Stages of Organizational Identity Development

If we are to achieve a richer culture, rich in contrasting values, we must recognize the whole gamut of human potentialities, and so weave a less arbitrary social fabric, one in which each diverse human gift will find a fitting place. -- Margaret Mead

The following are stages organizations may go through as they address (or fail to address) racism and white privilege. Organizations may exhibit indicators from several stages simultaneously and there will be individual divergence within stages, but, as a whole, the organization will be operating predominantly from one stage. These stages are not a linear progression. Organizations may move up, down, or even skip stages as they develop social justice skills. There is also no natural progression or "evolution" from one to the next. Sustained effort over time is required in order to move into and stay in the later stages.

Stage 1: Pre-Encounter: (Unconscious Incompetence)

Organizations in this stage don't recognize institutional racism and white privilege within their organization and the impact it is having on their employees, clients, decision-making, hiring, policies, practices or procedures, etc. As a result institutional racism continues to be perpetuated throughout the organization in both conscious and unconscious ways.

Indicators:

- Staff, supervisors, and managers do what they are told without challenging the status quo. They continue to do things the way they have always been done.

- Overt and covert institutional messages reflect support of white dominant culture[1]. When someone asks questions or raises concerns that bring inequity and social justice issues to the surface, others respond by minimizing the issue e.g., "That's not needed", "They will never let you do that", "Things are fine the way they are" and other comments that marginalize their voice or mark them as trouble makers.

- Leaders function as managers, never thinking outside the box in ways that would grow the organization to become culturally competent.

- Leadership does not value the contributions or interests of its employees or clients.

- Leadership is tightly controlled vs. widely shared. There is limited diversity of voice in decision-making settings. Access to "sit at the table" is restricted.

- The physical environment reflects white dominant culture i.e., Pictures, art work, books, celebrations, protocols, positions of power, etc.

- The ethos of the organization is based on white cultures norms e.g., values, beliefs, attitudes, discourse, rituals, etc. This is assumed normal or, "Just how things are done," not racial or cultural.

- Relationships center on affinity groups, especially during unstructured time.

- People of color may have assimilated to white institutional norms and values and don't see a need for change. Their attitude may be one of, "Don't rock the boat."

- Individual racist acts go unchallenged e.g., inappropriate jokes, statements and emails, etc.
- New employees are hired based on who they know in the organization and if they are seen as a "good fit".

Stage 2: Encounter (Conscious Incompetence)

The encounter can be internal or external. Something happens in the organization that can't be ignored, for example a major racial incident, media attention, data showing disparities, etc. Or an individual or subgroup can become aware of the racist practices in the organization by attending a workshop, noticing a series of discriminatory events over time or openly discussing their negative experiences with one another. In either case, people realize there is a problem and, "I'm not the only one experiencing it or who sees it." Eyes begin to open.

Indicators:
- Some individuals or subgroups in the organization begin to quietly, and in subtle ways, question and resist the way things are and have always been.
- Some people start to understand the inequity within their organization. They may want to do something about it but don't know how or what to do.
- Individuals and subgroups begin to talk and seek support within and outside the organization.
- Many people within the organization remain in the pre-encounter stages, denying that things need to change in spite of the situation. Cognitive dissonance is often operating where they express overt messages of appreciation for people of color while at the same time communicate white supremacy through context and or nonverbal signals.
- Some will blame an individual or group for whatever has occurred, not taking responsibility for the contributions of systems. "If they tried harder they might get promoted to management."
- The lack of success of people of color within the organization, both staff and clients, will be blamed on cultural deficits or individual shortcomings.
- Some will blame the individual whose racist behavior brought the problem to light by sending him/her to a diversity training to "solve" the problem vs. looking within the organization.
- Many will blame the conversations for causing the tension. "Racism was not a problem until you brought it up."
- There will be a continuum of feelings throughout the organization from, "Power to the People!" to, "What the hell are you talking about?" Feelings of anger, frustration, surprise, confusion, and even relief become the norm.
- The more conversations are happening, the more intense the emotions become.
- When hiring there will be a stated open application process and belief that "the most qualified person should get the job." The majority of people hired will be white.

Stage 3: Pre-Transformation

A committee or group(s) is formed within the organization to begin to talk about what to do and best ways to approach institutional change. There is still resistance from those in the organization who don't see anything wrong with the way things were. They consider the committee's work a waste of time and money making statements like, "We have work to do," or, "I can't believe that we are spending time on this, this is the work place, not a place to be having touchy feeling conversations," or, "I'm tired of people playing the race card and making issues out of non issues." They may start to cite examples of ways in which their needs have not been met followed by, "…but you don't see me complaining and forming a committee about it do you?" Statements like, "Won't this just divide us? That was just one incident," and, "I have a lot of diverse staff in my department and they think this is a waste of time too," are all common resisting statements. As social justice work begins to gain momentum, so does resistance.

Indicators

- Public vs. private conversations are incongruent. The water cooler talk is not the same conversation in the staff meetings.

- Diffusion of priorities is common. Committees struggle with finding a focus, trying to do too much, too fast and too hard.

- Whites allies may unconsciously try to over compensate for their own and the organization's past and present behavior, attitudes and beliefs. Their efforts to align become ineffective for several reasons. Their efforts may come across as disingenuous, their overcompensation may appear as if it's everyone else who has work to do but doesn't show insight into their own need for transformation, or their behaviors can exhaust others.

- Evidence for the need to change continues to surface through the language, attitudes and beliefs of people within and outside the organization. These can be unconscious and conscious behaviors e.g., referring to a sari or traditional Native dress as costumes, making statements like, "I don't see color," or, "When I visited (another country), I was the minority but I learned to adjust," or, "People need to speak English in America," and other types of microaggressions.

- Efforts for change can be top down or bottom up, but at this stage tend not to include a wide range of perspectives and input.

- Overall there is chaos in the organization as they work to transform while people are in so many different stages of ethnic identity development.

- Anxiety, nervousness, fear, shame, blame, confusion and frustration are all common emotions that tend to surface.

- Resistance comes in the form of not having time or money for what is seen as extra work.

- More people of color may be hired, based on their willingness to assimilate or be "team players".

Stage 4: Transformation (Conscious Competence)

All levels of the organization are involved in the transformation process (staff, leadership, board, CEOs, middle management, etc.). There is a growing shift towards organizational alignment. In the process, the organization begins to redefine itself through culturally relevant professional development, addressing policy, best practices, hiring and others areas that warrant new thinking. New leadership is prone to starts and fits, not sure of what they are doing or what would be most helpful. The organization has determined a specific focus on issues of racism and privilege and may try many different strategies. However, they're having difficulty defining objectives and measurable outcomes. They end up doing a lot of everything, not really making progress. Their approach is more like this is an event versus a journey. There are still people who are resistant in this stage but more people are on board as they begin to move from colorblind ideology to cultural/racial literacy and see the benefits. This creates some tension between groups. White allies may continue to over-identify with people of color and distance themselves from those in the organization who are slow to understand the benefits of their efforts and support the work. In the zeal to create change, there is often an "us against them" mentality rather than working towards the humanity and dignity of everyone within the organization.

Indicators

- Cultural competence is a part of the strategic plan.

- Culturally relevant professional development (CRPD) is being planned and is on-going at all levels of the organization.

- Efforts are made to cultivate and distribute leadership more widely.

- White allies are visible in the organization, advocating and supporting change.

- The organization is inquiry based: Asking strategic, exploratory and critical questions.

- Intentional efforts are being made to flush out those aspects of the organization that perpetuate institutional racism and white privilege.

- Policy is being rewritten to include culturally relevant language and new policies are being put into practice.

- The mission statement is reconsidered to ensure it supports the transformation process.

- There are feelings of hopefulness, grief and loss for the way things were, and confusion around what's taking place and next steps.

- Small wins are celebrated.

- Attention and focus is on eliminating disparities for one group (e.g., race, ableism, sexism, ageism, heterosexism, classism, homophobia, etc).

- There is an emphasis on the "rules of anti-racist behaviors" without an internalization of what this means for individuals or the organization.

- When new members join the organization there is a process for including them in the work.

- People of color are hired and promoted to serve at all levels of the organization.

Stage 5: New Identity (Unconscious Competence)

The organization begins to feel comfortable in the work they are doing. There is direction and strong commitment throughout the organization. The new identity they have achieved feels rewarding to its members and the energy is high as they continue to transform the culture. Leadership and staff understand that this work is a way of "being" vs. "doing" and that it is an on-going process. There is acceptance for the time it will take to transform the organization as they continue to move on a trajectory towards equity and social justice. The culture and climate is one that values and capitalizes on its diversity. People are seeing the positive effects of their work within the organization (e.g., relationships and cohesiveness amongst staff, middle management and leaders), and outside the organization (e.g., improved services for clients). Staff members who don't support the new direction of the organization either leave or are asked to leave.

Indicators

- The constitution of the organization is in flux. New people aligned with the social justice vision are coming and current employees who do not agree are leaving.

- The mission, vision, power, practice and policy all reflect the contributions and interests of the wide diversity of cultural and social identity groups.

- All members of the organization act on the commitment to eradicate all forms of oppression within the organization.

- Diverse leadership from clients is sought out. The communities most impacted by the decisions are involved in decision-making process.

- There is full participation and diverse representation in decision-making. This is automatic and internalized.

- Reconciliation and reconstitution is a part of the work. "Us against them" type mentality is replaced by collective responsibility and collaboration ideology.

- White privilege, oppression, racism and other sensitive topics are no longer threatening but common language used to critically engage in discourse. These discussions are part of the on-going practice.

- Commitment to the long haul is understood, recognizing they are on a journey.

- Anti-racist initiatives are embedded in the strategic planning and decisions of the organization.

- Culturally relevant professional development is clearly planned to meet specific goals.

- Affinity caucusing around different identities is a common strategy to identify and address organizational issues.

- The intersectionality of different forms of oppression and privilege are explored.

- Evaluation and assessment tools take power, privilege and oppression into consideration.

- Staff members are actively working to address internalized racial oppression and white supremacy in beliefs and actions.

Stage 6: Social Justice/Social Action

The organization has transformed itself considerably. Leadership, staff and board members are unconsciously competent in many more areas. Members find themselves regularly able to develop effective relationships across cultures within and outside the organization. They are skilled and effective in developing policies and strategies that work towards liberating clients, staff of color and whites at all levels of the organization. Partnerships are formed with other organizations to support social justice issues and address structural racism. Advocating for justice is for the collective humanity not simply for the benefit of people of color.

Indicators
- All forms of isms are a concern for the organization (sexism, heterosexism, racism, classism, ableism, religion, etc).

- When focusing on race it is beyond Black and White.

- Staff and leadership have a greater appreciation for the personal and professional growth that comes with taking risks in this work. They are comfortable with being uncomfortable and take risks to engage across cultures.

- Leadership is redefined as inclusive and non-hierarchical.

- Individuals within the organization take personal responsibility for social change work and seek creative ways to collaborate with one another.

- On-going CRPD is the norm of the organization.

- The organization is actively working in larger communities (regional, national, global) to eliminate all forms of oppression and to create multicultural organizations.

- Different cultural norms of staff members are valued and employees do not have to assimilate or leave a part of themselves behind when they come into the workplace.

- Employees are skilled in code switching with a wide variety of cultures.

Sources:

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[1] *White cultural norms designed to maintain institutional power include:

1. "Either/Or" Thinking	3. Competitive Individualism
2. Secrecy	4. A Scarcity Mentality ie. Limited Resources