



MOVING A RACIAL JUSTICE AGENDA: ORGANIZATIONAL ASSESSMENT: ARE YOU READY?

Assessing Your Organization's Readiness and Capacity to Move a Racial Justice Agenda

Not every organization is ready to take on racial justice work even if they are eager to do so. The following assessment is designed to raise critical issues as organizations and organizers think about their capacity to move a racial justice agenda. This assessment is designed to identify potential barriers to taking on a racial justice focus and outline the preparatory work that may be needed to effectively engage in and sustain racial justice work.

Organizations of Color: *(We are referring to organizations that are primarily or entirely comprised of people of color, whether of various racial groups or mostly one.)*

Organizations run by people of color and devoted to building the power of people of color through organizing are essential elements of an effective racial justice movement. People of color must develop independent autonomous institutions that they control, although that does not exclude the possibility of working in alliance with white allies.

The assessment for organizations of color differs from that for white and multi-racial organizations. Although some of the assessment questions listed for white and multi-racial organizations may be useful and relevant for organizations of color, this section will focus on the unique context of organizations of color.

Historically, organizations of color at the forefront of racial justice struggles have faced severe obstacles. These include the difficulty of sustaining financial stability, dealing with the erratic support of – and sometimes betrayal by – white liberal and progressive organizations and defending themselves from the repressive strategies of the police, the courts, local, state and federal governments and non-governmental bodies. This history informs the approaches organizations of color may take to sustain their work over time.

1. Do you have intentional and effective approaches to developing leadership throughout your organization?

In order to sustain and build the work, organizations need to be intentional about leadership development. Building power for organizations of color means building a strong base of members and leaders. Concentrating leadership in the hands of a few weakens the work and makes it easier for opponents to hurt the organization by discrediting one or two individuals.

2. Is there a shared analysis and language about race and racism within the organization?

Does your organization have an analysis of institutional racism and white supremacy? Some groups of color mistakenly seek to address racial inequities by facilitating the assimilation of people of color

into dominant racist institutions, while many people of color have internalized some of the myths about the end of institutional racism and the existence of “equal opportunity.”

Does your organization intentionally work to educate its membership and the community about the realities of racism?

What is your approach if you want to target the systemic racism of an institution (school board, police department, city hall, etc.) that is headed by a person of color? Without an analysis of institutionalized racism, it may be difficult for your organization to challenge institutions headed by people of color due to fears of discrediting people of color public officials.

3. Does your group have a strategy for dealing with people of color groups and leaders who are recognized by the power structure but who oppose your analysis and methods?

Racism continues to try and divide people of color in order to conquer us. Does your group have an analysis and strategy to deal with tokenized and mainstreamed people of color who will attack your credibility, including and especially people who are recognized by some as “community leaders?”

4. Are you intentionally building alliances with other organizations and communities of color?

To what extent does the organization’s analysis of racism affirm the shared experiences of various groups of color both within the organization and in relationship to other communities?

One of the ways racism operates in the U.S. is that it divides to conquer, driving wedges between various ethnic groups and communities of color. It is critical for organizations to proactively build alliances among people of color. We cannot ignore real differences and tensions, but should consciously and constructively try to mend problems and create collaboration. If people of color are divided, our work for racial justice is jeopardized.

5. Does your organization have a strategic approach to weighing the costs and benefits of entering coalitions, particularly with white organizations?

Organizations of color, need to be careful about coalition work with white organizations. Although such coalitions are often necessary – especially given the demographic realities of the West –there are many potential pitfalls. White organizations are often larger and better resourced, creating significant power imbalances. Few white organizations “get” racism at a deep level and have a track record of fighting racism in appropriate ways. How can organizations of color collaborate while maintaining an appropriate level of leadership, keeping their focus and avoiding getting usurped? What type of internal strength do you need to build before entering new collaborations? How can you assess the capacity of predominantly white organizations to be effective anti-racist allies to your organization?

6. How is your organization prepared to deal with racist attacks?

If your work is effective, you will most likely be targeted at some point, if not also constantly, in a million smaller ways. Many established organizations develop “risk management” plans to deal with all kinds of potential crises. People of color organizations should consider adding to these usual disaster possibilities (fire, embezzlement, financial crisis, etc.) some of the liabilities that come with building power for people of color in a deeply racist society: media misinformation and mischaracterization, harassing lawsuits (SLAPP suits), challenges to your nonprofit status, infiltration by government agents, etc.

White Organizations: *(By “white organizations” we mean organizations that are almost entirely made-up of white people among staff, leadership, constituency and membership. A few people of color could be part of the organization even in meaningful ways, but the organization is dominated by white people.)*

White organizations need to be incredibly thoughtful about their role in racial justice organizing. It is necessary that white organizations become active allies in struggles for racial justice, but ultimately, white organizations need to be taking leadership from and be accountable to people of color organizations and communities in the work as much as possible. The following are questions that will help identify whether white organizations are ready to take on a new or expanded commitment to engage in racial justice work.

1. Who is currently committed and interested in taking racial justice work on?

As an organizer or leader are you the primary one pushing the agenda? Is there a shared commitment among leaders and people who hold power and influence within the organization? How thoughtful and deep is the commitment? Are people committed enough to expend real resources for the work? Do people understand that this will involve internal work, possibly internal resistance and tension, and may impact external relationships? Are people going to back off at the first sign of trouble? The fiftieth?

If there is not a shared commitment among a critical mass of people with power in the organization who also share a sense of the potential barriers and problems that could arise, the organization is not ready. More internal education and more effort building a base of support for taking on a racial justice focus must happen.

2. What is motivating people within the organization to take on racial justice work?

Are people interested in the work out of a sense of solidarity with people of color, political thinking which prioritizes the work, a sense of guilt, or opportunism? Seriously thinking about these questions can help get a sense of how deep the commitment is as well as identifying potential major pitfalls.

When is adding a race analysis to your campaign work opportunistic? - some examples

- When this is done to garner money or to generate #s or information for a grant
- When spokespeople of color are used without any depth of relationship:
 - The spokesperson of color themselves isn't really rooted in the community and has no depth of relationship to the community of color
 - The organization is engaging that spokesperson without any interest in engaging the community itself
- When adding a race analysis shines the spotlight on a community that puts them in jeopardy, diverts their energy and focus, puts them in a situation they don't want to be in, and wasn't asked for

3. What is and has been your organization's relationships with people of color organizations and communities of color?

White or predominantly white organizations that have no relationship with people of color or organizations and communities of color are not ready to move a racial justice campaign. Nor are they ready if the relationships they do have with people of color are not particularly deep or lack a level of meaningful trust. In this context, white organizations should be beginning to develop alliances with organizations and communities of color by educating themselves about relevant issues and building relationships.

In regions or places where people of color organizations are few and communities of color are isolated, white and predominantly white organizations must act creatively to seek avenues of accountability in their racial justice work. This may mean building relationships with key organizations of color and leaders outside their community, town, city, or state. Regional organizations can be useful in helping to identify possible alliances that can hold white and predominantly white organizations accountable and that can potentially strengthen and support isolated organizations of color.

4. Have organizations of color identified a need for support on an issue or campaign?

How would you know if people of color have identified a need for support on an issue or campaign? This is related to your organization's level of relationship with people and communities of color. Is your organization answering this question based on common knowledge, media reports, or a specific request for your support?

5. Is there a shared and sharp analysis of race and racism among the organization's leadership and membership?

There does not need to be a shared analysis of race and racism among the entire organization in order to begin racial justice work (although that would be better), but if there is little shared language and analysis problems will result. Is there enough of a shared analysis among leadership that the work won't be compromised? Note that the actual process of engaging in campaign work can create opportunities for membership education if you plan for it.

Dismantling racism training and political education are effective methods of developing shared organizational analysis. An organization that is really struggling to find a language to talk about race and racism in their own organization and in their organizing work may not be ready to move a racial justice campaign.

6. Do you expect some resistance to taking on more explicit racial justice work?

Any type of change often comes with some level of resistance. From whom is the resistance likely to come and why? Resistance should be expected and can be worked through. Membership and constituency education can help avoid resistance as well as surface inevitable resistance in a structured setting where it can be productively discussed and challenged.

Common Points of Resistance among white organizations

Fear of POC coming into the organization

If the majority of membership or leadership of an organization is fearful of POC coming in to the organization, then that organization is definitely not in a good position to seriously take on a racial justice focus. Rather the organization should most likely focus on internal dismantling racism education. If, however, this fear is isolated to just part of the membership or leadership than it may be possible to move forward with a racial justice organizing campaign while doing intentional internal dismantling racism education.

The research phase of an organization's campaign may provide an opportunity to provide some of the internal education needed to dismantle racist fears. Empirical and anecdotal data may move white members and leaders to begin to focus on issues rather than their own racist beliefs.

People feeling unprepared and inexperienced at working with a race analysis

Organizations can build on the work and expertise of other organizations and institutions that have experience working with a race analysis. This can be an impetus for building alliances or coalitions that bring organizations with a strong history of racial justice work together with less experienced organizations.

Relying on tried and true organizing strategies - while still being flexible - may provide and opportunity to overcome assumptions that racial justice organizing is a whole different ballgame than familiar organizing strategies. While we don't want to deny that moving a racial justice campaign may have unique strategies and challenges, sometimes the feeling of not being equipped does not represent a lack of capacity to move a racial justice agenda.

Fear of wedging membership, wanting to avoid "divisive" issues (Alinsky organizing rule)

If we avoid issues of race because we think it is divisive, we are avoiding some of the most critical issues. Too many progressive organizations have sat out key racial justice fights for fear of wedging their membership, with the effect of strengthening the racist right wing.

It's better to strengthen your constituencies' understanding of and commitment to racial justice than to avoid the issues of race and racism. Building a strong and shared analysis of oppression is key to undermining this "cardinal organizing rule." Sometimes confronting points of disagreement can move an organization past seemingly huge barriers to a whole new level of work.

7. Is the organization prepared not to tokenize the few people of color who are part of the organization?

Tokenism is the act of placing a limited number of people (pick one and only one) from a non-dominant group for a prestigious position in order to deflect criticism of oppression. Tokenism is a form of co-optation. Sometimes it takes "the best and brightest of the most assimilated, rewards them with position and money (though rarely genuine leadership and power), and then uses them as a model of what is necessary to succeed, even though there are often no more openings for others who may follow their model. Tokenism is a method of limiting access that gives false hope to those left behind and blames them for "not making it." "If these two or three black women can make it, then what is wrong with you that you can't?"

Sometimes tokenism is unconcerned with credentials or expertise. Under pressure to stop the displacement of Southeast Asians caused by urban "redevelopment," the mayor appoints a Vietnamese businessman to head a task force on the problem. The businessman has no expertise on housing or displacement but hopes to benefit from the redevelopment. By appointing this "token," the mayor hopes to create the appearance of concern for, or even accountability to, the community.

Typically the tokenized person receives pressure from "both sides." From those in power, there is the pressure to be separate from one's race (for instance) while also acting as a representative of the entire group. The tokenized person is expected to become a team player, which means that identifying racist activity within the organization or working on behalf of one's community is seen as disloyalty. The pressure from one's community, on the other hand, is to fight for that community's concerns, in other words, to help from the inside. Of course, it is virtually impossible to work from the inside because the tokenized person is isolated and lacks support. It is a "no win" situation, filled with frustration and alienation.

Example: Recruiting a person of color on an otherwise white board of directors with no intention of actually changing programs in order to serve the needs of people of color.

This boxed- text is adapted from Suzanne Pharr's "Common Elements of Oppression"

When predominantly white organizations take on racial justice work, the few people of color in the organizations are often put into uncomfortable positions within the organization. People of color may want to take the opportunity to caucus in order to build a strong network of support as they enter a racial justice campaign. The caucus may allow people of color to assess whether the organization is tokenizing them in order to put a "colored face" to the campaign while marginalizing people of color from meaningful positions of leadership in the campaign. The caucus may also allow people of color an opportunity to address the impact of internalized racism on members and leaders as active participants in moving a racial justice agenda.

8. Why is your organization primarily white?

This is an incredibly useful question to reflect on before proceeding. In thinking about this question, it is crucial to “step out of the box” and seriously test your basic assumptions.

- Is it because of demographics: few people of color in your area? Has your organization allowed demographics to be an excuse for not doing the work?
- Is it because your organization has historically framed issues in ways that aren't relevant for people of color?
- Have there been specific incidents where the organization has tried to build relationships with and include people of color but it didn't work? Why?

Multi-Racial Organization: *(We are referring to organizations that are composed of people of color and white people. A multi-racial organization, as opposed to a “white organization” for the purposes of this assessment, has equity in leadership and power between people of color and white people.)*

Multi-racial organizations devoted to building alliances across race and building the power of people of color through organizing are essential elements of an effective racial justice movement.

Similar to organizations of color, multi-racial organizations at the forefront of racial justice struggles have faced severe obstacles. These include the difficulty of sustaining financial stability, dealing with the erratic support of – and sometimes betrayal by – white liberal and progressive organizations and defending themselves from the repressive strategies of the police, the courts, local, state and federal governments and non-governmental bodies. Multi-racial membership organizations are also at risk for being wedged apart by racist attacks. This history informs the approaches multi-racial organizations may take to sustain their work over time.

Multi-racial organizations need to be incredibly thoughtful about their role in racial justice organizing. It is necessary that multi-racial organizations become active allies in struggles for racial justice, but ultimately, multi-racial organizations need to be taking leadership from and be accountable to people of color within their organization as well as other communities and organizations of color. The following are questions that will help identify whether multi-racial organizations are ready to take on a new or expanded commitment to engage in racial justice work.

1. Who is currently committed and interested in taking racial justice work on?

As an organizer or leader, are you the primary one pushing the agenda? Is there a shared commitment among white and people of color leaders within the organization? How thoughtful and deep is the commitment? Are people committed enough to expend real resources for the work? Do people understand that this will involve internal work, possibly internal resistance and tension, and may impact external relationships? Are people going to back off at the first sign of trouble? The fiftieth?

If there is not a shared commitment among a critical mass of people with power in the organization who also share a sense of the potential barriers and problems that could arise, the organization is not ready. More internal education and more effort building a base of support for taking on a racial justice focus must happen.

2. Do you have intentional and effective approaches to developing leadership throughout your organization?

In order to sustain and build the work, organizations need to be intentional about leadership development. Building power for communities of color means building a strong base of people of

color and anti-racist white allies as members and leaders. Concentrating leadership in the hands of a few weakens the work and makes it easier for opponents to hurt the organization by discrediting one or two individuals.

3. Is there a shared analysis and language about race and racism within the organization?

Does your organization have an analysis of institutional racism and white supremacy? Some multi-racial organizations mistakenly seek to address racial inequities by facilitating the assimilation of people of color into dominant racist institutions. Other multi-racial organizations fall in to the trap of using a “color-blind” or “love sees no color” analysis to mangle diversity within the organization.

Does your organization intentionally work to educate its membership and the community about the realities of racism?

What is your approach if you want to target the systemic racism of an institution (school board, police department, city hall, etc.) that is headed by a person of color? Without an analysis of institutionalized racism, it may be difficult for your organization to challenge institutions headed by people of color due to fears of discrediting people of color public officials.

4. Are you intentionally building alliances with other organizations and communities of color?

To what extent does the organization’s analysis of racism affirm the shared experiences of various groups of color both within the organization and in relationship to other communities?

One of the ways racism operates in the U.S. is that it divides to conquer, driving wedges between various ethnic groups and communities of color. It is critical for organizations to proactively build alliances among people of color. We cannot ignore real differences and tensions, but should consciously and constructively try to mend problems and create collaboration. If people of color are divided, our work for racial justice is jeopardized.

5. Are there people of color organizations or institutions who have identified a need for support on your potential campaign or would ally themselves on the campaign?

Although your organization is multi-racial, does your membership of color reflect the community most impacted by your potential campaign? It is important to reflect on whether your organization needs to look outside itself for additional sources of accountability in order to move forward.

How would you know if people of color organizations or institutions have identified a need for support on an issue or campaign? This is related to your organization’s level of relationship with people and communities of color. Is your organization answering this question based on common knowledge, media reports, or a specific request for your support?

6. Does your organization have a strategic approach to weighing the costs and benefits of entering coalitions, particularly with white organizations?

Multi-racial organizations need to be careful about coalition work with white organizations. Although such coalitions are often necessary – especially given the demographic realities of the West –there are many potential pitfalls. White organizations are often larger and better resourced, creating significant power imbalances. Few white organizations “get” racism at a deep level and have a track record of

fighting racism in appropriate ways. How can multi-racial organizations collaborate with predominantly white organizations without tipping the balance of multi-racial equity in leadership within their own organization? What type of internal strength do you need to build before entering new collaborations in order to support leaders of color in your own organization? How can you assess the capacity of predominantly white organizations to be effective anti-racist allies to your organization?

7. Do you expect some resistance to taking on more explicit racial justice work?

Any type of change often comes with some level of resistance. From whom is the resistance likely to come and why? Resistance should be expected and can be worked through. Membership and constituency education can help avoid resistance as well as surface inevitable resistance in a structured setting where it can be productively discussed and challenged.

Common Points of Resistance among white people

Fear of more POC coming into the organization

If the white membership or leadership of an organization is fearful of more POC coming in to the organization, then that organization is definitely not in a good position to seriously take on a racial justice focus. Rather the organization should most likely focus on internal dismantling racism education. If, however, this fear is isolated to just part of the membership or leadership than it may be possible to move forward with a racial justice organizing campaign while doing intentional internal dismantling racism education.

The research phase of an organization's campaign may provide an opportunity to provide some of the internal education needed to dismantle racist fears. Empirical and anecdotal data may move white members and leaders to begin to focus on issues rather than their own racist beliefs.

People feeling unprepared and inexperienced at working with a race analysis

Organizations can build on the work and expertise of other organizations and institutions that have experience working with a race analysis. This can be an impetus for building alliances or coalitions that bring organizations with a strong history of racial justice work together with less experienced organizations.

Relying on tried and true organizing strategies - while still being flexible - may provide and opportunity to overcome assumptions that racial justice organizing is a whole different ballgame than familiar organizing strategies. While we don't want to deny that moving a racial justice campaign may have unique strategies and challenges, sometimes the feeling of not being equipped does not represent a lack of capacity to move a racial justice agenda.

Fear of wedging membership, wanting to avoid “divisive” issues (Alinsky organizing rule)

If we avoid issues of race because we think it is divisive, we are avoiding some of the most critical issues. Too many progressive organizations have sat out key racial justice fights for fear of wedging their membership, with the effect of strengthening the racist right-wing.

It's better to strengthen your constituencies' understanding of and commitment to racial justice than to avoid the issues of race and racism. Building a strong and shared analysis of oppression is key to undermining this “cardinal organizing rule.” Sometimes confronting points of disagreement can move an organization past seemingly huge barriers to a whole new level of work.

8. Is the organization prepared not to tokenize the people of color who are part of the organization?

Tokenism is the act of placing a limited number of people (pick one and only one) from a non-dominant group for a prestigious position in order to deflect criticism of oppression. Tokenism is a form of co-optation. Sometimes it takes “the best and brightest of the most assimilated, rewards them with position and money (though rarely genuine leadership and power), and then uses them as a model of what is necessary to succeed, even though there are often no more openings for others who may follow their model. Tokenism is a method of limiting access that gives false hope to those left behind and blames them for “not making it.” “If these two or three black women can make it, then what is wrong with you that you can't?”

Sometimes tokenism is unconcerned with credentials or expertise. Under pressure to stop the displacement of Southeast Asians caused by urban “redevelopment,” the mayor appoints a Vietnamese businessman to head a task force on the problem. The businessman has no expertise on housing or displacement but hopes to benefit from the redevelopment. By appointing this “token,” the mayor hopes to create the appearance of concern for, or even accountability to, the community.

Typically the tokenized person receives pressure from “both sides.” From those in power, there is the pressure to be separate from one's race (for instance) while also acting as a representative of the entire group. The tokenized person is expected to become a team player, which means that identifying racist activity within the organization or working on behalf of one's community is seen as disloyalty. The pressure from one's community, on the other hand, is to fight for that community's concerns, in other words, to help from the inside. Of course, it is virtually impossible to work from the inside because the tokenized person is isolated and lacks support. It is a “no win” situation, filled with frustration and alienation.

Example: Recruiting a person of color on an otherwise white board of directors with no intention of actually changing programs in order to serve the needs of people of color.

This boxed- text is adapted from Suzanne Pharr's "Common Elements of Oppression"

As a multi-racial organization takes on racial justice work, people of color could be put into uncomfortable positions within the organization. People of color may want to take the opportunity to caucus in order to build a strong network of support as they enter a racial justice campaign. The caucus may allow people of color to assess whether the organization is tokenizing them in order to put a "colored face" to the campaign while marginalizing people of color from meaningful positions of leadership in the campaign. The caucus may also allow people of color an opportunity to address the impact of internalized racism on members and leaders as active participants in moving a racial justice agenda.

9. How is your organization prepared to deal with racist attacks?

If your work is effective, you will most likely be targeted at some point, if not also constantly, in a million smaller ways. Many established organizations develop "risk management" plans to deal with all kinds of potential crises. People of color and multi-racial organizations should consider adding to these usual disaster possibilities (fire, embezzlement, financial crisis, etc.) some of the liabilities that come with building power for people of color in a deeply racist society: media misinformation and mischaracterization, harassing lawsuits (SLAPP suits), challenges to your nonprofit status, infiltration by government agents, etc.

©Western States Center, 2001
PO Box 40305
Portland, OR 97240
503-228-8866
www.westernstatescenter.org