

Elements of White Middle-Class Dominant Culture

adapted (slight edits only) by scott winn (2010) from "White Supremacy Culture"
Dismantling Racism: A Workbook for Social Change Groups
Kenneth Jones and Tema Okun, Changework 2001

This is a list of characteristics of dominant culture which 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 pro-actively named or chosen by the group. They are damaging because they promote dominant ways of thinking to the exclusion of differing ways of being and thinking. The overall effects of these dominant cultural norms is to stop us from talking about power imbalances between individuals and groups....which stops us from creating cultures supportive of transformation towards justice.

Perfectionism

- Little appreciation expressed among people for the work that others are doing; appreciation that is expressed usually directed to those who get most of the credit anyway
- More common is to point out either how the person or work is inadequate
- Or even more common, to talk to others about the inadequacies of a person or their work without ever talking directly to them
- 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
- Making a mistake is confused with being a mistake, doing wrong with being wrong
- 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
- Tendency to identify what's wrong; little ability to identify, name, and appreciate what's right

Antidotes: develop a culture of appreciation, where the organization takes time to make sure that people's work and efforts are appreciated; develop a learning organization, where it is expected that everyone will make mistakes and those mistakes offer opportunities for learning; create an environment where people can recognize that mistakes sometimes lead to positive results; separate the person from the mistake; when offering feedback, always speak to things that went well before offering criticism; ask people to offer specific suggestions for how to do things differently when offering criticism

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: realistic workplans; leadership which understands that things take longer than anyone expects; discuss and plan for what it means to set goals of inclusivity and diversity, particularly in terms of time; learn from past experience how long things take; write realistic funding proposals with realistic time frames; be clear about how you will make good decisions in an atmosphere of urgency.

Defensiveness

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

Antidotes: understand that structure cannot in and of itself facilitate or prevent abuse; understand the link between defensiveness and fear (of losing power, losing face, losing comfort, losing privilege); work on your own defensiveness; name defensiveness as a problem when it is one; give people credit for being able to handle more than you think; discuss the ways win which defensiveness or resistance to new ideas gets in the way of the mission.

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 the 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: include process or quality goals in your planning; make sure your organization has a values statement which expresses the ways in which you want to do your work; make sure this is a living document and that people are using it in their day to day work; 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); learn to recognize those times when you need to get off the agenda in order to address people's underlying concerns

Worship of the Written Word

- If it's not in a memo, it doesn't exist
- 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 other is key to the mission

Antidotes: take the time to analyze how people inside and outside the organization get and share information; figure out which things need to be written down and come up with alternative ways to document what is happening; 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)

Only one right way

- 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 the value in the culture of other communities, sees only value in their beliefs about what is good

Antidotes: accept that there is many ways to get to the same goal; 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; work on developing the ability to notice when people do things differently and how those different ways might improve your approach; 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; 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; never assume that you or your organization know what's best for the community in isolation from meaningful relationships with that community

Paternalism

- 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
- 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

Antidotes: make sure that everyone knows and understands who makes what decisions in the organization; make sure everyone knows and understands their level of responsibility and authority in the organization; include people who are affected by decisions in the decision-making

Either/Or Thinking

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

Antidotes: notice when people use 'either/or' language & push to come up with more than 2 alternatives; notice when people are simplifying complex issues, particularly when the stakes seem high or an urgent decision needs to be made; slow it down & encourage people to do a deeper analysis; when people are faced with an urgent decision, take a break & give people some breathing room to think creatively; avoid making decisions under extreme pressure

Power Hoarding

- 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

Antidotes: include power sharing in your organization's values statement; discuss what good leadership looks like & make sure people understand that a good leader develops the power & skills of others; understand that change is inevitable & challenges to your leadership can be healthy & productive; make sure the organization is focused on the mission

Fear of Open Conflict

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

Antidotes: role play ways to handle conflict before conflict happens; distinguish between being polite & 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 the issues being raised; once a conflict is resolved, take the opportunity to revisit it and see how it might have been handled differently

Individualism

- 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
- Desire for individual recognition and credit
- Leads to isolation
- 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: include teamwork as an important value in your value statement; make sure the organization is working towards shared goals and people understand how working together will improve performance; evaluate people's ability to work in a team as well as their ability to get the job done; make sure that credit is given to all those who participate in an effort, not just the leaders or most public person; make people accountable as a group rather than as individuals; create a culture where people bring problems to the group; use staff meetings as a place to solve problems, not just a place to report activities.

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: evaluate people based on their ability to delegate to others; evaluate people based on their ability to work as part of a team to accomplish shared goals

Progress is Bigger, More

- Observed in systems of accountability and ways we determine success
- Progress in 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 were serving instead of quality of service or values created by the ways in which we serve

Antidotes: create '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 the costs, not just the financial ones, for example the cost in morale, the cost in credibility, the cost in the use of resources; 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; ask those you work with & for to evaluate your performance

Objectivity:

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

Antidotes: realize that everybody has a world view & that everybody's world view affects the way they understand things; realize this means you too; push yourself to sit with discomfort when people are expressing themselves in ways which are not familiar to you; assume that everybody has a valid point & your job is to understand what that point is

Right to Comfort

- The belief that those with power have a right to emotional & 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: understand that discomfort is at the root of all growth & learning; welcome it as much as you can; deepen your political analysis of racism & oppression so you have a strong understanding of how your personal experience & feelings fit into a larger picture; don't take everything personally

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