

Becoming an Anti-Racist / Racially Just Organization

The Environmental Support Center's Story

*By Danyelle O'Hara
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Introduction

In November 2004, the Environmental Support Center began a two-year organizational development process called "dismantling racism" (DR). By working with the staff and board to develop a shared analysis of racism, ESC began to address the individual, cultural, and institutional manifestations of racism within the organization, and to organize for change based on that shared understanding. Although most participants had been through various diversity and anti-racism trainings, none had gone through a process as extensive or intensive as the one on which ESC embarked.

What led the Environmental Support Center to "Dismantling Racism"?

A culmination of events led ESC to engage in this work, including a programmatic decision to focus on environmental justice and a related effort to increase the number of people of color on the staff to more effectively engage this priority. The actual decision to pursue an organization-wide training process was catalyzed by the resignation of a person of color who pointed out that certain communication and decision making dynamics within the organization might contribute to ESC's difficulties in retaining staff of color. As one staff person noted, "It looked like the organization might not be making the best choices and that the culture might not necessarily be working for all people." Although ESC's staff retention issues went beyond race, there was a desire to explore how the organization's internal structure and practices inhibited its ability to employ and work with people of color.

How was the decision understood internally?

While the decision to address racial issues was strongly supported by the Environmental Support Center's board and staff, the need for it wasn't readily apparent to everyone. From the perspective of many, the high level of racial and ethnic diversity on ESC's board, staff, and among its constituents already made ESC an anti-racist organization, or close to it. One board member said, "I was surprised that ESC--which is one of the most diverse organizations I'm part of--would feel like it would need to undertake a project of such seriousness." A staff person empathetically pointed out, "It wasn't someone spitting on someone

else's face ... it was good people working in an organization that had some unconscious behaviors. Nothing was done intentionally, but that's where the harm came."

What was required to undertake the Dismantling Racism process?

Undertaking the DR process took significant commitment from the Environmental Support Center, including:

- budgeting for outside trainers,
- dedicating time for the retreats,
- including trainers in board meetings, and
- allocating time in board meetings, and participating in conference calls.

The strong buy-in for the process was solidly grounded in existing staff and board relationships, as well as their deep commitment to the organization. One board member said, "We were doing it together [because] it was helping us expand our vision of what the organization is, and staking out something we could all be proud of." The buy-in also resulted from the initiative one particular staff person of color took to engage in numerous one-on-one conversations, share personal experiences, and provide reading materials.

The conversations, sharing, trusting relationships, and unwavering focus on improving the Environmental Support Center's strength to pursue its mission were all necessary for moving through what was sometimes a difficult process. "We were clear on the intentions so usually people did not feel personally attacked." Nonetheless, uncomfortable, emotionally charged topics surfaced, in which a small number of people chose not to engage. "We lost some folks ... it was like they concluded, 'Hmm, this is real, maybe I'm not ready for it.'" Overall, however, the relationships among board and staff were strengthened significantly and a collective commitment to creating a new organizational culture emerged.

What did the formal Dismantling Racism process entail?

The Environmental Support Center contracted with drWorks (formerly ChangeWork) to provide the intensive training and facilitation needed over a two-year period. They began with an internal assessment, based on interviews with each member of the board and staff, to develop an understanding of the attitudes and feelings about racism in the organization. The assessment was followed by a workshop focused on developing an analysis of racism and adopting a common understanding of the problem. A second workshop, conducted several months after the

first, focused on understanding and assessing anti-racist organizational development. Concurrently, a people of color caucus and a white caucus were formed to allow for in-depth exploration of the individual and institutional impacts of racism and white privilege on the organization. Because they were on-going groups, the caucuses were also used to review proposals and provide feedback on organizational policies and decisions.

A racially balanced Change Team of board and staff was also created to vet feedback and topics from the caucuses before they went onto the board's executive committee. The caucuses and the Change Team received coaching from the trainers, who also checked in periodically with ESC. The trainers concluded their work with ESC by conducting an evaluation of the overall process.

How did the work unfold?

Perceptions about the new internal groups, particularly the caucuses, varied. Some organizational members experienced the caucus as a place to “let your hair down, and to feel free to take off the mask and be who you are.” Others, at least initially, found less comfort in the caucus idea: “The white and people of color caucuses seemed divisive in a way.” Concerns dissipated as all parties began to understand the caucuses as spaces to deeply explore their own personal and collective experiences of race. For some, particularly in the white caucus, this exploration was much more successful when the trainers provided active facilitation and guidance.

One of the most poignant moments came during a “fishbowl” exercise, as people sat in a circle to listen to a small group debrief an incident involving the caucuses and the Change Team. An agreement had been made to discuss the agenda for an upcoming board meeting in the caucuses and, according to one board member, “while the people of color caucus followed the protocol we had established to vet things first through the Change Team, the white caucus took their decision straight to the executive committee. I was on both the people of color caucus and the executive committee and said, ‘Wasn’t this supposed to go through the Change Team?’ [It was a] big ah-ha, at least for the white folks. For people of color, it was like, ‘Yeah, this is what we mean, this is what we’re talking about.’” Another board member added, “We kind of shoved ours [the draft agenda] through the white caucus and didn’t allow adequate time for the people of color caucus to really dig in. We basically rolled out an agenda without their input ... I really owned that as an example of the white privilege I walk around with.”

This experience, referred to as “the Fishbowl” because of the intentionally transparent way in which the incident was presented and discussed, highlighted the often unintended ways in which white privilege plays out to perpetuate structural racism. “Unconscious behavior is always hard. When everyone is striving to be their best selves you can stay on top of it, but when you’re tired and just trying to get the work done, that’s where it’s hard. You fall back on certain behaviors.” The Fishbowl drove home why it was so important to focus on race and racism. “Everyone in the room began to see that we weren’t doing the process because there’s racism out in the world, but because it’s here in our organization.” For many, the Fishbowl was the moment when ESC’s staff and board took ownership of their anti-racist work.

What happened after the formal process ended?

The conclusion of the formal relationship with drWorks marked the end of the beginning of ESC’s DR process, which is ongoing. Included in the ongoing process is a full recognition that while ESC is not a perfectly “anti-racist” or “racially just” organization, this need not hinder it from working towards its goals, taking action, and sharing its experiences about the journey. To help clarify its direction, ESC has developed a public dismantling racism statement and a set of goals that help to frame the organization’s day-to-day work through a constant lens of anti-racism.

In addition to its statement and goals, ESC undertook a strategic planning process, also with an anti-racism lens, to articulate a theory of change, strategic direction, and program goals. Going about the work of implementing the plan has moved being an anti-racist and racially just organization from the conceptual to the concrete. ESC staff and board are finding that the commitment to racial justice influences everything from interactions with constituents to recruitment of staff to internal communication to contracting with vendors. According to one staff person, “It’s guiding choices we make, the way we implement our programs, and the way we orient towards the future.”

Internally, a focus on anti-racism has heightened ESC board and staff’s ability to communicate about tough issues with a shared vocabulary. “There’s a real intentional commitment and lack of fear to talk about race, racism, classism, and recognizing that it happens in our society and our organizations, and we have to be more attuned and attentive.” Most significantly, this focus has generated a greater level of participation in ESC’s work. One board member noted that, “Even in moments of high stress, ESC has done a good job of not reverting to an orientation of ‘We don’t have time for this.’” This being time to ensure all voices are heard on critical topics, to consider alternative approaches

and perspectives, or to move away from an issue if that is what is needed. This, staff and board are finding, is a significant part of the work.

The future

When ESC is fully a racial justice organization, it won't be something that's constantly identified, but rather something the organization simply does. As one staff member put it, "We will be there when we get to that Zen quality and can just be it without having to keep naming it."

But keeping the anti-racism conversation front and center is a challenge for an organization that has been transitioning from a founding director, managing the precarious economic climate, and juggling all the other challenges and opportunities of running a nonprofit. "We're still coasting on the good will and vocabulary that was developed, but I'm conscious of that disappearing."

Ensuring that racial justice finds its proper place in all organizational discussions and practices is largely dependent on adequately orienting and training the organization's leadership. This requires that members who have been with the organization for longer periods take responsibility for bringing those newly arrived into the conversation by transmitting the history and vigilantly maintaining an open and accessible organizational culture. ESC will also need to determine if and when significant resources of time and money should be used to engage in another round of assessment, training and facilitation.

ESC's dismantling racism statement, goals, and on-the-ground work has stimulated dialogues with constituents, peers, and funders. "People consistently want to know, 'What does it mean, how does it feel, who did you work with?'" This curiosity is a critical opening onto a broader and more complex conversation about what the environmental movement is and what it can be. ■

For more information about the Environmental Support Center: www.envsc.org

For more information about drWorks: www.dismantlingracism.org