White Supremacy Culture in the Workplace Worksheet

Information taken and adapted from dRworksBook - Home
WHITE SUPREMACY CULTURE: Characteristics - SHOWING UP FOR RACIAL JUSTICE and WHITE DOMINANT CULTURE & SOMETHING DIFFERENT

This is a list of characteristics of white supremacy culture that show up in our organizations. 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 proactively named or chosen by the group**.
- They are damaging **because they promote white supremacy thinking**.

Because we all live in a white supremacy culture, these characteristics show up in the attitudes and behaviors of all of us – people of color and white people. Therefore, these attitudes and behaviors can show up in any group or organization, whether it is white-led or predominantly white or people of color-led or predominantly people of color.

One of the purposes of listing characteristics of white supremacy 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 multicultural organization.

Instructions: Based on the following example add it to the description of each characteristic you see fit (it could be part of several characteristics)

Examples of a white supremacist incident at work

Example 1

I've heard my white male supervisor refer to a Black woman colleague as "poised and polished" and it rubbed me the wrong way because he never referred to white colleagues this way. Recently a colleague referred to a Black woman guest speaker as "I never imagined she would be so polished and eloquent", which I also found troubling. These types of remarks about Black women seem like we need to qualify to be articulate but white women/people do not.

Example 2

A White staff department head went directly to the chief of staff to complain about a staff member without consulting with the staff person's supervisor (a woman of color).

How we see ourselves

defensiveness • white people spend energy defending against charges of racism instead of examining how racism might actually be happening • Nowhere to air grievances. Focus placed on protecting power instead of addressing harms, naming intention instead of acknowledging impact. • the defensiveness of people in power creates an oppressive culture	**antidotes** 1. understand that structure cannot in and of itself facilitate or prevent abuse since it rather creates and perpetuates such abuse; 2. name defensiveness as a problem when it is one; 3. Give and receive feedback non defensively, have a clear structure to hear and address grievances. 4. Skills are supported in being both self critical and self loving.

Real Examples

either/or thinking

- Believing people are racist or not racist, good or bad.
- Seeing incidents of inequity as isolated events.
- closely linked to perfectionism in making it difficult to learn from mistakes or accommodate conflict
- reductionism
- creates conflict and increases sense of urgency
- no time or encouragement to consider alternatives, particularly those which may require 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' without acknowledging a need for time and creativity to come up with more options

antidotes: systems and complexity thinking

1. Understanding context and intersectionality. Seeing patterns, holding contradictory thoughts & feelings simultaneously.
2. notice when people use 'either/or' language and push to come up with more than two alternatives;
3. notice when people are simplifying complex issues, particularly when the stakes seem high or an urgent decision needs to be made;
4. slow it down and encourage people to do a deeper analysis;
5. when people are faced with an urgent decision, take a break and give people some breathing room to think creatively;
6. avoid making decisions under extreme pressure

Real Examples

i'm the only one

- connected to individualism, the belief that if something is going to get done right, 'I' have to do it
- little or no ability to delegate work to others

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

Real Examples

individualism

- Focus is on single charismatic leaders
- Working in isolation, from each other and from other organizations.
- Little experience or comfort working as part of a team
- people in organization believe they are responsible for solving problems alone
- accountability, if any, goes up and down, not sideways to peers or to those the organization is set up to serve
- competition more highly valued than cooperation and where cooperation is valued, little time or resources devoted to developing skills in how to cooperate
- creates a lack of accountability, as the organization values those who can get things done on their own without needing supervision or guidance

antidotes: **community and collectivism**

1. Understanding that to change everything it takes everyone. Understanding interdependence of all social struggles
2. include teamwork as an important value in your values statement;
3. make sure the organization is working towards shared goals and people understand how working together will improve performance;
4. evaluate leader's ability to work in a team as well as their ability to get the job done;
5. make sure that credit is given to all those who participate in an effort, not just the leaders or most public person;
6. make people accountable as a group rather than as individuals;
7. create a culture where people bring problems to the group;
8. use staff meetings as a place to solve problems, not just a place to report activities

Real Examples

objectivity

- the belief that there is such a thing as being objective or 'neutral'
- the belief that emotions are inherently destructive, irrational, and should not play a role in decision-making or group process
- invalidating people who show emotion
- requiring people to think in a linear (logical) fashion and ignoring or invalidating those who think in other ways
- impatience with any thinking that does not appear 'logical'

antidotes:

1. realize that everybody has a world view and that everybody's worldview 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

Real Examples

paternalism

- No consultation or transparency in decision making.
- Taking over projects and services, mediating and facilitating others
- 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
- those without power understand they do not have it and understand who does
- 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

antidote: partnership

1. Decision making is clear, affected parties are consulted.
2. Evaluations include staff at all levels.
3. Make sure everyone knows and understands their level of responsibility and authority in the organization;
4. Include people who are affected by decisions in the decision-making.

Real Examples

right to comfort

- the belief that those with power have a right to emotional and psychological comfort (another aspect of valuing 'logic' over emotion)
- scapegoating those who cause discomfort
- equating individual acts of unfairness against white people with systemic racism which daily targets people of color

antidotes:

1. understand that discomfort is at the root of all growth and learning;
2. welcome it as much as you can;
3. 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;
4. don't take everything personally

Real Examples

perfectionism

• little appreciation expressed among people for the work that others are doing; appreciation that is expressed is usually directed to those who get most of the credit anyway
• more common is to point out either how the person or work is

antidotes: **appreciation**

1. develop a culture of appreciation, where the organization takes time to make sure that people's work and efforts are appreciated;
2. develop a learning organization, where it is expected that everyone will make mistakes and those mistakes offer

inadequate • making a mistake is confused with being a mistake, doing wrong with being wrong • 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 • 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	opportunities for learning; 3. create an environment where people can recognize that mistakes sometimes lead to positive results; 4. separate the person from the mistake; 5. when offering feedback, always speak to the things that went well before offering criticism; 6. ask people to offer specific suggestions for how to do things differently when offering criticism; 7. realize that being your own worst critic does not actually improve the work, often contributes to low morale among the group, and does not help you or the group to realize the benefit of learning from mistakes 8. Mistakes are valued as opportunities for learning.
Real Examples	

How we interact with one another

fear of open conflict	antidotes: **direct and constructive feedback / growth and learning**
● White fragility goes unchecked ● Those who bring up discomfort for others are scapegoated rather than to look at the issue which is actually causing the problem ● Useful feedback not given in a timely manner resulting in underperformance, lack of growth and distorted sense of how one is doing. ● Smaller problems left unattended become bigger ones down the road. ● People in power are scared of expressed conflict and try to ignore it or run from it ● emphasis on being polite ["civil"] Politeness is valued over honesty ● equating the raising of difficult issues with being impolite, rude, or out of line	1. Direct And Constructive Feedback/Growth And learning 2. Peers call each other in and continuously learn from each other. Managers are skilled at providing timely, supportive feedback in culturally and individually responsive way 3. Role play ways to handle conflict before conflict happens; 4. distinguish between being polite and raising hard issues; 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 those issues; 5. once a conflict is resolved, take the opportunity to **revisit** it and see how it might have been handled differently

Real Examples

power hoarding	antidotes:
 ● little, if any, value around sharing power ● power seen as limited, only so much to go around ● 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 ● those with power don't see themselves as hoarding power or as feeling threatened ● 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	 1. include power sharing in your organization's values statement; 2. discuss what good leadership looks like and make sure people understand that a good leader develops the power and skills of others; 3. understand that change is inevitable and challenges to your leadership can be healthy and productive; 4. make sure the organization is focused on the mission

Real Examples

How we organize our work and institutions

only one right way	antidotes:
 ● 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) ● similar to the missionary who does not see value in the culture of other communities, sees only value in their beliefs about what is good	1. accept that there are many ways to get to the same goal; 2. 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; 3. work on developing the ability to notice when people do things differently and how those different ways might improve your approach; 4. 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; 5. when working with communities from a different culture than yours or your organization's, be clear that you have some learning to do about the communities' ways of doing; 6. never assume that you or your organization know what's best for the community in isolation from meaningful relationships with that community
Real Examples	

progress is bigger, more

- observed in how we define success (success is always bigger, more)
- 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)
- 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

antidotes: **progress is sustainability and quality**

1. create Seventh Generation thinking by asking how the actions of the group now will affect people seven generations from now;
2. 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;
3. 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;
4. ask those you work with and for to evaluate your performance

Real Examples

quantity over quality ● all resources of organization are directed toward producing measurable goals ● 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 ● little or no value attached to process; if it can't be measured, it has no value ● discomfort with emotion and feelings ● 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)	**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
Real Examples	

sense of urgency

• 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
• 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)
• reinforced by funding proposals which promise too much work for too little money and by funders who expect too much for too little

antidotes
1. realistic workplans;
2. leadership which understands that things take longer than anyone expects;
3. discuss and plan for what it means to set goals of inclusivity and diversity, particularly in terms of time;
4. learn from past experience how long things take; write realistic funding proposals with realistic time frames;
5. be clear about how you will make good decisions in an atmosphere of urgency;
6. realize that rushing decisions takes more time in the long run because 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

Real Examples

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worship of the written word

- If it's not written down, it is not valued.
- If it's written down in any way other than "Standard American English", it is seen as incorrect or less intelligent.
- Supervisors "correct", edit and change documents to reflect a particular normalized language
- the organization does not take into account or value other ways in which information gets shared
- 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: all forms of communication valued and taken seriously

1. Communication is treated simply as communication, stripped of "right" or "wrong", recognizing that an individual's use of language involves culture, power, lived experience and geography.
2. Editing focuses solely on communicating more clearly to a particular audience and done with permission of the writer.
3. Appreciation for how in some communities, info relayed effectively through relationship networks and the spoken word, not just the written word.
4. take the time to analyze how people inside and outside the organization get and share information;
5. figure out which things need to be written down and come up with alternative ways to document what is happening;
6. work to recognize the contributions and skills that every person brings to the organization (for example, the ability to build relationships with those who are important to the organization's mission);
7. make sure anything written can be clearly understood (avoid academic language, 'buzz' words, etc.)

Real Examples