- Working to ensure full inclusion of multicultural workforce to enhance growth and success of organization
- Begins to question limitations of organizational culture: mission, policies, structures, operations, services, management practices, climate, etc.
- Actively works towards developing a multicultural organization
- Committed to redesigning and implementing policies and practices to redistribute power, and ensure the inclusion, participation, and empowerment of all members

Stage 6: The Multicultural Organization

- Mission, values, operations, and services reflect the contributions and interests of the wide diversity of cultural and social identity groups
- Leaders and members act on the organizational commitment to eradicate all forms of oppression within the organization
- Actively works in larger communities (regional, national, global) to eliminate all forms of oppression and to create multicultural organizations