

TRAINING FOR CHANGE ARTICLE

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What's Doing Your Detective Work

Figuring Out What a Group Really Needs When They Request an Anti-Oppression Workshop

by Nico Amador

One of the elements of direct education, TFC's training methodology, is a value on being learner-centered, rather than curriculum-centered. When we get asked to do a training, we do not usually rely on a pre-established curriculum that we use to teach the content we're being asked to deliver.

We think that in order to be effective as trainers, we need to first consider the context and the group that we are working with— who they are, what the culture of the group is, what their specific goals are and the ways they might need to be challenged. Once we know that, we can think creatively and flexibly about the design, pulling from a wide variety of tools in order to produce a learning experience that can truly move the group forward.

This means that we have to start by being detectives, asking a bunch of questions and gathering information before we can start planning an agenda. Lately I've been reflecting about how important these initial conversations can be with requests for workshops under the label of anti-oppression or diversity. I get so many requests for these kinds of workshops but often groups are so vague on what they're really asking for that I have to spend a lot of time probing in order to understand what's actually behind the request.

As trainer offering workshops on issues of oppression, privilege, liberation, identity, cultural competency or any other themes that fall under those labels of "anti-oppression" or "diversity," it's really important to me that I offer people an opportunity to do more than just strengthen their intellectual analysis. I want people to get personal, to get real, to notice the choices they have at the level of their behavior, whether that be individual or organizational behavior. I don't see success as giving people more language or concepts to talk about oppression or identity, if they walk away still not being able to see how their actions are serving a goal of inclusion or creating more barriers. Therefore, I want to take the time to learn as much as I can so that the way I approach the training is aligned with the learning that can contribute most to how a group needs to change at that moment in its development.

Often times I can get a good diagnosis of the group and a clear sense of the goals by talking to one or two people in the group, but for longer workshops or more contentious ones it can be helpful to interview multiple people in order to get a variety of perspectives. Once I have this information I can start designing. I'm always prepared to adjust my design in the moment, if that's needed, but usually if I've done my homework ahead of time the design won't need to change dramatically.

In this article, I want to share some of the questions that I've found useful in my initial conversations with groups who are requesting anti-oppression or diversity workshops and what I'm listening for in their answers. The sequence of questions as they are here might be useful to guide the flow of the conversation, but I don't always stick to this sequence as a formula, I think it's better to be organic and follow the direction the conversation takes as it's happening:

What does this group do, who are they, what is their focus? Are they involved in direct service, campaign work, legal work, the arts, are they a collective or co-operative? What is the culture of this group and what will that mean about how they engage with these issues? For example, activists working on a campaign might be more task-oriented and might carry a greater sense of urgency to “fix the problem” and move on. They might need more help to slow down and recognize a need for a longer term plan for organizational change. This is a generalization and might not turn out to be true, but it is a part of what I think about as I put together an agenda for a group and anticipate the kinds of dynamics that might show up.

I also want to understand how the workshop can advance the larger goals and purpose of their group. I want to have a sense of how strengthening their awareness and facility with working cross-culturally can make an impact on their ability to achieve their mission.

Why does this group need this workshop and what are they hoping will change as a result? When I ask this question, one of the things that I’m listening for is the problem the group is trying to solve. If a group requests an anti-racism training, there could be a number of reasons for this. It could be because there are white people in the group who are acting in way that marginalizes the people of color in the group. Or maybe the internal dynamic of the organization is fairly healthy but the structure of the organization is such that they have a hard time reaching or recruiting people of color into their programs and want to change that. There are many options for how to approach an anti-oppression or diversity workshop—it could look like facilitating a group to have an honest fight, running a mediation, doing team-building, setting up caucuses, or spending time evaluating structure and strategy. Unless I know what the problem is that we’re trying to solve, it’s hard to know what tools and what approach will produce the desired change.

Is the impetus for this workshop in response to a particular incident within the organization?

Groups can carry a lot of shame, guilt or fear that may make them reluctant to address the history of conflict within their group. But if there is a conflict that is really live, I want to know as much about that as possible so that I can support the group to deal with it honestly and transparently. It’s incredibly awkward to walk into a situation as a trainer where no one has told you that there is an elephant in the room and we can waste a lot of time with a group if we don’t know what it is.

What is the sense of buy-in or interest in this workshop from the people who will be participating, where might the resistance to it come from? I think this is important to ask because some groups will have more of a consensus for the need for the workshop which means I’ll be able to dive in to the riskier material quickly and expect people to follow me. Other groups may be requiring that people in their group participate in the workshop whether they want to or not. In that case, I will need to anticipate a certain level of skepticism and take more time to build a container in order to invite enough safety for people to engage and get real.

What other tensions or dynamics are at play here? This isn’t usually a question I ask out loud but it is a question I ask myself as I’m listening to a group describe the challenges they are facing. I want to sort out where the tensions around personal identity and diversity in the group might be overlapping with other tensions around other kinds of rank, roles and personality conflicts in the group.

For example, I did an anti-racism training with a group where the white male founder had giving up power in the organization; a dynamic that others in the organization experienced as racism and/or sexism.

As a trainer in that situation, I wanted to help that founder see how his impulse to stay in control might be marginalizing others in the group, but I also realized that in order to be effective, I needed to be able to speak with empathy to his role and the real challenges of transitioning out of leadership in an organization.

In another group, that had an anti-war focus, they wanted to address dynamics of race and racism but there was also a tension that existed between the military veterans in the group and the civilians. Doing more team-building work in that instance before getting into the conversation about racism proved to be very useful.

How many people will be participating and how much time do you have for this workshop? Daniel Hunter has written a **great article on pushing back** on groups that expect deep work on anti-oppression to happen in two-hour workshops. You can read that article [here]. Negotiating the amount of time a workshop needs to meet its goals is one place where we might need to be pushy to ask for more time or scale back the expectations for the goals of the workshop so that they seem realistic given the constraints.

Given the time available, what are one or two concrete goals that seem achievable for this workshop? Usually this is a question that I ask after I've gathered information from asking some of the previous questions and can reflect back to the group what they seem to be asking for. I try to give a lot of support and feedback to help a group generate options and develop a helpful and realistic focus for the workshop. At this point in the conversation I'm hoping that we can start to translate the broad theme of anti-oppression or diversity into more workable goals such as "build skills for handling conflict," "create a shared understanding about the kinds of diversity that exists in this group and how that's impacted the individual experiences here," "identify some structural changes that could be made in order to include people of color (or any other particular community that is of concern for the group) into the decision making of the organization."

I want to end by giving one example of a training I did that started as a simple request for an anti-oppression training and why the interviews my co-facilitator and I did beforehand proved to be so important for this training.

A couple years ago Training for Change was approached by the president of the student council of a university who wanted an anti-oppression workshop for him and the other members of the student council. Though the president seemed well intentioned, he was not fully transparent about why he was requesting the workshop. Upon further conversation with him and others on campus, we learned that the almost all-white student council had been publicly criticized for its lack of representation of people of color, its apparent indifference to the concerns of the student of color groups and its lack of transparency in allocating funding.

As we talked, we noticed that the president was still fairly defensive about the criticism. My co-facilitator and I worried that the student council intended to use the anti-oppression training as a way to show that they were "addressing the concerns," while not actually making a full commitment to building a better relationship with students of color on campus.

We were determined not to collude with their defensive position and considered pulling out of the training all together. However, we were able to negotiate some agreements for accountability that reassured us enough to go forward.

We insisted on an initial two-day training and a one-day training six months later, to ensure a higher level of accountability. In the first training we spent the first day unpacking the criticisms that had been directed at the council. We did an adventure-based learning activity to help the group become more self-reflective about their internal group dynamics and build enough of a container for the group to start speaking more honestly and directly to each other. We followed this with another activity that established a bigger framework for understanding white privilege and mainstream cluelessness.

On the second day we looked at the structure of how the group made decisions and helped them brainstorm ways to build relationships with student of color organizations and operate with greater transparency. They outlined some clear next steps that they could implement. We ended the day with a tool we invented for the purpose of this workshop called the **Facing Attack Challenge** where everyone practiced hearing criticism and finding different options for how to respond. The tool was incredibly useful at reducing their fear of receiving criticism and opened them up to ways to respond without getting defensive, a quality we thought they really needed to cultivate.

Six months later we came back and evaluated the progress that had been made on the steps they had outlined in the first workshop. We also invited several representatives from the student of color coalition on campus to give feedback about the changes they felt still needed to happen. We spent most of the day looking at options for deeper collaboration between student council and student of color organizations.

The result? The student council made some real strides to operating in a more accessible and transparent way. There was still skepticism from the student of color groups but because the student council became more active in asking and responding to feedback, more students of color started to view them as a resources and respect the leadership that they were showing. It encouraged a greater diversity of students to get involved with student council and when we checked in a year later, the group had changed from an all white council to one where almost half the members were people of color.