

Tips for White Trainers Leading Multi-Racial Groups

By [Celia Kutz](#)

In multi-racial workshops I've led, activists are struggling with how to organize within an extremely tense environment. White people are tentative; confused about how to take action that does not cause further harm. Black participants have little patience and struggle with being bold but not tokenized. I've been with Asian Pacific Islanders, Latin@s, mixed-race activists, all of whom want to work on anti-black racism and struggle with how to do that while building up their community's power. Over the summer of 2015 Matthew Armstead and I attended a workshop that increased my ability to train within this intensity. The following are five tips strengthened while at [Beyond Diversity 101: Race](#) - a workshop designed for Black and white participants, with the majority of our time spent in separate caucuses by race. I'm primarily writing this to support white trainers facilitating multi-racial groups.

Know How You Became White

During the first day white participants formed a caucus, sharing our migration stories from Europe. We explored possible reasons why our ancestors chose whiteness and capitalism in order to survive, grieved the loss of our cultural practices, and noticed how we came to internalize dangerous, often unconscious belief systems such as: the individual is supreme, economic success is paramount, people are disposable, there is only one version of history and you must always appear to be contributing. Naming these unspoken truths allowed us to identify the oppressive behavior we'd internalized without shame. We could then acknowledge the choices our ancestors had made, understand them in their context, and knowingly make different choices today. It's crucial for white trainers to take the time to do this self-awareness work. Knowing where your people came from, why they made the choices they did and how they got you to where you are now will help you to have compassion for your own white patterns of behavior. You can then recognize and identify these patterns as they happen, noticing the ways in which you may unknowingly be perpetuating whiteness. When you are training you'll be able to keep better track of your own inevitable habits *and* have more skill at noticing how whiteness is showing up in your group. At that point you can use your rank to intervene when white dominance shows up without shaming anyone. Knowing the inner reasons for your own behavior increases confidence, and as a result, impacts your ability to facilitate the strong emotions which will inevitably arise in mixed race spaces trying to organize in this highly conflicted time.

Use White Caucuses to Breakdown Patterns

The time spent in the white caucus getting to know each other and finding our common struggles strengthened our bond. This trust building was crucial when we needed to test each other later on and push each other's understanding of race. After a particularly emotional day we closed our session asking and receiving from each other the support we needed. A small gesture, but mighty when you understand that often white people mistakenly go to their friends of color to process the pain and anger they have about racism. Of course people of color will understand why the death of another Black man is horrific. However, understanding a situation, and being personally

threatened by an event are two very different experiences. It's offensive to bring the pain of our understanding to the people most threatened by the event itself. White people seeking each other for support helps us unlearn this behavior.

Caucusing forced us to figure out how be close to each other, a difficult thing for people who have been habituated to prefer isolation and individualism. White trainers would be wise to encourage white people to seek each other out as a resource in multi-racial spaces. A common behavior for white people, especially the middle-class, is to compete with each other for the 'perfect white person' prize. This can show up as calling out racist behaviors with shame, choosing to 'take a side', and avoiding someone who has said something offensive. White caucuses during these moments can help the group notice the divisive dynamic and push them to see each other as a resource. Resistance to this choice may show up because people will want to distance themselves from the oppressive incident, identified in the one person who 'messed up'. White people learning to love each other, regardless of where they are along the journey is not easy, but necessary to move racial justice forward.

An Emotional Process That Stayed On Track

On the first day the facilitators called our time together *Heartwork: calling on a wider order of logic than that comes from the mind. This wider order of logic requires close attention to emotions.* People learn in different ways: by listening, reading, practicing for themselves. Some learn best when they feel emotionally connected to the content, through what Training for Change calls the emotional learning channel. I've seen emotions come up in a training and backfire in two ways for white trainers. One: the sadness of racism overwhelms a participant and the entire group focuses on their experience - this person is often white and female. The other: emotions are minimized as unimportant or never allowed to surface. Emotional learning is often marginalized because people are not skilled at having emotions without staying 'stuck' in them. Patriarchy has done a fine job of making it impossible for crying to be seen as powerful. That day, making room for emotions while in caucuses and explicitly inviting participants to keep track of what was going on in their mind, body, and spirit when talking about race, made it possible for people to go deep and stay active. White participants learned new ways racism affects Black people, stayed connected to the strong feelings of other participants and to their own inner emotional responses. This is a handy skill for a trainer.

When the group may be experiencing it's own racism it's important for trainers to be able to keep track of their own response and that of the group. White trainers need to be able to scan the group for where there is hurt or shame coming up about racism and be able to facilitate the group through that learning moment - while keeping their own guilt or shame as a resource and not a sink hole! The lifelong journey of ending white supremacy and building campaigns for racial justice depends on this skill. Being able to invite and integrate emotional work into our racial justice workshops is essential. I've seen groups make well-intentioned commitments they then task to a committee for next steps. The follow through doesn't happen because they haven't really connected to each other or the issue. Whether through personal relationships, a moral belief, spiritual calling or strategic imperative, we need to cultivate our ability to acknowledge and use strong emotions that create connection.

Have an Anchor

I often interrupt, ask direct questions and am a passionate communicator – a style I joyfully reclaim from my own internalized anti-Jewish upbringing. However, the white caucus was mostly polite, took turns and was soft spoken. By the third day I was frustrated and impatient, reeling at the lack of action and practical next steps. I was resentful of the facilitator and annoyed with the other white participants, so I went outside. Time and time again, going to the natural world for support has helped me as a trainer through difficult times. With my hands on the ground tears came and I realized that somewhere along my racial justice journey, I had lost faith in the healing potential of white people. I didn't believe that we could change fast enough to impact the racist violence plaguing the U.S. I was angry, filled with an intense grief that had my shoulders hunched and my heart broken. As I stayed with the intensity of that feeling, listening without pushing it away and honoring the truth of my realization, I felt the solidity of the earth under my hands. Other white people I knew who were committed to the struggle for racial justice came to my mind and I remembered two things I'd learned before. Disappointment is one of the consequences for having high expectations and we can love each other enough so we can out love how much we hate what's happening. I felt my inner strength, a sensation I've identified as energy moving vertically through my solar plexus, come back, and my head rise to look out at the horizon. Having an anchor has consistently been a resource for me as a trainer in tough times. Everyone has their anchor(s). A big part of our work as white people is to get in touch with our anchor when racial tension is high. Tapping in to that source of energy can sustain and guide us.

Bring Your Own Urgency

I went back into the white caucus and told them about my frustration with the process. I was passionate and direct even while tears came and my voice was shaking. The young woman beside me apologized for contributing to making the space unsupportive for me. I turned to her and said, "Don't do that. Don't take my experience and move the focus onto your feelings over what happened. Stay here with me and listen to my experience. I want you to understand." The room got quiet, her spine straightened and everyone was listening. After I had shared others came forward intensely sharing their own frustrations with the way they had internalized the expectation to be nice and fair when communicating. People began to laugh at the hypocrisy of white patterns and then more stories came out, as people revealed family secrets that they'd never shared out loud. Later, over dinner, the same young woman approached me and said, 'I've never had another white woman talk to me like that. I didn't know we could.'" I smiled, and realized the healing I was looking for was right here. It was available when I was willing to risk being vulnerable enough to share my true self.

More often now, as a white trainer, I am bringing my strong feelings and sense of urgency to the groups I work with. Showing, and verbally sharing my investment in the group's ability to successfully navigate issues on race becomes a resource for the group. I've come to realize that one important role of the trainer is to help raise the stakes for a group; helping participants to increase the expectations they have for themselves. Using [tools and activities](#) designed by Training for Change, I support them to reach those expectations and I bring my full self – devoted to the people's movement, building a more just and sustainable world.