

# DEI STRATEGY IS LIMITED AND POTENTIALLY HARMFUL: SO NOW WHAT?

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*“... the language of freedom, nation, democracy, and even the state, in spite of and at times because of its racism, have not been ideologically stable but a battleground. From the radical abolitionist and eloquent freedom orator Frederick Douglass to Martin Luther King Jr. to journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones, anti-racist crusaders have worked to simultaneously deploy and expose the duplicity of America’s founding creed and documents. And while it is important to unearth the rock upon which this nation was built, it is important to also remember that racism is alive and well in modified form. The upheaval of the mid-twentieth-century Black freedom movement resulted in reforms in the racial order but not its eradication. To truly uproot racism would require a reordering of the society in rather fundamental ways. ...”*

—Barbara Ransby, “Racism’s Roots and Branches,” *DISSENT*. Summer 2021.

Barbara Ransby, author of *Making All Black Lives Matter: Reimagining Freedom in the Twenty-First Century*, clearly states that the future of racial justice work requires disruptors, as it always has. “*To truly uproot racism would require a reordering of society.*” What does that mean? What could it look like? For the many non-profits and foundations who recently began or deepened their Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) change work since the 2020 racial justice uprisings, it is important to be grounded in this statement and to grapple with these urgent questions:

- ⊙ Will your DEI organizational change process lead to transformative change?
- ⊙ Will it contribute to eradicating systemic racism and white supremacy?

**These are big questions.** You may have gulped or been energized or shook your head or even dismissed the question altogether. First, it’s important to interrogate your DEI strategy (more about this later) and come to your own conclusion about whether it will uproot racism. Second,

many times organizational change processes are just focused internally. Think about the role and responsibility your organization has to use its voice, power, and privilege in the community in which you reside, in the professional associations you belong to, and in your relationships with peer organizations. We know that structural racism is cumulative, reinforcing, entrenched and is, by its nature, dehumanizing, destructive, wounding, barbaric, and vicious. Therefore, an organization's accountability is to question whether implementing a DEI strategy will ferociously and tenaciously uproot systemic racism in your organization and to ensure that your responsibility and commitment extends beyond your organization.

The premise of this article is that I don't believe DEI strategy will uproot racism; however, when implemented well, with a systemic analysis and a commitment to building power, DEI work can contribute to laying groundwork and building internal will to work toward operationalizing racial justice. In Part Two, I share my experience of the limitations of DEI and provide several questions to support you in interrogating your organization's strategy so you can contribute work toward co-creating a racially just organization.

The Society of Human Resource Management's *Guide to Developing a Strategic Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Plan* provides this definition of DEI strategy:

“Workplace diversity is the collective mixture of differences and similarities that include individual and organizational characteristics, values, beliefs, experiences, backgrounds, preferences and behaviors. While diversity creates the potential for greater innovation and productivity, inclusion is what enables organizations to realize the business benefits of this potential. Equity refers to fair treatment in access, opportunity, and advancement for individuals. Work in this area includes identifying and working to eliminate barriers to fair treatment for disadvantaged groups”<sup>1</sup>

*Please see PART TWO to learn more about interrogating your strategy or being explicit if you are using DEI strategy but the strategy emphasizes equity.*

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<sup>1</sup> [Guide to Developing a Strategic Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Plan](#), Society for Human Resource Management. Accessed 10/21.

## PART ONE

# WHY DOES DEI STRATEGY NOT LEAD TO RACIAL JUSTICE?<sup>2</sup>

Recently, there has been more in the mainstream media about systemic racism and even a spotlight on its impact, including pieces during the COVID 19 pandemic about racial inequities in the health care system, and discussions about the Black Lives Matter movement now reaching a global audience. More people (including whites) have been engaged in the movement. There are also more critiques of non-profits and foundations who continue to embrace the status quo or who have not followed through on their public commitment to racial justice.<sup>3</sup> In response to the national and international calls for action, more organizations have been investing in (starting or doubling down on) DEI work. Still, state-sanctioned violence and the vast racial disparities experienced by Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color are ever-present. It is important to be accountable for the hesitancy to begin or to deepen DEI work. This is not a time to be toe-dipping, or developing deliverables that fit a three-year timeline, or wondering if there is enough time to do DEI work in your organization.

- ⊙ *It is the time* to have a strategy that will dismantle structural racism and white supremacy culture.<sup>4</sup>
- ⊙ *It is time* to implement a strategy that is focused on shifting power as well as building power of those most impacted by systemic racism.
- ⊙ *It is the time* for bold uncompromising changes in organizational structures (policies, practices, and culture) that truly reflect how racial justice can be actualized every day.

I am not trying to minimize the enthusiasm, commitments made, or the work that many organizations are investing in as they have jumped on the DEI bandwagon. I wanted to share my perspective and experience and encourage organizations to interrogate whether there is any unintended impact of using the DEI strategy, if it has caused or potentially is causing harm, and whether they believe it is effective in contributing to achieving racial justice.

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<sup>2</sup> Please refer to [racialequitytools.org](https://www.racialequitytools.org/)'s Glossary to learn more about the terms being used in this article.

<sup>3</sup> Devich Cyril, Malkia, Kan, Lyle Matthew, Maulbeck, Ben Francisco, and Villarosa, Lori. Mismatched: Philanthropy's Response to the Call for Racial Justice. Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity. 2021.

<sup>4</sup> To learn more about the concept and the characteristics of white supremacy culture, explore Tema Okun's website: <https://www.whitesupremacyculture.info/>

## PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

In asking these questions and issues, as a white cis-woman I reflected on my 25 or so years of working to dismantle racism and develop communities of practice and action, and later working with organizations to operationalize their policies, practices, and culture in line with their values of racial equity and justice. I didn't always talk about dismantling racism or operationalizing racial justice. The terms I used have changed over the years from managing diversity to diversity and inclusion to dismantling racism to racial equity, and I now frequently talk about racial justice and liberation.

My approach and assumptions have significantly changed from believing, in the late 90s, that a person crying at a dismantling racism training meant a breakthrough moment or thinking that increasing staff's knowledge of racism and creating an action plan was sufficient for an organization to change. I have at times been hesitant to be explicit with terms. I have flip-flopped about whether to say, 'white dominant culture' or 'white supremacy culture,' and defended myself when questioned about whose comfort I was centering. I've been there.

As I share my story below about the interview with an organization, I also remember the times I struggled to find common ground to engage 'the many' or not feeling confident to be explicit with terms and used more "appealing" ones. My writing over the years is evidence of how my own personal work and my worldviews continue to evolve. Sharing a bit about my own journey is not for it to be a confessional nor to highlight my learning. It is to acknowledge my own bumpy journey of building my own knowledge, moving toward action, and then focusing on taking action every day. I am forever grateful to friends and colleagues - especially People of Color - who were extremely generous and challenged my thinking and actions and continue to do so.

Though the focus of this paper is questioning the limitations of DEI strategy, I'm also clear that I/we need to interrogate anti-racism and racial equity/justice work. I need to constantly hold up a mirror to my own practice and be accountable to the people with whom I work as well as the ecosystems in which I reside.





I continue to reflect and learn from the brilliance and the vulnerability of organizational partners, friends, and colleagues as we discuss their most challenging moments, the various practices tried, and their/our lessons - some not realized until years later.

These past several years in my practice, I have been focused more on how to support organizations to develop internal muscles for sustained change (e.g., building a feedback muscle, leaning into conflict), as well creating, and implementing processes that center relationships and strengthen internal racial equity teams and their relationship with management teams and Boards. I've also been taking time to dream about what is possible and specifically how we - individually and collectively - can contribute. I continue to explore the scaffolding and the conditions that may lead to transformational change as well as what accountability looks like within a sector or ecosystem. After witnessing the

trauma and harm in so many organizational systems, I have started learning about healing and somatic practices. At this point I am in heavy learning mode, though I am working with and gaining insight from some brilliant partners who incorporate these practices into organizational change processes<sup>5</sup>.

Each time I work with an organizational or a consultant partner, I reflect, learn, question, and try out new ideas as we experiment and innovate to build a collective vision of what a racially just and liberated organization can be. My thoughts and challenges about DEI work reflect my own struggles and learnings over the years. They are part of my internal urgency to jointly experience with family, friends, co-conspirators, and others, a transformative, beautiful, loving, joyful, liberated world in which we each can fully authentically contribute and experience together. ■

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<sup>5</sup> My appreciation and gratitude for generously sharing knowledge and skills of healing and/or somatic practices with me to Kevin Kahakula'akea John Fong, Raquel Gutierrez, Simran Noor, Sonali Sangeeta Balajee, Brigitte Rouson, Angelica Otero, Susan Glisson, Mee Moua, Charles Tucker, and Michelle Otero. I participated in two training sessions which increased my understanding of healing practice as I deepen my learning and *start* to develop my skills: *Coaching for Healing, Liberation, and Justice: Introduction to Liberatory Coaching* facilitated by Sarah Jawaid and Damon Azali-Rojas and *Healing Justice Learning and Strategy Lab* facilitated by Cara Page and Erica Woodland and sponsored by Borealis Philanthropy.

The words diversity, inclusion, and equity each have a purpose, yet many times they are used interchangeably, watering down the intent and the impact or saying all three letters while the strategy being implemented only reflects diversity or inclusion. In my experience, it is important to be precise about each of their contributions for change. Each of the DEI strategies can contribute to laying the groundwork for transformational change if implemented well (see chart below). Though continued interrogation is necessary: follow the intent, the strategy, and the projected outcome.

When you interrogate your organization's DEI strategy ask yourself:

- ⊙ Is your organization **being explicit** in talking about race racism, oppression, and power and are **the terms being used to describe the actual intent** behind the change process - and reflect the stated outcomes?
- ⊙ Is your **DEI strategy** encouraging risk-taking, and working steadily to **disrupt white supremacy culture and structural racism**, as well as focusing on **shifting power**?
- ⊙ Is your organization focused on **identifying your organization's responsibility and contribution** to a just and liberated society or is it limited to a set of DEI deliverables?
- ⊙ Is your organization **implementing your DEI strategy with integrity and accountability** with your staff and the community in which you work?

Whether you've been working for a while or your organization is just starting and developing a strategy, begin with the question of what is grounding you or your organization in this change work. Is it a reaction to a critique? Is it following your peers? Is it the revelation of the impact on inequitable policies? Or did enough people speak up to warrant the launch of a DEI change process? Be true in speaking about why you launched your change process, so that the change is grounded in transparency and integrity. Whatever the impetus, the most critical actions in moving forward with your strategy are building the power of and engaging with accountability to those most impacted by structural racism - Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color, while centering their voices and leadership.

I have witnessed that if a DEI strategy is not addressing structural racism and white supremacy culture as well as shifting power, it doesn't lead to aligning policies, practices, culture with the value of racial justice. If done well, DEI can contribute to change, but it isn't enough to create the transformation needed on its own. That said, there are paths forward!

## PART TWO

# IT TAKES TIME TO SHIFT DEI STRATEGY: SO NOW WHAT?

You may be frustrated after reading Part One, as you begin or continue to interrogate the DEI strategy you're using and wonder if it will shift power, if your terms align with your stated outcomes, and if it will lead to becoming a racially just organization. You may be frustrated because you have been on a long path already that has been messy, possibly harmful, and has made limited progress. Therefore, if you also come to the conclusion that the DEI strategy will not lead you to your vision of racial justice, it's not like you can immediately flip a switch and adopt a racial justice strategy. It takes deliberate, sustained work and building internal organizational will.

Here are few offerings from my experience to help you continue and deepen your work by interrogating your strategy, asking some hard questions, considering how to make your case, and continuing to engage others to work collectively for racial justice and liberation. They will also help you deepen your organizational change work beyond just focusing on DEI to one that helps your organization become a truly racially just and liberatory one.

Operationalizing racial justice means reimagining and co-creating a just and liberated world and includes:

- ⊙ understanding the history of racism and the system of white supremacy and addressing past harms,
- ⊙ working in right relationship and accountability in an ecosystem (an issue, sector, or community ecosystem) for collective change,
- ⊙ implementing interventions that use an intersectional analysis and that impact multiple systems,
- ⊙ centering Blackness and building community, cultural, economic, and political power of Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color (BIPOC), and
- ⊙ applying the practice of love along with disruption and resistance to the status quo.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Maggie Potapchuk, "Operationalizing Racial Justice in Non-Profit Organizations" (MP Associates, 2020). This definition is based on and expanded from the one described in Rinku Sen and Lori Villarosa, "Grantmaking with a Racial Justice Lens: A Practical Guide" (Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity, 2019).

## INTERROGATE THE STRATEGY AND BE ACCOUNTABLE

*“Every single time we try to give birth to a new nation, the umbilical cord of white supremacy is wrapped around its neck. We have to be truthful and be really responsible midwives so that we can give birth finally to a new country that is a genuinely multiracial democracy. Our history says we’re not going to do very well, but I have faith, because wherever human beings are, again, we have a chance.”*

—Eddie Glaude, author of [Begin Again: James Baldwin’s America and Its Urgent Lessons for Our Own](#), on The Daily Show With Trevor Noah.

July 28, 2020.

In a conversation with a potential client whose request for proposals (RFP) was focused on integrating DEI practices within the organization, I asked whether they are explicit in talking about and working on outcomes for racial equity and justice. The response was, “We focus mostly on equity, and less on diversity and inclusion.” As we continued to discuss how their work was delineated, the person realized that the emphasis was actually not on equity and became defensive. The person made an assumption from my initial questions, that there was bad/good binary insinuation. Instead, my questions were intended to support the organization in getting to clarity and alignment between terms and strategy. I have found that it’s fundamentally important to be accountable to what you say and how you describe your strategy to the people most impacted by institutional racism and white supremacy culture. When implementing DEI strategy in an organization, it’s critical to take risks, to share truths, and to believe the organization will change based on the words you are using and the strategy you are implementing. This is a responsibility we can’t take lightly in implementing a change process and making this investment of resources, time, support, and personal work.

I have witnessed, been a part of,<sup>7</sup> and heard about how the DEI framework can reinforce white supremacy culture, racial inequities, and serve as cover for organizations that keep the status quo in relation to how power operates. Examples include:

- ⦿ Focusing on number counting, and not on creating policies and practices that are equitable and directly address structural racism.

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<sup>7</sup> Examples of how white supremacy culture manifests in organizational development practice are highlighted in the article “[Understanding and Disrupting White Supremacy at Work: An Action and Inquiry Guide for OD Practitioners](#),” Kimberly A. Walker. Organizational Development Review. Vol. 53, No. 3. 2021, pp. 41-47.

- ⊙ Bringing Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color (BIPOC) to the table to make decisions in the spirit of inclusivity and communicating that their voices will ‘count,’ while a power analysis has not been used to design the decision-making process, and not everyone has equitable access to institutional power in order to shape policies, practices, and culture.
- ⊙ Focusing on quantifiable deliverables, and less on being responsive and adaptive to the issues shared and truths told, especially by staff of Color, through an organizational assessment process.
- ⊙ Investing time learning about the history of oppression, and not including an assessment of the racist impact of our own organization’s policies and practices (history and current) on the communities we work with/in.

The term DEI is used loosely by many organizations and is implemented in vastly different ways. Some DEI strategies may contribute to identifying inequitable practices and policies. Some may build people’s awareness and knowledge of different concepts and interrupt implicit bias. Recruitment and hiring processes may be modified, and more thoughtfulness provided in supporting new staff by discussing the culture of the organization. For some organizations, the message is “look at all of our DEI progress,” yet, these transactional activities are not sufficient, nor will they uproot racism. They do not reflect the shift necessary to align an organization with a stated value of racial justice.

For other organizations - mostly predominately white organizations, the label DEI is sometimes used as a placeholder for deeper structural work being done by internal organizers of change. Those organizers (often People of Color and frequently those with limited institutional power to effect change) are doing the work until senior leadership and the Board catch up, increase their understanding of racism, and make a personal investment in a change process focused on systemic issues. This is a constant tension within the change process. I have seen it play out in organizations as transactional, comfortable, majority-centered actions are being implemented, while the waiting begins ... and continues ... for a leadership commitment and investment. In the meantime, harm continues, inequitable policies remain in place, and, unfortunately, many of the advocates for change then leave. The process then repeats itself, which is a frustrating, agonizing, maddening process widely recurring in the non-profit and philanthropic sector and ... let me repeat... the harm continues. While some folks try to figure out why progress is limited, others beef up the limited progress and use it as excuse for not investing more or taking more risks.

Some may have read the bestselling book by Dr. Beverly Daniel Tatum, former president of Spelman College, [Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?: And Other Conversations About Race](#), in which she talks about personal work and uses the metaphor of the moving walkway in airports.

Dr. Tatum explains,

“I sometimes visualize the ongoing cycle of racism as a moving walkway at the airport. Active racist behavior is equivalent to walking fast on the conveyor belt... Passive racist behavior is equivalent to standing still on the walkway. No overt effort is being made, but the conveyor belt moves the bystanders along to the same destination as those who are actively walking. Some of the bystanders may feel the motion of the conveyor belt, see the active racists ahead of them, and choose to turn around... But unless they are walking actively in the opposite direction at a speed faster than the conveyor belt, unless they are actively anti racist, they will find themselves carried along with the others.”<sup>8</sup>

I recommend using a slightly modified version of Dr. Tatum’s metaphor when interrogating how your organization’s DEI strategy has been implemented. Here are a few examples I have witnessed from different organizations<sup>9</sup>:

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<sup>8</sup> *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? and Other Conversations About Race*, Beverly Daniel Tatum, 1997. p.11.

<sup>9</sup> The labels of Dr. Tatum’s metaphor have been modified. See the following resource to learn more about how to address ableist language - [Instead of these Ableist Terms, Use Inclusive Language at Work](#), by Monica Torres, Huffington Post.

	<b>MOVING WITH</b>	<b>MOVING STILL</b>	<b>MOVING AGAINST</b>
<b>DIVERSITY</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Communications highlight individuals’ voices and pictures of People of Color to showcase the organization’s ‘diversity work.’ The presence of people of diverse identities is used as proof there are not inequitable policies and practices.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Work focuses on reviewing and modifying recruitment, hiring, and/or board selection policies and practices. Increasing diversity of staff and board is viewed as progress.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Work on staff and board diversity is grounded in how white supremacy culture manifests, identifying, and changing inequitable policies and practices, and then collectively creating an equitable organization.</li> </ul>
<b>INCLUSION</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Decisions are made by equal vote without an equity analysis, assessment of differential impact (cumulative and current), or prioritizing of voices and leadership of People of Color in the organization and the community.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The organization implements a set of norms which promotes that everyone’s voice matters and that different points of view will be openly discussed.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The organization centers Black, Indigenous and other People of Color voices and leadership in decision-making, planning and strategy.</li> </ul>
<b>EQUITY</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The organization uses the term ‘equity’ in internal documents &amp; external communication without an organizational change process to shift power, an interrogation of how white supremacy culture is operating or a determination of how inequities are present in policies &amp; practices.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The organization implements an equity change process which includes an organizational assessment, training, changing policies, but not an investment to shift power or build the internal will and skills to collectively transform the organization.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The organization implements a change process focusing on shifting power, building internal will and skill, and co-creating a racial just organization that uses healing &amp; liberatory practices, an intersectional analysis, &amp; clear accountability within an ecosystem for transformational change.</li> </ul>

The examples in the “moving with” and “moving still” columns provide more clarity about the earlier statement regarding the limitations of DEI Strategy. These columns show examples of how the status quo is reinforced, and minimal change happens using what is being called a DEI strategy. The impact of transactional, minimal, and ‘cover’ actions (actions that on the surface can sound like progress but have no substantive institutional change) is often harm, loss of credibility and questions about the organization’s commitment. Implement DEI in this way can also lead to an assumption of progress, which might ramp down the organization’s investment of time and resources.

On the other hand, the examples in the “moving against” column, highlight how DEI strategy can *contribute* in laying the foundation for transformational change, as mentioned earlier. These examples address white supremacy culture and structural racism and, most importantly, focus on centering Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color within the organization and on shifting power. DEI strategy still has its limitations, but implementing it in this way, through introducing and using terms such as white supremacy culture, systemic racism, through providing education to understand these concepts, through fully engaging to build internal will and through being accountable to the community and the ecosystem the organization sits in, can help build a platform for transformational change. By doing the latter, it also does not only use an ‘individual’ organizational approach<sup>10</sup>. The practices described in this last column provide substantive groundwork in working toward eradicating racism and the system of white supremacy.

## BE CLEAR ABOUT THE RISKS YOUR ORGANIZATION IS WILLING TO TAKE AND WHETHER YOU ARE BUILDING POWER

When interrogating your strategy, think about the level of risk senior leadership, the staff, and the board are willing to take in actualizing the organization’s value of racial justice. When I, as a white cis woman, talk about risks, I am clear that taking risks carries a significantly lower level of consequences and considerably more ease for me than for my colleagues of Color. What about your organization? How much risk is it willing to take?

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<sup>10</sup> Read more about [Individualism](#) as a characteristic of white supremacy culture on Tema Okun’s [website](#), *Divorcing White Supremacy Culture* to consider how your organizational change process may reflect some of these behaviors.

The notion of risk gets thrown around a lot. Think about a time when your organization used or considered using its power and privilege to make a stand and/or use its voice and standing in the community for justice or fairness.

- ⊙ What and who was involved? What happened afterwards? If there were conversations about doing so and a decision was made not to, why not?
- ⊙ What questions, and/or concerns had to be addressed to increase the level of risk your organization would take?
- ⊙ How was internal will built and how was the case made for the decision to take the risk?
- ⊙ What supports were necessary to amplify the organization's values?

**When interrogating your DEI strategy**, another simple but complex question is, *“Will it shift power in the organization?”* In a predominately white organization, just hiring People of Color will not shift power. Nor will creating space to hear more from a racially diverse staff about their perspective on an issue. The system of white supremacy is still present, and the organization still needs to address how white supremacy may be manifesting in its policies, practices, and culture. While having a racially diverse staff will provide different perspectives and experiences and help you understand the impact of what's happening in the system, it comes at great cost to staff members of Color whose identities have not been centered, and who experience distinct and more intense consequences from current culture, policies, and practices. Keep this front and center as decisions are made about the change process. A sentiment that has been shared many times over in organizational assessment processes is:

*“In our organization, “people of color not only bear the brunt of harm from racism at the organization, but they also bear the brunt of harm from the racial equity process, of white people’s learning curves, of the slow pace of change, of mis-steps large and small all along the way.”*

## BE EXPLICIT WITH YOUR WORDS

*“...When we say “race” as opposed to “racism,” we reify the idea that race is somehow a feature of the natural world and racism the predictable result of it. Despite the body of scholarship that has accumulated to show that this formulation is backwards, that racism precedes race, Americans still haven’t quite gotten the point. And so, we find ourselves speaking of “racial segregation,” “the racial chasm,” “racial divide,” “racial profiling,” or “racial diversity” - as though*

*each of these ideas is grounded in something beyond our own making. The impact of this is not insignificant. If “race” is the work of genes or the gods, or both, then we can forgive ourselves for never having unworked the problem.”*

–Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Foreword in The Origin of Others* by Toni Morrison

Being explicit doesn't only improve communication, it unpacks what is underneath choices about the terms you're using. Many times, it unearths the challenges present in an organizational system or the limitations organizations have in talking about racism or using particular terms. What is being said? What is not being said? I was recently interviewed for an article about race caucusing for a large membership organization. In my discussion with the writer, I talked about naming one of the characteristics of white supremacy culture (perfectionism) in a joint caucus meeting. When I received my quotes for the article back to review, the term “white supremacy culture” had been omitted. I asked why and was told that the organization had decided that they wanted to attract a wider audience and found this term triggering. For whom, I wondered. I assumed mostly white folks. How did they come to that conclusion for a whole membership? What is the ‘triggered’ response that seems too far out? Rather than just avoiding the term, they could have used it as an opportunity to engage with people and learn more about their reaction to the term.

Here are some questions you can use to unpack which terms your organization decides to use and not use:

- ⊙ ***Is there a concern about a reaction to specific terms?*** If so, is your organization reinforcing white supremacy culture by setting boundaries on acceptable emotions? Are you centering individuals' comfort - not just that of the person or people being ‘triggered’ but also the person who does not want to engage - to avoid a perceived conflict? It is important not to disregard people who have an emotional reaction to a term. Work with others and role-play different scenarios on ways to respond and support their learning. Most importantly, center those who are using these terms and want to work for change. Too many times we marginalize those who want to move forward and keep repeating to them that they should “just wait...”
- ⊙ ***Is there a concern about not knowing what to say when someone challenges a term?*** If so, is your organization reinforcing the perfectionism characteristic of white supremacy<sup>11</sup> culture with the idea we must ‘get it right’ in explaining and making the

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<sup>11</sup> Read more about [Perfectionism and One Right Way](#) as a characteristic of white supremacy culture on Tema Okun's [website](#), *Divorcing White Supremacy Culture*.

case with no mistakes or receiving an ‘emotional’ response? What would be the consequences if you didn’t have the answer that will lessen an ‘emotional’ response? Isn’t it imperative to take the risk and figure it out? Is ‘not failing’ being reinforced as important in your culture? And more importantly, if your priority is to create a racially equitable workplace, it will be necessary to lean into taking the risks associated with possibly having disagreements or challenging conversations. It is almost impossible to do this work without having a challenging conversation and continued practices leads to confidence and skill building and can lessen potentially anxiety producing moments.

- ◎ ***Is there a concern about the term itself - that it just feels radical or that you are unsure of how to use it?*** If you are unfamiliar with the term - there is a plethora of information, webinars, podcasts, and organizations for you to dig in deep and learn the terms, concepts, and history.<sup>12</sup> It takes time, yet that cannot be a barrier or an excuse. Focus on how you can move this personal work to be a priority on your schedule. If you believe that it is too radical (like white supremacy culture), reach out to other organizations who are using the term. Learn about their individual and collective process to have the term be part of how they talk about their racial justice work. Understandably, there may be more to consider for public messages. Learn from groups who have made the case using racial justice framing and messaging.<sup>13</sup>

Part of an organization’s work is expanding the personal risk tolerance and the organization’s cultural acceptance and support for a spectrum of emotions and reactions while building people’s conceptual knowledge. It’s critical to learn how to have these conversations, how to talk about different terms (for example, by giving examples and sharing stories), and how to prepare for responses that question using particular terms. By being explicit with terms and your intention, you are increasing your own power, taking responsibility, and being accountable in doing racial equity and justice work.

Over the past year or so, we have repeatedly read/heard the term “white supremacy”<sup>14</sup> in mainstream media, not only referring to the increasing intensity of militant hate groups across the country but also in reference to understanding systemic racism. In that context, for

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<sup>12</sup> There are plenty of lists of resources to explore on this [page](#) of [www.racialequitytools.org](http://www.racialequitytools.org)

<sup>13</sup> Check out the resources on the [Communication page](#) of [www.racialequitytools.org](http://www.racialequitytools.org)

<sup>14</sup> White Supremacy is the belief (ideology) that white people and the ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and actions of white people are superior to People of Color and their ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and actions. While most people associate white supremacy with extremist groups like the Ku Klux Klan and the neo-Nazis, white supremacy is ever present in our institutional and cultural assumptions that assign value, morality, goodness, and humanity to the white group while casting people and communities of color as worthless (worth less), immoral, bad, and inhuman and “undeserving.” Drawing from critical race theory, the term “white supremacy” also refers to a political or socio-economic system where white people enjoy structural advantage and rights that other racial and ethnic groups do not, both at a collective and an individual level. “[What Is Racism?](#)” – Dismantling Racism Works (dRworks) [web workbook](#).

organizations that are using DEI<sup>15</sup> strategy, are you talking about white supremacy and systemic racism in your organizational change process? How are you talking about it? What is the impact when organizations are not explicit with these terms due to fear of backlash, even though they are being heard regularly? If your values include racial justice, why aren't you naming it? What are you implying by using DEI, and what missed opportunities are occurring by using this language? Who is being harmed by the limitations of the DEI strategy?

Sometimes we (myself included) start conversations by engaging people where we are with our own thinking and worldview - using what might seem to others as social justice jargon. The approach for others (and my own earlier approach) is to meet people at their comfort level, staying away from explicit terms, and then spoon-feeding information based on tolerance and/or facilitating cognitive dissonance<sup>16</sup> activities/discussions to raise their comfort level and expand their worldview. Another approach is to connect with people's values first by asking the question, "What would an organization look like and feel like if it practiced rigorous humanity?" Then, we can just beam delighted attention and listen to all the possibilities they share, connect with similar values, build relationships, and begin engaging to work together on transforming the organization.

## CO-CREATE YOUR RACIAL JUSTICE VISION

*"The moment we choose to love we begin to move against domination, against oppression. The moment we choose to love we begin to move toward freedom, to act in ways that liberate ourselves and others."*

—Bell Hooks, *Love as the Practice of Freedom*

As you have been reading through this and thinking about introducing new terms or raising questions about how DEI strategy gets implemented, you may get ahead of yourself and envision how people may resist the efforts. Yet, it is hard to imagine people resisting the

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<sup>15</sup> On a side note, why are we using an acronym for organizational change work (e.g., JEDI [Justice, Equity, Diversity, Inclusion], DEI, DEIB [Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging])? Why don't we just state that our vision is racial justice? Or state our vision of contributing to a just and liberated world? By using an acronym, are we hiding the essence of the work our organization is really doing/wants to do and then lessening our accountability to our vision? And by using an acronym, are we missing an opportunity to share and engage people in co-creating a vision of justice and liberation? Are we missing an opportunity to normalize this discussion? A few questions to ponder later...and a continuing discussion...

<sup>16</sup> Cognitive Dissonance as a Strategy in Social Justice Teaching, Paul Gorski. Multicultural Education. Fall 2009. p. 54-57.

concepts of justice, access, and fairness. Forecasting resistance can end up being an excuse for not moving forward. If we are centering relationships and working on creating a community of practice, action, and accountability, this binary way of working with or resisting the change process will lessen. We can then focus on our responsibility to inquire and understand what is behind how a person is responding and engage with them, rather labeling someone and possibly writing them off.<sup>17</sup>

In my work with organizational partners to operationalize racial justice, one of the most asked questions during initial meetings is, “What will be different?” I typically share case studies and what I have witnessed of other organization’s progress, though a top ten list of organizations who have operationalized racial justice in their policies, practices, and culture doesn’t exist (and likely never will). And there isn’t a linear change process. There are twists and turns, and lots of messiness as organizations work through their history and envision a just future. Your staff, management team and board need to envision and shape the future - individually and collectively. It’s important to reflect on how you will personally and collectively be responsible to each other and with your constituents/community on moving the work forward.

When I talk about envisioning, it is about dreaming. To prepare for this dreaming, do everything you can to set aside your hesitations and fears, your current narratives about change, and, for some whites, challenge your zero-sum worldview<sup>18</sup> of racial justice (the idea that if one group experiences justice, another group will not).

**Let’s dream:**

## What is your vision of a racially just world?<sup>19</sup>

As you picture and delve into your vision of the world, be specific about how and what your organization can contribute. When you imagine a racially just and liberated world and your organization’s responsibility and contribution, what is the best strategy to get you there? Does a DEI strategy provide the substantive, courageous, and bold change necessary to transform your organization and shift power? And if not, what will? What are you going to do next to contribute to your vision of a racially just organization and a racially just world? Then what are you doing tomorrow?

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<sup>17</sup> Please [read more about resistance](#) in Grantmaking with a Racial Justice Lens by Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity.

<sup>18</sup> To learn more, see “[Racism as a Zero-Sum Game](#),” Michael Martin, NPR. 7/13/11.

<sup>19</sup> If you need some inspiration, here are a few books to explore: All of Octavia Butler’s [books](#), [How Long ‘til Black Future Month?](#) by N.K. Jemison, [Children of Blood and Bone](#) by Tomi Adeyemi, Octavia’s Brood: [Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements](#) edited by adrienne maree brown and Walidah Imarisha, and [Riot Baby](#) by Tochi Onyebuchi and many more...

It is our responsibility *forever now* - individually and collectively - to work every single day with passion, vigor, joy, and the deep belief that our vision for justice and liberation is and will be our reality - if not for us then for our children and future generations.

*“So don’t walk away. The child needs you, too, don’t you see?  
You also have to fight for her, now that you know she exists,  
or walking away is meaningless.  
Here, here is my hand. Take it. Please.  
Good. Good.  
Now. Let’s get to work.”*

—N. K. Jemison From, How Long ‘Til Black Future Month?

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*“I tend to think we must not ask whether it is possible for a human being or society to become just or moral; we must believe it is possible. Those who believe we are likely or destined to fail – because the Dreamers hold all the power and our liberation is up to them – can easily tell themselves they are “in the struggle” when they show up at a rally with a sign, or go on Twitter or Facebook to rant about the police, then do no more. But those who are in it to win it, and who believe in their own power and understand their responsibility to use it wisely, cannot so easily lie to themselves about the utility of random or halfhearted gestures. Greater precision of thought and action is required.”*

—Michelle Alexander

Review: ‘Between the World and Me,’ by Ta-Nehisi Coates, *The New York Times*