

White Supremacy Culture in Organizations

By Dismantling Racism Works adapted by
The Centre for Community Organizations

White Supremacy Culture in Organizations

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The Authors

This document is based primarily on a workbook developed by Tema Okun at Dismantling Racism Works. The content originates from that source unless otherwise stated, but has been edited and adapted with permission.

Sections marked with an asterisk (*) are based on Daniel Buford's extensive research on white supremacy culture for the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond.

Dismantling Racism Works & their sources

dRworks is a group of trainers, educators and organizers working to build strong progressive anti-racist organizations and institutions. dRworks can be reached at www.dismantlingracism.org.

Their original document builds on the work of many people and organizations, including: Andrea Ayzavian, Bree Carlson, Beverly Daniel Tatum, M.E. Dueker, Nancy Emond, Kenneth Jones, Jonn Lunsford, Sharon Martinas, Joan Olsson, David Rogers, James Williams, Sally Yee, Grassroots Leadership, Equity Institute Inc, the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond, the Challenging White Supremacy workshop, the Lillie Allen Institute, the Western States Center, as well as the contributions of hundreds of participants in the dRworks Dismantling Racism process.

Tema Okun dedicated the workbook to her long-time colleague Kenneth Jones: "[He] helped me become wise about many things and kept me honest about everything else. I love you and miss you beyond words." For their full bibliography, see the complete notebook for dRworks' Dismantling Racism process. Selected sources:

- Notes from People's Institute for Survival and Beyond Workshop, Oakland, CA, spring 1999.
- Notes from Challenging White Supremacy Workshop, San Francisco, CA, spring 1999.
- Beverly Daniel Tatum, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* NY: HarperCollins, 1997.
- Derrick Jensen, *A Language Older Than Words*. NY: Context Books, 2000.
- Paul Kivel, *Uprooting Racism*. PA: New Society Publishers, 1996.
- Anne Wilson Schaef, *Living in Process*. NY: Ballantine, 1998.

The Authors

This document has been adapted by the Centre for Community Organizations (COCO).

COCO team members Emily Yee Clare, Emil Briones, Kira Page and Philippe Angers-Trottier adapted and expanded the original document in 2019, with permission from the author.

COCO's mission is to help build a more socially just world by supporting the health and well-being of community organizations in Quebec. By conducting research, disseminating resources, providing training in organizational development, and reinforcing the links among Quebec's community organizations, COCo works to promote the vitality of this province's community sector. One of COCo's focus areas is strengthening inclusion and diversity within the Quebec community sector, particularly around questions of racial justice. COCo's offices are in Montreal, also known as Tiotia:ke, on the traditional territory of the Kanien'kehá:ka people. This place has also been a historical meeting place for other Indigenous nations, including the Omàmiwinini or the Algonquin people

In adapting this document, we pulled from a number of resources on white supremacy culture, in particular:

- The Neighbourhood Arts Network, Art and Equity Toolkit. Toronto, Canada, 2012. Their content is integrated in the generative questions posed at the end of each section.
- Nemesis Radical Feminist Collective, Language of Domination, Montreal, Quebec, 2000s.

Additional resources include:

- Robin Di Angelo, "White Fragility", International Journal of Critical Pedagogy, Vol. 3, 2011.
- CompassPoint Nonprofit Services, Aligning Leadership Structure With Individual & Organizational Identity: 5 Insights from Directors Sharing Power, Oakland, California, 2017.
- The Centre for Community Organizations & Emily Yee Clare, Diversité d'abord, Montreal, Canada, 2017.
- The Centre for Community Organizations & Philippe Angers-Trottier, Learning Organizations, Montreal, Canada, 2018.

You will see quotes, paraphrases and links to these works throughout the document—we strongly encourage you to check them out!

Introduction

This is a list of characteristics of white supremacy culture that show up in our organizations. Organizational culture is powerful precisely because it is so pervasive, impacting every part of our work; at the same time, it is very difficult to name or identify.

- **COCO SAYS** — Some organizations might not be familiar with the term ‘white supremacy culture.’ We use the following definition: White supremacy culture is the idea (ideology) that white people and the ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and actions of white people are superior to People of Colour and their ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and actions. White supremacy expresses itself interpersonally as well as structurally (through our governments, education systems, food systems, etc).—

The characteristics explored in this document are damaging. They are used as norms and standards without being proactively named or chosen by the group, and they promote white supremacy thinking. Because we all live in a white supremacy culture, these characteristics show up in the attitudes and behaviours of all of us—people of colour and white people. Therefore, these attitudes and behaviours can show up in any group or organization, whether it is white-led, predominantly white, people of colour-led, or predominantly people of colour. Part of the complexity of dismantling white supremacy is that people of colour, though marginalized within a white supremacist society, might also be complicit in and/or actively contributing to perpetuating norms and behaviours that map onto a white supremacy culture.

- **COCO SAYS** — Many organizations are interested in policy as a lever for organizational change. In our own experience as an organization trying to live our anti-oppressive values, cultural change was a precursor to applying an anti-oppressive or anti-racist lens to our policies. This has also been true for the organizations we support. Policy is a powerful tool, when used in conjunction with efforts at cultural change. This document has been an invaluable tool for us in identifying the characteristics of organizational culture that are implicitly or explicitly white supremacist. —

One reason to list characteristics of white supremacy culture is to point out how organizations that 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 organizations that claim to be multicultural in fact require new participants to adapt or conform to already existing (i.e. white supremacy culture) cultural norms. Being able to identify and name the cultural norms and standards the group wants is a critical step in building a truly multicultural organization.

- **COCO SAYS** — We want to note that these characteristics should be applied contextually. For example while ‘worship of the written word’ is a characteristic of white supremacy in organizations, not documenting any of your work can also present a problem for challenging patterns of inequity. —

How to Use this Document

We hope that this document can be a spark for conversations about racism in organizations. Given the large amount of content, we know that it may be overwhelming to imagine using it as a facilitation tool.

One of the best ways we have found is to use the document in smaller chunks. You can choose a couple of sections at random or based on observations of the organizational culture. Talk together about how the characteristics listed apply to your organization and ask:

- How do these cultural features exist in our organization or group? How are they hurting us, if they are? How do the descriptions mirror our experience or not?
- Is there a difference in how people of colour in the group experience these cultural beliefs and how white people do? What could we learn from that?
- What steps could we take to change these features in a day-to-day way? What solutions could the antidotes offer us? Are we ready and willing to do that?

Not all organizations are ready for this conversation. However, for those that are, our experience is that these kinds of conversations can be rich and invigorating. They allow us to explore the day-to-day experience of working together and offer a path to imagining and implementing a different way of being.

Perfectionism*

A Perfectionist Culture

- In a perfectionist culture:
 - 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;
 - there is little appreciation expressed for the work that others are doing. When appreciation is expressed, it is directed at those who already receive the most credit;
 - it is more common to point out how the person or their work is inadequate. Moreover, it is common to talk to others about the inadequacies of a person or their work without ever talking directly to the person in question;
 - making a mistake is confused with being a mistake. Doing wrong is confused with being wrong;
 - there is little time, energy, or money put into reflecting as a group and identifying lessons learned that could improve practice—in other words, little or no learning from mistakes;
 - there is a lot of splitting hairs/nitpicking. People bring up every imperfection in others' contributions or find exceptions to generalized observations that are offered.
- Perfectionist organizations are very good at identifying what's wrong, but have little ability to identify, name, and appreciate what's right.
- Perfectionist culture is often internalized by individuals. In other words, the perfectionist fails to appreciate their own good work, often pointing out their faults or 'failures.' Fixating on inadequacies and mistakes rather than learning from them, the person works with a harsh and constant inner critic and this is reinforced by the organizational culture.
- Perfectionist workplaces struggle with:
 - a poisonous level of stress and anxiety, self-blame, difficulty with teamwork, avoidance of feedback and reflection, and significant indecision;
 - holistic and systems thinking that might allow them to innovate or solve the root cause of issues.
- Perfectionism is closely linked to a culture of blame. It relies on guilt, fear and shame as motivators for work, which contributes significantly to employee burnout and stress.

- **COCO SAYS** — Our own research has shown that the requirement for 'perfect' work in organizations is often applied unequally on the basis of race. For example, racialized employees are held to a higher standard, while white employees are allowed to experiment, mess up, learn and improve. 'Mistakes' by racialized employees are seen as representative of their value as a staff member overall, and even of their racial group, while white employees are given the 'benefit of the doubt.'

Our research has also documented a pattern where racialized employees are punished for things that would not even qualify as mistakes, or are being held accountable to expectations that were never made clear to them. The most common example we hear is that a racialized employee is assumed to be responsible for leading diversity or anti-racism efforts in an organization, often without that ever having been made clear in the job posting or the job description. They are then blamed for the failures or conflicts that arise from those initiatives (or the lack of them). You can find more about this in COCo's report, *Diversité d'abord*. —

Antidotes

- + Emphasize a culture of appreciation, where the organization takes time to ensure that people's work and efforts are valued;
- + Develop a 'learning organization,' where it is expected that everyone will make mistakes and that those mistakes offer opportunities for growth;
- + When things go wrong, don't automatically search for someone to blame or assume there is someone at fault;
- + Foster an environment where people can recognize that mistakes sometimes lead to positive results. Develop an ability to fail and transform from those failures;
- + Separate the person from the mistake. When offering feedback, always speak to the things that went well before offering criticism;
- + Ask people to include specific suggestions for how to do things differently when they offer critical feedback;
- + Realize that being your own worst critic does not actually improve the work. It often contributes to low morale for everyone and does not help you or the group learn from mistakes;
- + Develop other sources of motivation in your organization such as a shared vision and a commitment to personal and organizational learning.

Worship of the Written Word

- “If it’s not in a memo, it doesn’t exist.” Written communication is overvalued above all other forms of communication that organizations rely on for their functioning;
 - The organization does not take into account or value other ways in which information gets shared, potentially losing out on valuable information or skewing its meaning along the way;
 - Those with strong documentation and writing skills are more highly valued, even in organizations where the ability to relate to others (via methods other than the written word) is key to the mission;
 - The organization undervalues or dismisses the emotion, tone and relational impact of communication since much of this is lost or de-emphasized in written communication;
 - There exists a culture of low trust and micromanagement (e.g. using unreasonable demands of documentation as a way to surveil an employee);
 - The multitude of ways individuals integrate and process information (i.e. not just reading) are dismissed or ignored;
 - Often based on an erroneous belief that institutional memory is largely communicated in writing.
- **COCO SAYS** – In our own research, we have also seen the 'worship of the written word' applied unevenly on the basis of race. For example, staff of colour are held to a standard of compliance with written policy, while white staff are given more leeway and understanding in interpreting or following the same policies. An example we often use is a racialized employee being written up for dress code violations – a policy that no one else in the organization even knew existed, and which was certainly not applied to white employees. We have started to call this a 'weaponization' of policy.

However, in our experience consulting with nonprofits, we have also seen the mirror image of 'worship of the written word' causing issues of power and inequity. For example, if there is almost no documentation of organizational history, process, or policy, the people who have been there the longest can maintain their power over decision-making and within collaborative work because they gatekeep access to key information. The lack of documentation can also contribute to the recurrence of problematic patterns in an organization. —

Questions to ask yourself

- Are the documents in our organization relevant and meaningful to the people they are meant to guide and support?
- Are key written documents reviewed and updated as our organization and community evolves?
- Does our organization solely rely on policies and procedures when trying to resolve conflicts or problems? What other reflexes can we develop when faced with challenging problems, uneven expectations, and miscommunication?
- Are people given the time to read important documents, and also to engage with and ask questions about them?

Only One Right Way

- The belief that there is one right way to do things. Once people are introduced to 'the right way,' they will willingly adopt it;
- When someone does not adapt or change, then something is wrong with them (and there is nothing wrong with those who are expecting that change or conformity in the first place). Think, for instance, of the missionary who does not see value in the culture of other communities;
- Causes significant barriers to change, agility, innovation, and teamwork;
- Creates a sense of exclusion and isolation for people who are not comfortable or at ease with 'the right way;'
- Often involves stubbornness and dogmatism: a position is final and not up for discussion, even in fairly low-stakes decisions and conversations.

Antidotes

- + Accept that there are many ways to get to the same goal and be open to alternative routes;
- + Once the group has made a decision to take a particular path to achieving a goal, honour that decision and see what can be learned from that way (even and especially if it is not the way you would have chosen);
- + Notice when people do things differently and how those different ways might improve your approach;
- + Keep an eye out for the tendency in 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;
- + When working with communities from a different culture (whether individually or organizationally), be clear on what you have still to learn about their ways of doing;
- + Never assume that you or your organization know what is best for other communities. Humility is essential in developing meaningful relationships with communities whose cultural background is different from yours or your organization's.

Only One Right Way

Questions to ask yourself

One antidote to the issues gathered in this section is to cultivate flexibility and adaptability in your organization. Here are some key questions to help your organization reflect:

- What kind of training or preparation might be needed to support staff and/or participants in negotiating change or being open to difference?
- What needs to happen in order to accommodate a range of learning styles, living conditions, or life responsibilities on our team?
- In what concrete ways are team members and the organization encouraged to explore other ways of being, knowing, and doing?
- Are individuals supported to learn from their mistakes? What happens when mistakes or challenges occur? What are our first reflexes?
- In what ways is a culture of learning and creativity fostered and embedded in the organization's structure? When and how do we try to reflect on our work and imagine different ways of doing?
- How are outside stakeholders involved in the planning, outreach, implementation, and evaluation of projects, programs, or organizations?
- What techniques are used to regularly check-in with colleagues and outside stakeholders about needs, processes, and goals?
- How are differences in ability, skill level, income, language, location, perspective, etc. accommodated to ensure that all potential participants are able to take part?
- When unexpected issues or developments occur, how will they be addressed or responded to?

Either/Or Thinking*

- Things are either/or: good/bad, right/wrong, with us/against us. There is reduced capacity for recognizing multiple or co-existing truths and complexity. Lots of sentences start with “but;”
- Closely linked to perfectionism. Perfectionists tend to aspire to a singular view or end goal, which makes it difficult to learn from mistakes, take feedback, and deal productively with those who do not agree;
- Incapacitates an individual's or organization's ability to deal with complexity. The resulting analysis is usually superficial and not holistic (e.g. believing that poverty is simply the result of a lack of education);
- Creates conflict and increases a sense of urgency. People feel they have to make decisions to do either this or that, with no time or encouragement to consider alternatives, particularly those requiring more time or resources;
- Often used by those with a clear agenda or goal to push those who are still thinking or reflecting to make a choice between ‘a’ or ‘b’ instead of acknowledging a need to come up with more options.

Antidotes

- + Notice when people use ‘either/or’ language and replace it with ‘both/and’ language;
- + When you feel stuck in an either/or situation, push to come up with more than two alternatives. If you feel you are stuck between two bad decisions and can't see a way out, try telling your team: “I believe there is a third solution. What we need to do is figure out what it is;”
- + Notice when people are oversimplifying 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;
- + When people are faced with an urgent decision, take a pause and give people some breathing room to think creatively. When possible, avoid making decisions under extreme pressure;
- + Equip your team with the tools to think in more complex and nuanced ways (e.g. mind maps, relationship maps, and other forms of systems mapping).

Either/Or Thinking*

- **COCO SAYS** — To us, 'either/or' thinking is very related to an organization's ability (or inability) to think in terms of systems and manage complexity.
“Systems thinking is a way for teams and individuals to look for changes that will give long-term improvements rather than the quick fix that eventually fails but is reapplied over and over...In essence, systems thinking provides an approach for managing complexity. It is a tool to help decision makers understand the cause-and-effect relationships among data, information, and people.” – David Crookes —

Concentration of Power

Power Hoarding

- There is little value placed on sharing power. Power is understood to be limited, with only so much to go around;
- Those with power feel threatened when anyone suggests changes to how things could or should be done in the organization. Leaders perceive suggestions for change as a criticism of their leadership and fail to recognize this response as part of power hoarding;
- Those with power assume they have the best interests of the organization at heart and assume ill intent from those wanting change, characterizing the changemakers as uninformed (stupid), emotional or inexperienced;
- Ideas of leadership are rooted in a culture of 'leader worship,' conceiving of leaders as saviours and/or heroes;
- Power hoarding often requires secrecy. Those with power control what, when and with whom the information is shared; opaqueness in decision-making and schisms within the organization can cause additional problems.

Behaviours to notice

- The Nemesis Radical Feminist Collective's document Language of Domination: had a lot to say about power hoarding! They described the following behaviours as part of power hoarding.
- Deposed kingship: attaching oneself to formal positions of power and giving them more importance than they are actually worth. Continuing to hold on to and identify with those positions after they have left them;
- Speaking for others: making your own opinions the voice of some collective to give them more weight, i.e. "many of us think that;"
- Keys to the City: controlling the circulation of information, almost jealously keeping key information of the group in a small set of hands—or one set of hands—for one's own use and profit;
- Master of Ceremonies: taking actual physical control to direct the group. Continually taking key responsibilities before others have the chance to;
- Playing mommy: over protecting and infantilizing others. Typical phrase: "Now, does one of the new...(e.g. women of colour) have something to add to this?;"
- Restating: repeating in your own words what someone (usually a woman) has just said in a way that is perfectly clear. Interrupting the conclusion of an intervention to recuperate it for your own ends;
- Focus Transfer: avoiding the question by bringing the subject of discussion back to issues that you have mastery of, in order to look smart and knowledgeable about the issue.

Antidotes

- + Embed shared power in the organization's values statement, its structures and policies, and its day-to-day operations;
- + Instil a culture of good leadership understood as supporting the development of others' leadership skills. Relatedly, such a culture necessarily abandons the idea of 'hero leaders;'
- + Cultivate leadership ideals that incorporate an understanding of the inevitability of change. Challenges to leadership are important for the health of the team and the organization;
- + Resist and challenge competitiveness. Prioritize cooperation and collaboration. This helps shift the implicit assumptions about leaders and leadership that can prevent power sharing from occurring.

Questions to ask yourself

Here are some questions to help deepen your ability to share power in your organization:

- Can my relationship with others be classified as either 'giving' or 'taking'? Or is there a two-way exchange of knowledge and resources?
- Do my actions demonstrate respect for the people and places I am working with?
- In hierarchical organizations, what are the structures that act as checks and balances for those in formal positions of power? How are conflicts of interest defined, identified, and addressed?
- In non-hierarchical organizations, how are informal power dynamics (e.g. seniority, social privilege, employment status) defined, identified, and addressed?

Power Hoarding

Things to think about

In 2017, consulting group Compass Point NonProfit Services published a paper on insights from 5 organizations that had moved towards shared directorship. The organizations had differences in how they were unpacking and distributing the single executive role: there were variations on 'co-directorship,' and some had even broader committee or collective structures they were experimenting with.

From their report: “Community United Against Violence came to the realization that internal leadership composition and structure is directly linked to external impact. According to Lidia Salazar, ‘We were noticing that our programmatic work wasn’t reaching marginalized communities. So, in our transition, we also changed our mission to center black and brown people, people of color. Then, in turn, it made sense to have a leadership model that reflected this in order to reach these communities and in order to make informed decisions for the organization.’ These evolutions of leadership structure are breaking down the false distinction between the organizations’ external organizational identity and their internal practices.”

Paternalism

- Paternalism is the policy or practice of people in positions of authority restricting the freedom and responsibilities of those subordinate to them in the subordinates' supposed best interest;
- In a paternalistic organization, decision-making 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, often without meaningfully consulting the people being affected;
- 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;
- There is often a lot of 'speaking in capital letters'—that is, presenting opinions and solutions like they are the final word on the matter, an attitude that is reinforced by tone and body language;
- Direct condescension and infantilization of others, particularly people who are new to the group (e.g. “you'll definitely need my help in order to get that task done”);
- Those without power in the organization might tacitly accept their powerlessness and/or fear the very real repercussions of challenging those with power;
- People without power understand that they do not have it and understand who does. Those without power do not really know how decisions get made; they are, however, completely familiar with the impacts of these decisions.

Antidotes

- + Cultivate transparency and open dialogue around decision-making practices. Ensure that everyone has a part in important decisions;
- + Make sure everyone knows and understands their level of responsibility and authority in the organization;
- + Meaningfully include those who are impacted by a decision in the decision-making process;
- + Be as transparent as possible about the reasons for any decisions being made without the input or against the input of people involved. Distinguish between appropriate confidentiality and discretion around sensitive information and an expedient lack of transparency.

Paternalism

Questions to ask yourself

Questions for organizational leaders about decision-making:

- Do I share my motivations, processes, and structures with others? How do I let others in on my processes and decisions?
- Who gets to be a part of decision-making? Who am I willing to share ownership with?
- How are team members involved in the planning, outreach, implementation, and evaluation of projects, programs, or organizations?

Defensiveness

- The organization spends significant time and energy trying to protect power as it exists and covering up abuses of power;
- The structure and procedures of the organization are optimized to protect the organization as is and to prohibit or dissuade growth and change;
- Criticism of those with power is viewed as threatening, inappropriate, or rude;
- People respond to new or challenging ideas with defensiveness, making it difficult to raise these ideas. People are not listening to each other or helping each other feel heard;
- A lot of energy in the organization is spent working around particular defensive individuals (often those with power). Ensuring that their feelings are not hurt is prioritized over thinking and working through important changes that need to be made for people with less power;
- White people spend energy defending against charges of racism instead of examining how racism might actually be happening and how their behaviours could be adding to organizational racism;
- Lashing out, wherein people seeking emotional control adopt a defensive attitude and respond to any opinion contrary to their own as a personal attack, may occur;
- Organizations rooted in defensiveness can unwittingly encourage the role of a solution-giver: those who give a response or solution before others have had a chance to contribute to the exchange, or before the problem has been given adequate time and consideration.

Things to think about

Defensiveness is connected to the idea of 'white fragility.' On this topic, Robin DiAngelo writes:

“White people in North America live in a social environment that protects and insulates them from race-based stress. This insulated environment of racial protection builds white expectations for racial comfort while at the same time lowering the ability to tolerate racial stress, leading to what I refer to as White Fragility...This results in a socially-sanctioned array of counter-moves against the perceived source of the discomfort, including: penalization; retaliation; isolation; ostracization; and refusal to continue engagement.”

Defensiveness

Antidotes

- + Understand that structural mechanisms cannot in and of themselves facilitate or prevent abuse;
- + Recognize the link between defensiveness and fear (e.g. fear of losing power, losing face, losing comfort, losing privilege). Name defensiveness when it is a problem;
- + Foster a culture of self-reflexivity in which people are supported and challenged to work on their own defensiveness;
- + Develop an organizational culture of caring and direct critical feedback—people are frequently capable of handling more than others expect, especially when there is a foundation of trust and care;
- + Discuss the ways in which defensiveness and resistance to new ideas get in the way of the organization’s mission.

Questions to ask yourself

“Relationship building is such a huge piece of what we do. Everything comes back to transparency—being really clear about ourselves and what we do in the community. We’re coming in as outsiders, so we’re being really really respectful that it’s their space. We’re being honest about our services and what we are able to provide. Being open to feedback, being approachable.”

— Art Starts, Neighbourhood Arts Network Art and Equity Toolkit

“Self-reflection happens organically and collectively amongst the staff. We get together every two weeks and report to one another. This helps to set the direction of where we’re going. I really like the performance reviews—it provides an opportunity to reflect and think about your goals. We are regularly visiting our programming sites and touching down about programs with the program managers. We talk about how needs have changed and what needs have come up, the success of the programs, and anything we can change. This happens at the end of every summer, the end of the year, and in the spring after winter programming is finished.”

— Art Starts, Neighbourhood Arts Network Art and Equity Toolkit

Right to Comfort

Right to Comfort

- The belief that those with power have a right to emotional and psychological comfort. This belief is broadly related to another characteristic to be discussed, the valuing of ‘logic’ over emotion;
- Scapegoating those who cause discomfort. For instance, people of colour who risk calling attention to organizational racism often become the subject of scrutiny rather than those who are complicit in perpetuating oppressive dynamics within the organization;
- Holding onto views wherein individual acts of unfairness against white people are conflated with or placed within the same analysis as systemic and structural racism that targets people of colour.

Antidotes

- + Understand that discomfort is at the root of all growth and learning—its presence is often signalling the need for deep self-reflection;
- + Welcome discomfort as much as you can;
- + Deepen your political analysis of racism and its intersections with other axes of oppression;
- + Personalize your reflections on racism and systemic oppression, rather than remaining within theoretical and hypothetical ways of thinking. These personal reflections can make for difficult work, but they strengthen analysis and help one see lived experiences and emotions as they fit into a larger picture.

Fear of Open Conflict

- People in power avoid conflict and disagreement;
- When someone raises an issue that causes discomfort, the response is to interrogate the person who highlighted the problem instead of interrogating the problem itself;
- Politeness is used to deny people the space to feel and to be themselves. For instance, when an employee is angered by racist acts committed against them, they are expected to mute their emotional reaction in the name of politeness and cordiality;
- Raising difficult issues is equated with being impolite, rude, or out of line. People in power might use this as a way to maintain control and silence those who challenge the organizational status quo.

Antidotes

- + Role-play ways to handle conflict before conflict happens;
- + Distinguish between being impolite and bringing up difficult issues. Learn to hold truth-telling conversations as a team and help each other feel heard in these moments;
- + Unlearn attitudes around 'acceptable' ways of calling attention to painful truths. Make space for emotions and think expansively about how problems are flagged in the organization;
- + Once a conflict is resolved, take the opportunity to revisit it at a later point and consider how it might have been handled differently.

Questions to ask yourself

- How is feedback used to assess and improve programs and activities?
- If unexpected issues or developments occur how will they be addressed or responded to?
- What techniques are used to regularly check-in with colleagues and community members about needs, processes, and goals?
- What are the unconscious beliefs that I or my organization hold that create and sustain our fear of open conflict?
- How can I, or my organization, find ways to help manage my/our fear of open conflict, other than avoiding conflict altogether?
- To what extent do I or the organization have space for people to be themselves?
- What are the ways in which self-reflexivity, trust, and openness to being challenged are fostered in the collective culture?

Individualism*

Individualism

- Individuals have little experience or comfort working as part of a team;
 - People often believe that problems and challenges are best handled alone. An individual might feel solely responsible, or there is an environment that generally lacks mutual support;
 - In hierarchical organizations, accountability is thought of in terms of top-down relationships and is rarely oriented from the bottom on up. This can apply both to lateral relationships as well as in relation to the community the organization serves;
 - Recognition is often done on an individual basis. Those in positions of power (both formal and informal) often get most or all of the credit, thus invisibilizing other contributors;
 - Leads to isolation;
 - Competition is more highly valued than cooperation. Where cooperation is valued, little time and few resources are devoted to developing these skills;
 - Individualistic organizational culture creates a lack of accountability as the group values those who can get things done on their own without supervision or guidance;
 - In individualistic organizations, people's people can be aggressive or reactive to persons whose group membership is important to them; for example, a person of colour in white majority organization who offers their perspective as a racialized individual might be met with discomfort, defensiveness, or denial as a way to silence or invisibilize how race and racism operate within the organization;
- **COCO SAYS** – To us, individualism is strongly linked to the meritocracy myth. Meritocracy is the idea that power, privilege, and wealth are afforded to those who have earned it on the basis of individual achievement, hard work, and/or inherent superiority. Operating within this rationale is the belief that those who are disenfranchised, powerless, and/or marginalized are as such due to a personal failure, a refusal to work hard, and/or inherent inferiority. The belief in meritocracy handily erases structural inequality, that has a real impact on people's power and position today. —

I'm The Only One

- The belief that if something is going to be done right, I have to do it. Connected to the organizational characteristic of individualism;
- Individuals with this belief often have little or no ability to trust and delegate work to others—those on the receiving end of this lack of trust have difficulty feeling respected and valued;
- Linked to a culture of perfectionism and disempowerment;
- This belief can contribute significantly to burnout and resentment in organizations given individuals' reduced capacity to ask for help and share the work, to be open to other perspectives or ways of doing, and to trust others' abilities.

Behaviours to notice

The Nemesis Radical Feminist Collective's document Language of Domination also adds that objectivity can also relate to:

- Hogging the show: speaking too often, for too long, and too loudly;
- Seeking the spotlight: using all sorts of strategies, drama, and set ups to attract a maximum amount of attention to yourself and your ideas;
- Frequent 'self-listening': formulating a response after the first few sentences of someone speaking, not listening to anything from that point on, and leaping in at the first pause.

Antidotes

- + Embed teamwork and collaboration in the organization's values, structures, policies and ways of doing;
- + Ensure that the organization is working toward shared goals and that people have a collective will to learn from mistakes together. Understand growth and success to be a matter of collective, rather than individual, achievement;
- + Foster a culture of mutual support where people feel safe bringing problems to the group;
- + Use team meetings as a place to solve problems and break workplace isolation, not just as a place to report activities;
- + Articulate that collaboration is a key skill you need in yourself and your team, and evaluate people based on their ability to work as part of a team (and other 'soft skills') and to accomplish shared goals. Make sure that recognition is given to all those who participate in an effort, not just the leaders or most public person;

Questions to ask yourself

- What are my relationships to the people, places, and ideas involved in this project? Who are the different people, and what are the different perspectives, that are necessary for the success of this task, project, or mission? What skills, resources, and initiatives already exist in the team? Am I seeking out existing team knowledge and expertise?
- How am I/are we perceived by others with whom I/we collaborate? How does this affect the work I am/we are engaged in? How do I/we acknowledge and address unequal power dynamics within a relationship? What kinds of accommodations or changes do I/we need to make in order to form relationships that are more equitable and more collaborative?
- How am I integrating our learning into the work as it moves forward?
- How are we supporting our staff and volunteers to reflect, learn and improve their abilities to work as a team?

Progress is
Bigger/More*

Progress is Bigger/More

- The belief that success and progress is synonymous with 'bigger' and 'more' is rooted in capitalism;
- Progress is understood as organizational expansion (e.g. adding staff or projects) or the ability to serve more people, regardless of how well the community is being served;
- This attitude gives little to no consideration for the cost associated with expansion. For example, growth might also mean:
 - increased control over your organization by funders or other external stakeholders;
 - the exploitation, exclusion, or underserving of the community as focus shifts to quantity over quality;
 - the burnout of staff and volunteers treated as a necessary evil in the name of unchecked growth.

Things to think about

Vandana Shiva writes: “An obsession with growth has eclipsed our concern for sustainability, justice and human dignity. But people are not disposable—the value of life lies outside economic development.”

How does this apply to our organizations? What are the costs to the people in our organization when we are always seeking growth? Are there different kinds of growth? What kind of growth do we want to have?

Antidotes

- + Take the time to think about the vision you have for your organization in 25, 50, or even 100 years—not just the upcoming season or your five-year strategic plan. Foster 'seventh generation thinking' by asking how the actions of the group now will affect people seven generations from now;
- + Make sure that any cost-benefit analysis includes all (i.e. human) costs, not just financial ones. Human costs may include, for example, the impacts on morale, credibility, and use of resources;
- + Include process goals in your planning, such as how you want to do your work, not just what you want to do;
- + Ask the people you work with to evaluate how growth and change management affects them.

Questions to ask yourself

- Do the projects being pursued have meaning for our wider community?
- Does their relevance extend beyond the moment of engagement and connect with longer term priorities and goals?
- How are our activities woven into community life and existing community activities?
- How are community priorities being integrated into our projects?
- Does the organization work to challenge 'work-over-people' culture? Is the well being of our staff and volunteers important to us? Do we invest time, energy, resources and reflection in assuring this well being?
- Is it really our desire to grow as an organization? Could we be more precise about our desire and vision for our organization—for example, is our desire actually to be continually learning, or continually improving? Instead of growing as an organization, has there been a consideration for strengthening partnerships with organizations who have resonant missions and values?
- For those who work with youth, how are they engaged at various levels of the organization? Are these engagement techniques aligned with the values of the organization and are they structured in a way which makes sense for the organization?

Objectivity*

- The belief that people can be (and can choose to be) objective or 'neutral' in their viewpoints and analyses;
- The belief that emotions are inherently destructive, irrational, and that they should not play a role in decision-making or group processes;
- Invalidating or punishing people who show emotion;
- Requiring people to think in a linear or 'logical' fashion and ignoring, invalidating or being frustrated by those who think in other ways;

Behaviours to notice

The Nemesis Radical Feminist Collective's document Language of Domination also adds that objectivity can also relate to:

- Invisibilizing marginalized folks: pretending that racism, classism, homophobia, ableism, etc. do not exist in our more 'evolved' groups. Saying things like: "As feminists, we understand oppression, so this isn't a problem between us;"
- Avoiding feeling and emotion: intellectualize, joke, or passively resist at any point where it is time to exchange personal feelings;
- Taking certain voices more seriously than others: always giving more weight and authority to certain people's perspectives; checking out when women/poc are speaking.

- **COCO SAYS** – We can see an attachment to 'objectivity' arising in organizations when they turn to policy/procedure instead of doing relationship repair between people. Structural organizational problems are often a cause of conflict and should be addressed as part of resolving conflicts and ensuring they don't reoccur. However, if people are hurting and being hurt in the organization, the first move by the organization should be to address the emotional, personal, and people elements of a conflict or dispute. —

Antidotes

- + Realize that everybody has a worldview and that these worldviews inform the way they understand things;
- + Work to expand your perspectives on what is counted as 'legitimate knowledge' versus what is dismissed. Validate emotional/affective, experiential, and ancestral knowledges as legitimate and powerful that are able to work in tandem with other knowledge forms to create expansive understanding and thinking;
- + Realize this means you, too. It might be easy to detect another person's dismissiveness or rigidity, but we all have to check ourselves and notice when we engage in this kind of narrow thinking;
- + Challenge yourself to sit with discomfort when people are expressing themselves in ways which are not familiar to you. Continue to listen;
- + Respect that everybody has a valid and useful perspective, and it is the job of the collective to understand what that perspective is—even and perhaps especially through discomfort and/or disagreement.

Questions to ask yourself

Questions for your team to valorize the subjective experiences of each member:

- What are some of the physical, social, economic, emotional, psychological, and spiritual experiences of the people involved?
- What experiences are people bringing with them?
- How do personal experiences shape involvement and support of the activity?
- Have there been reflections on the impact of anti-oppressive initiatives and equity work on those of marginalized identities and experiences? For example: is the organization taking steps to properly centre the voices of Indigenous, Black, and People of Colour in anti-racist organizational changes?

Quantity over Quality*

- All the time and money resources of an organization are directed toward producing measurable outcomes;
- Things that can be measured are more highly valued than things that cannot. The organization's impact is assessed in terms of measurable figures (e.g. event attendance numbers, newsletter circulation reach, and money spent) instead of by indicators that are less easily measured (e.g. quality of relationships, democratic decision-making, and ability to constructively deal with conflict);
- There is little or no:
 - value attached to process;
 - comfort with emotion and feelings;
 - capacity for handling complexity;
 - effort to capture qualitative and experiential information.
- Process may be sacrificed in favour of efficiency or 'getting things done.' For example, when there is a conflict between content (the agenda of the meeting) and process (people's need to be heard or engaged), content will 'win.' That is, you may get through the agenda, but if due attention has not been paid to people's need to be heard, the decisions taken are likely to be undermined and/or disregarded.

Antidotes

- + Include process or quality goals in your planning, and look for ways to measure them (e.g. if you have a goal of inclusivity, think about key indicators you can measure to assess whether that goal has been achieved);
- + Make sure your organization has a values statement or some other anchor that expresses how the group wants to do its work. Consider this a living document, one that people ought to use in their day-to-day work;
- + Learn to recognize those times when you need to get off the agenda in order to address people's underlying concerns.

Questions to ask yourself

- What are the long-term impacts on the people working on this project?
- What are the long-term impacts on community members or community spaces?
- What can we do to support our staff and volunteers?
- Do staff have adequate training for the work they are doing? Are practices around feedback built on care and constructiveness?
- Does our organization have structures to ensure that people's working conditions are considered and improved upon on a regular basis?
- Does our organization have a culture that supports our employees and allows their needs to be considered and improved upon on a regular basis?
- Are equity initiatives moving beyond 'diversity hires?' Does the organization consider reflecting on and shifting culture and structure to align all levels of the organization?

Sense of Urgency

- A constant sense of urgency makes it difficult to take time to be inclusive, encourage democratic and/or thoughtful decision-making, to plan long-term, or to consider consequences;
- A constant sense of urgency frequently results in sacrificing potential allies for quick or highly visible results. For example, an organization might sacrifice the interests of communities of colour in order to win victories for white people (who are seen as the default or norm community and therefore 'more valuable');
- This dynamic is often reinforced by funding proposals that promise too much work for too little money, and by funders who expect too much for too little.

Antidotes

- + Learn to make practical work plans that set up people for success;
- + Write realistic funding proposals with realistic time frames;
- + Understand that things take longer than anyone usually expects. Leadership should build in flexibility and suppleness during times when urgency seems to pervade the workflow and/or workplace culture;
- + Discuss what it means to set goals around anti-racism, anti-colonialism, and other forms of resistance to structural oppression. Dedicate time to support individual and organizational learning, and collectively herald structural changes that give rise to inclusion and diversity;
- + Take the time needed to learn from past experiences and find a feasible, consistent method for documenting and/or preserving these learnings;
- + Realize that rushing decisions takes more time in the long run. Inevitably, people who didn't get a chance to voice their thoughts and feelings will at best resent and at worst undermine the decision because they were left unheard;
- + Be clear about how you will make good decisions in an atmosphere of urgency.

Questions to ask yourself

- How much time is available for relationships to deepen and for trust to be built?
- Has there been deep reflection and careful planning around timelines for projects and deadlines?
- Has the organization taken the time to conduct meaningful consultations with team members and/or the community?
- Are there mechanisms for regular feedback at reasonable intervals?

Learning Organizations: An Antidote

COCo has been increasingly interested in the concept of Learning Organizations (LOs), and the idea's relevance for nonprofit organizations. As we were deepening our own understanding of this framework, it became apparent to us that the ideas central to being a learning organization may also serve as powerful antidotes to many characteristics of a white supremacy culture in organizations. After going over the broad strokes of our research on LOs, perhaps you'll come to the same conclusion—we would love to hear your thoughts!

In brief, a Learning Organization can be understood “as one that is characterized by continuous learning for continuous improvement, and by the capacity to transform itself” (Watkins and Marsick, 2003). A learning organization sees learning as a significant organizational goal. It finds ways to facilitate learning at all levels, drawing on different forms of knowledge in order to not only face change, but to thrive with it.

Our own research identified four elements of a learning organization. These elements are:

- **A structure that supports learning**, characterized by few formal hierarchical levels. It prioritizes teamwork and gives a high amount of autonomy to staff members and teams. This facilitates open communication throughout the organization, encourages risk-taking and innovation, and allows the organization to remain flexible.
- **A learning climate** that cultivates a feeling of trust and safety throughout the organization, that demonstrates an appreciation and facilitation of learning, and ensures the process of learning is a pleasant and safe one for all. Such a climate makes learning from mistakes and failures easier, acknowledges that individuals learn in different ways, and underlines that learning at all levels is of strategic importance for the organization.
- **A social take on learning**, acknowledging that meaningful and transformational learning usually comes unexpectedly, while working and interacting with others. As such, LOs seek to create and multiply the appropriate contexts and containers for informal learning to happen.
- **A capacity to navigate complexity**, allowing the organization to imagine, prototype, apply and evaluate novel, ecological and durable ways of addressing change and organizational challenges.



Learning Organizations invite us to implement a number of practices that are similar to the antidotes to white supremacy culture contained in this document. LOs ask:

- How can we distribute power differently in the organization so that it is shared more diffusely across the organization?
- How can we be open to learning on the job, making mistakes, and trying new things?
- How can we have a climate or culture that makes it easy for people to learn and change?
- How can we make sure we value and understand the importance of the informal interactions and conversations that are part of our organization?
- How can we help ourselves learn to talk about very complex issues, especially where we have very little shared experience?
- How can we make visible and value different forms of knowledge within our organization?
- How can we make time to reflect on our ways of doing and thinking?

