Dismantling White Supremacy

How can we transform workplaces to be equitable spaces for models and internal teams?

We can work honestly to unlearn the hetero-normative white supremacist culture behaviors and practices that we all have been indoctrinated with. These behaviors and practices create division and prioritize capitalism over people.

Even the most well meaning of us have unconsciously learned and upheld these behaviors. All white spaces do not exist by accident - and *unlearning what upholds them is a lifelong choice.*

Unlearning this culture means understanding that it permeates every aspect of our lives. White supremacy and capitalism go hand in and keep people from different walks of life separate. Capitalism thrives by having an exploited underclass and our capitalist system thrives on anti-Blackness.

This document focuses on dismantling white supremacy from a Black lens. This is a bottom-up perspective. Advocating for the intersectional rights of, and improving the experiences of the bottom class also improves society as a whole.

For example, the Civil rights Movement was an amalgamation of many Black men, women and queer folks fighting for basic rights in the United States. These efforts by Black activists contributed to passing the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965.

Photograph of Lincoln Memorial Youth March for Integrated Schools

Photographs of Civil Rights Programs at the Lincoln Memorial, Washington, DC, 1949 - 1959
Record Group 79: Records of the National Park Service, 1785 - 2006

Many of the first-generation families we know today are a product of this legislation and the bottom-up work Black people did then, and continue to do today, to create real long-lasting change that truly impacts everyone for the better.

When working to dismantle racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, etc., always keep in mind the intersections of identities. Critically think about how more than one 'ism' can affect how a person walks through life.

Below, we reviewed common workplace habits followed by suggested antidotes. These antidotes are guidelines and are not meant to be prescriptive. They are meant to be a baseline for greater conversation.

WE SPEAK
MODEL MANAGEMENT

White Supremacy Culture in the Workplace
& *How to Change the Dynamic:*

Sense of Urgency

Assigning unrealistic workloads with short deadlines, reinforced by budgets that propose a high level of work for disproportionately low funds.

How This Relates To Anti-Blackness In The Workplace

A workplace with a sense of urgency encourages quick turn around and lacks time to be thoughtful - which can morph good intentions into a performative allyship rather than meaningful transformation. In 2020 for example, a large-scale sense of urgency emerged when brands were called to take steps toward more equitable workplaces. Not enough time and thought was given to what was being asked. This resulted in sacrificing potential allies for quick, high visibility results that benefit the status quo more so than individual communities.

Questions To Ask

➔ Who are the creatives we contract for each project?

➔ What is their background and cultural experience? How will it affect the project? Will the effect be positive, neutral, negative, or something else?

➔ Are our inclusive choices a win for BIPOC and other marginalized people *or* are they a win for white normative expectations of what it means to be inclusive?

ANTIDOTE

✔ Discuss and plan what it means to set goals toward true equity beyond the white normative definition.

✔ Nurture leadership that understands authentic change often takes longer than desired.

✔ Focus on the entire process rather than quick results.

✔ Create a structure that will make good decisions in times of urgency and learn from past experiences.

✔ Create realistic plans and proposals with realistic time frames.

✔ Make long term, 10,000-foot decisions that support the process, goal and all involved.

How This Relates To Anti-Blackness In The Workplace

DEFENSIVENESS

Criticism and critique of those in power is viewed as threatening, inappropriate, or rude rather than constructive. When power structures feel threatened, more energy is spent protecting power as it exists rather than opening up a safe space for concerns.

Defensiveness does not nurture a safe working environment for all. When people in power are by default defensive, it creates an oppressive, negative work culture for everyone beneath them.

For example, a workplace might spend more energy defending against claims of racism rather than on examining how racism might be happening. Extra mental and emotional energy might then be spent by the claimant, who feels they need to work around people that are defensive, making sure they are not feeling offended instead of working toward a common goal.

Alright, you said something kind of racist.

In our post-modern America, how racism is defined has skewed how racism is perceived and its most subtle forms are too often disregarded or denied.

When white people hear "you are being racist", "what you said was racist", or "that was racist", they hear "*you* are evil" or "*you* are wrong" or "*you* are a bad person".

This leads to feeling that they must deny the statements are true vs. listening to the actual concern and working through the bias together.

TIP: If someone calls you out for saying something kind of racist - *take a breath and do not get defensive, to allow for a resolutionary conversation.*

ANTIDOTE

- ✔ Understand the link between defensiveness and fear - fear of losing power, losing face, losing comfort, losing privilege etc. – and name defensiveness as the problem, when it is one.

- ✔ Actively work on your own defensiveness and nurture a space for all voices to be heard.

- ✔ Discuss the ways in which defensiveness or resistance to new ideas gets in the way of the mission.

- ✔ Understand that systems may be in place to prevent abuses of power, but systems are never foolproof.

QUANTITY OVER QUALITY

When an organization is directed toward producing and focusing only on goals of quantity, without incorporating the big picture or looking at the overarching goal and how it affects other people and systems. Quantity in itself isn't bad, but becomes a problem when workplaces don't look at goals holistically.

How This Relates To Anti-Blackness In The Workplace

For example, you may get through an agenda but if you have not paid attention to people's need to be heard, the decisions made at the meeting can be undermined and/or disregarded. Let us say John, a cis gendered white man, has a business with 10 employees and three of them are Black, meeting his company's numerical diversity goal. However, John does not have an open-door policy to allow open discussion about to allow open discussion about racism. His Black employees feel like their concerns of racial bias are pushed to the wayside.

It is imperative to note, workplace stats, or having Black bodies in a space, does not equate to a truly inclusive environment.

When we focus too much on numbers, we lean into quotas. Instead, the quality of relationships are immeasurable and should matter more.

Having an open-door policy and being open to the concerns of Black employees will only enhance quality goals and lessen future biases, when it comes to recruitment or day to day interactions.

ANTIDOTE

- ✔ Make sure your organization has a values statement that expresses the ways in which you want to do your work.

- ✔ Look for ways to plan and measure process goals over quantity goals.

- ✔ Think about how to measure if you achieved your goal or not. Make this is a living document to guide day-to-day work.

- ✔ Learn to recognize when you need
  to drop your agenda, in order to address what matters most in achieving true equity.

ONLY ONE RIGHT WAY

The belief that there is 'one right way' to approach a workplace matter. When someone does not agree, something is wrong with them. This also shows up when a person only sees the 'good' in their beliefs vs. seeing the multi-faceted outlook of their beliefs and the beliefs of others from a larger or different perspective.

How This Relates To Anti-Blackness In The Workplace

Only 'one right way' is more commonly manifested in the recruitment process.

"Required skills" are a way to weed out folks who do not work within the "right way."

Marginalized folks who are disproportionately barred from taking traditional paths (university or art schools) are commonly disregarded before even making it to the interview process based on the assumption of not being able to work a specific way or possibly their approach not being within the white cultural norm.

ANTIDOTE

✔ There are many correct paths to meeting the same goal. By encouraging discussion among diverse leaders, more equitable paths may be found.

✔ Encourage this practice and honor the decision of the group. Take note of all possible solutions that arise from these discussions.

✔ People who can look at things from different perspectives have a lot to offer. Often they can shed light on a problem or solution in a new way.
✔
✔ If a group or person always pushes the same perspective from the belief that there is only 'one right way' - recognize that this is what's happening.

PATERNALISM

When people with power think they know what is best for people without it. People in positions of authority know why a decision is made and who made it, while the powerless have no view or access to these insights.

How This Relates To Anti-Blackness In The Workplace

Jen made a unilateral decision with a client that a new project would be 80 billable hours. The experienced team, who would execute the work, was not included in negotiations. The experienced team raised concerns about how realistic Jen's agreed timeline was. Jen dismissed these concerns, failing to consider their validity. This lead to a significant impact on the project's quality.

When paternalism is at play, so are the below:

Those with power think they can make decisions for and in the interests of those without it.

Those with power often do not think it is important or necessary to understand the viewpoint or experience of those without, for whom they are making decisions.

Decision-making is clear to those with power and unclear to those without it.

Those without power understand they do not have it and who does.

Those without power do not know how decisions are made and who makes them; yet they are completely familiar with the impact of those decisions personally.

ANTIDOTE

- ✔ Make sure everyone clearly understands who makes which decisions.

- ✔ Include people who are affected by decisions in the decision-making.

- ✔ Provide clarity on each person's
  level of responsibility and authority.

POWER HOARDING

When Power is perceived as a limited resource and sharing power is not practiced. The people in power often do not recognize that they are hoarding power and are threatened (defensiveness) when it is suggested.

How This Relates To Anti-Blackness In The Workplace

For example, a very common form of power hoarding in our industry, is the lack of marginalized talent working on set. <u>A great example of this is with kinky/coily hair on set (4a, 4b curl type).</u> Models with kinky/coily hair are commonly getting hair and makeup done by white or non-Black POC stylists. Too often, these stylists are not properly trained on how to work with textured hair or how to apply makeup on melanated skin. Some stylists may falsify their experience out of fear of losing work and being seen in a bad light.

This inability to be honest about qualifications is a form of power hoarding, which leaves Black models with the responsibility of doing their own hair and makeup on set.

Black hair stylists are more likely to know how to do textured hair, straight hair, or fine hair. There should also be a qualifying class for stylists of all backgrounds to receive proper training. Overall, Black makeup artists and hairstylists are sparsely found on set, which is often at a detriment to the overall result.

Important to remember - upholding white supremacist culture is not always blatant or rude.

Sometimes it is in the form of being blissfully unaware, as these practices have permeated our everyday and are considered 'normal' or 'default'.

For example, we often find that in beauty school, hair and makeup is taught on white people by default.

With a lack of industry encouragement for more inclusive and diverse standards, this 'white default standard' is set, promoted, and accepted by all.

This is how the cycle continues today.

ANTIDOTE

- ✔ Discuss what good leadership looks like.

- ✔ Make sure people understand that a good leader includes power sharing in your organization's values statement.

- ✔ Understand that change is inevitable and challenges to leadership can be healthy and productive.

PROGRESS IS BIGGER, MORE

When success is measured as "bigger" and "more than we have now," regardless of how it affects everyone, it encompasses and disregards positive outcomes that are not directly associated to 'progress'. For example, an organization which expands (adding staff, adding projects) or develops the ability to serve more people, regardless of how well they are being served.

Be wary of over expansion. The capitalistic norms of growth are traditionally achieved through exploitation and greed.

We live in an ever-changing capitalistic society. It is best to make expansion choices that are sustainable.

The ways in which your business develops products matters.

How can these developments indirectly impact marginalized communities in positive ways? How are we packaging our products? How can we empower through partnership opportunities?

ANTIDOTE

- ✔ Discuss and plan what it means to set goals toward true equity beyond the white normative definition. Create 'Seventh Generation' thinking. Do this by asking how the actions of the group will affect people now and seven generations from now.

- ✔ Ensure that all cost/benefit analysis include all the costs, not just monetized costs. *For example, the cost in morale, the cost in credibility, the cost in the use of resources, etc.*

- ✔ Also include process goals in your planning, as mentioned earlier in the *Quantity over Quality* antidote.

RIGHT TO COMFORT

People in positions of power feel they have a right to emotional and psychological comfort because they feel victimized or overwhelmed by concepts they don't see. For example, change that tackles systemic racism to help improve life for Black people may seem unfair to white people–why did the change have to happen at all, if their life was perfectly fine? Acts of "unfairness" are often misidentified as a personal attack against their comfort because it's easy to miss the bigger picture: solving systemic racism means things need to change. Systemic racism targets Black people and people of color institutionally and on a large scale vs. an individual act or situation.

White supremacy culture functions to shield white comfort over everything else. This makes it very difficult for Black people and marginalized professionals to express their discomfort when facing bias or racism in the workplace. There is an unconscious expectation that marginalized people must remain positive when experiencing and calling out discrimination, for fear being seen as an aggressor.

How This Relates To Anti-Blackness In The Workplace

More times than not Black and marginalized professionals find themselves remaining silent on issues of bias and discrimination. Many find it easier to keep their heads down vs. speaking up. Taking on the emotional labor to say something or stay quiet and can have a serious effect on a person's wellbeing.

In the book Caste, by Isabel Wilkerson, the author explains how taking on the emotional labor can also affect someone physiologically. The author talks about telomeres. "… a repeating sequence of double stranded DNA at the end of a chromosome. The more frequently a cell divides, the shorter the telomere becomes." This cell weathering process is a measure of premature aging, which is exacerbated by chronic exposure to stressors like discrimination.

This kind of cell damage, originally intended to study Black Americans, was expanded due to the realization that social inequity was at play in other forms as well.

For example, low-income white people show shorter telomeres than white people with more resources. Of course, the advanced socio-economic status and privileges of the Black American middle or upper-classes, still does not shield them from discrimination and the weathering of telomeres from that discrimination.

ANTIDOTE

✔ Understand that discomfort is at
   the root of all growth and learning - welcome it.

✔ Deepen your analysis and knowledge of racism and oppression.

✔ The larger picture of institutional racism is not a personal attack. We all have internalized biases based on our experiences. Taking things personally inhibits real growth.

OBJECTIVITY

Maintaining a completely objective or 'neutral' status quo and writing off emotions as inherently destructive/irrational. This kind of environment distracts from the decision-making or group process when people are invalidated or treated poorly for showing emotion. This kind of environment is the product of a white, cis male dominated society.

How This Relates To Anti-Blackness In The Workplace

In the study, Are Some Emotions Marked "Whites Only?" Racialized Feeling Rules in Professional Workplaces, by Adia Harvey Wingfield, the author outlines how there are workplace emotional expectations which include calmness, amiability, and congeniality. Emotions like anger, annoyance, and frustration are discouraged but accepted, depending on the situation. These emotional rules are meant to regulate the expression of emotion in the workplace. However, racial dynamics in the United States show us that the rule is reinforced differently for different people.

Since 2016, only 16% of Black Americans were employed in a corporate sector. Many Black professionals are either the first or one of few in their sector, unlike Black people in the working-class. This leads to hyper visibility in a predominately white space. This hyper visibility leads to Black professionals often finding themselves policed and stereotyped.

Due to long standing persistent stereotypes ("Aggressive Black Man" or "Angry Black Woman"), Black people in the workplace are held to higher emotional standards, than their white counterparts.

According to the study, Black professionals are expected to always display a pleasant demeanor vs. appearing emotionally neutral or "objective".

ANTIDOTE

- ✔ Assume that everyone has a valid point, and your job is to understand the point. Push yourself to sit with discomfort when people are expressing themselves, especially when in ways that are not familiar to you.

- ✔ Push yourself to sit with discomfort when people are expressing themselves, especially when in ways that are not familiar to you.

- ✔ Realize that everyone has a world view and that everyone's worldview affects the way they understand things. *Realize this means you too.*

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