

# Building Community by Reimagining New Possibilities

# 2

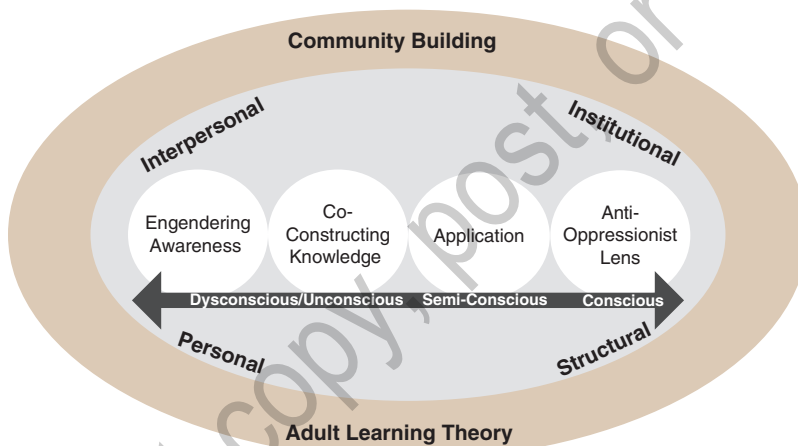
*Jessica was a recent graduate of Howard University School of Journalism. She longed for the opportunity to work for an organization that specialized in highlighting issues about race and gender inequality. So, it was safe to say she was beyond elated when she was offered an entry-level position as a junior reporter for an urban publication that sought to share empowering stories of women from all different walks of life. It only took a few weeks of field training and staff meetings for Jessica to notice an observable pattern about the narratives that were told about women of color versus those who were White. As she built relationships with various colleagues, the watercooler talk verified that she wasn't alone in her observations, but no one ever shared their feelings during the weekly staff meetings, which were led by the all-White executive leadership team. These meetings began to feel suffocating to Jessica because she felt like her heart's desire and lived experience as a Black woman was being ignored and erased by the organization's historical storytelling practices, which were steeped in uplifting stereotypical stories about Black women, with no investment in engaging in authentic multiple perspectives. During one staff meeting Jessica conjured up the courage to ask the question, "Why are we always telling the same stories about the same type of women?" Margie, the lead executive team member, quickly responded by saying, "Jess, we tell the stories we know the people know and expect to hear." Two weeks later Jessica handed in her letter of resignation.*

Jessica's story is not an anomaly, and often organizations that were created with the best of intentions hardly ever engage in practices that would eliminate systems that silence the voices of those within its community. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (1966) stated, "Our goal is to create a beloved community that will require a qualitative change in our souls as well as a quantitative change in our lives." Creating the "beloved community" is essential work when striving to eradicate systematic racism. Racism will never be interrupted as long as our organizations cling to systems and structures that were designed to serve the dominant culture. Traditional models of leadership often call upon us to invest an inordinate amount of time developing and implementing strategic plans. There are different names for these documents; for example, in the field of education we would refer to the School Improvement Plans, or in the not- or for-profit world it would be the Organizational Effectiveness Plan. Irrespective of what they are called, the sole purpose of these documents is to move the work of the organization based on its vision, desired data metrics, and anticipated outcomes. Often the vision of the organization (as outlined in these plans) is conceived in a vacuum by those who are a part of the dominant culture and have positional power. Further, the data metrics are often narrow in focus and based on isolated data points such as standardized scores rather than the rich, descriptive data that can be collected through qualitative methods. Plans organized in this way are problematic and highly positioned to replicate White supremacy culture. Imagine a car manufacturer creating the same car year after year with the same manufacturing defect and wondering why customer loyalty is tanking. Planning and organizing in absence of examination is bound to produce the same outcomes and issues that will cost deeply over time. Moreover, when the planners are limited to those with positional power (usually those in the dominant majority), the process typically suffers from an emphasis on a sense of urgency and quantity over quality. In addition to urgency and quantity over quality, White supremacist thinking normalizes specific ways of making meaning of our world, including the following:

1. Valuing product over process ("The ends justify the means.")
2. Overemphasis on perfectionism ("There is no room for errors." "There is only one right way.")
3. Binary (either/or) thinking ("It's either black or white." "You're either with us or against us.")

Since the Eurocentric cultural lens leaves little room for the nuance or the complexities of race, we want to propose a counternarrative. Let us reimagine an organization seeking to develop and implement a strategic plan that is entrenched in anti-racist practices. What might that look like? What type of practices would be important to observe? Consider Jessica's experience. What might an anti-racist organization's response to her wonders sound like? What type of practices would have been put in place prior to her arrival that would be easy to observe? This chapter will describe the *conscious anti-racist engendering (CARE) framework* as a tool for engaging planning for anti-racist operations, specifically highlighting the first steps of the model, community building and normalizing adult learning.

**Figure 2.1** Conscious Anti-Racist Engendering (CARE) Framework



Dismantling oppressive organizational practices requires both skillful change management and focused capacity building. Further, these efforts, organizational transformation, and capacity building should have a framework of accountability. The CARE framework provides a way to consider these goals as it undertakes the work of intersectional anti-racism. This will require the organization to not just consider race but also how it intersects with other facets of a person's identity such as gender, class, or native language. Identifying this as intersection does two things: First, it names what is real and obvious for the sake of discussion and not persecution, and second, it gives credence to the biases and stereotypes so that a true disruption of racial practices can be examined. The framework is designed

to constellate around two essential questions: (1) How do we build community? (2) How do we normalize adult learning as a mode of operations in the organization? Consider these two questions in the context of traditional strategic planning exercises and how the CARE framework makes the process different than traditional approaches.

First, in traditional models, the community members with the most influence are usually those with power and authority. This power can be derived by position and/or connections with organizational capital. All voices are not treated equally, and all perspectives are not valued. Typically, the equation skews toward those with power having the most influence during the planning processes. In contrast, leaders who apply the CARE framework purposefully center and grant authority to those who are marginalized, those whom the organization is there to serve, those whose experiences are often excluded. The positional power of the leader is deployed in service of creating conditions that disrupt hierarchies that perpetuate structural forms of oppression. While we underscore the role of the leader with positional power, we want to emphasize that all members of the community must examine the concept of democratizing power across the community. The vision of community undergirded by the CARE framework might best be described as a beloved community. The community model employed by CARE framework centers justice-based interpersonal and community-based relationships. In the context of CARE framework, qualitative encompasses a way of being that invites a full range of expression, acceptance, and value of all identities. Quantitative refers to divesting our oppressive practices and holding ourselves accountable for making repairs and reparations when needed.

An anti-racist organization must be willing to commit to creating transparent and recursive protocols that advance anti-racist practices. Before this can happen, we must acknowledge that the beliefs, traditions, and actions that form our status quo are steeped in racist practices; rather than applying the technical fixes or workarounds discussed in the prior chapter, we must *reimagine* our organization. For example, the organization's vision must explicitly state a true commitment to pursuing anti-racism. Its stakeholders must represent a range of racial groups that are directly impacted by the work of the organization both internally and externally. The data metrics should be equally if not be more geared toward placing an emphasis

on qualitative data collection over quantitative data collection. Community building can greatly benefit our efforts to create anti-racist leadership and organizations.

### **Normalizing Adult Learning as a Means of Achieving Anti-Racist Functioning**

Dismantling institutional racism necessitates sustained professional learning. Leaders and teams must commit to interrogating the manner in which they internalize oppressive ways of being and knowing. Such deep-seated change will not be leveraged with “spray and pray” workshops. It can take several years of concerted effort on the part of all members of the community to chip away at White supremacist beliefs and paradigms. Adults with advanced degrees, decades of experience, and stellar reputations in the field must be as willing to be a part of this process as well as fledgling professionals. This is what the outer concentric circle of the CARE framework is meant to depict.

#### **Pause and Reflect**

Consider the organization you work for, and now reimagine it using an anti-racist lens. Reflect on what organizational practices will need to be disrupted immediately. What role can you play in this disruption?

### **Building Community by Examining Our Individual Racial Identities**

The term *community* speaks to a collection of people joined together by some common interest. In the words of Dr. King, beloved communities are intentional about creating conditions in which multiple perspectives are honored and in which practices that are steeped in White supremacy culture may be challenged (Gray, 2019). Leaders must sit with how they perceive, engage with, define, and understand their racial identities. Ultimately, they must be able to discover and accept how their lived racialized experiences have shaped both their self-perceptions and their perceptions of others in their personal

and professional lives. White people as well as people of color are expected to engage in this type of racial identity work. Dr. Beverly Tatum wrote, racism is “a system of advantage based on race, where White people are advantaged, and people of color are disadvantaged.” Because racism is embedded within four interlocking forms of oppression—internal, interpersonal, institutional, ideological—White people must unlearn the belief that White supremacy exists only in interpersonal, explicit action (Greenia, 2018). For example, White people cannot selectively choose to not benefit from direct and indirect privileges they receive due to their race. Racism is complex, layered, and engrained in every aspect of the human existence.

Racial identity work should not be done in isolation but rather in communion with the participants within the organization. It requires more than self-reflection in a silo, or random self-examination activities devoid of opportunities to gain multiple perspectives. Individuals must take an active role in examining their own cultures and the influence of those cultures on the construction of their racial identities. At the same time, we must strive to gain perspectives from others’ lived experiences. Without this intentional self-examination, we will continue to be entrapped in thoughts, ideas, structures, and plans that reinforce the status quo and are harmful to the overall organization and its stakeholders. Reflecting on Jessica’s experience, the lack of individual and collective examination yielded an experience that caused her to resign rather than stay and flourish. Lack of examination will continue to reproduce increased marginalization among those who sit in power versus those who labor.

The innovative nature of the CARE framework is the manner in which it depicts how community building creates space for all members of the community to examine trust and vulnerability, broker accountability for everyone’s personal work, and understand the intended goal and outcomes of an anti-racist organization. There is a direct relationship between trust and vulnerability that, on its surface, can make any leader feel like they are entering a firing squad without a safety net or escape plan. At the same time, the rewards of this type of emancipation are invaluable. Dr. Brené Brown (2012) wrote, “Vulnerability is not weakness; it’s our greatest measure of courage” and “trust is a product of vulnerability that grows over time and requires work, attention, and full engagement” (p. 53). This type of bold declaration starts with examining our individual responsibility, but it ultimately becomes the key to taking collective responsibility.

## Mobilizing the Significance of Collective Responsibility

An anti-racist organization requires a commitment to transparency about our racial identities, willingness to be vulnerable with other members of the community, and trust in partners to work collaboratively to disrupt the workings of power and privilege. Collective work engenders brilliance and power. Every person enters the community with unique assets and interpersonal skills that help us communicate clearly and competently with others. We draw upon these personal and interpersonal skills to articulate our lived experience, particularly our understanding of how power and privilege impact our organizations. In such brave spaces, we can imagine and act upon ideas that disrupt and dismantle racist practices. Creating space for a meaningful dialogue is the gateway to liberating our organizations. It makes the difference between an organization that only makes statements about impending change and one that is committed to radical transformation. Organizational transformation will require revolutionary changes to policies and practices that were mostly beneficial to dominant culture. This cannot be done overnight nor without its members having the courage to identify their lack of understanding and awareness of how such policies and practices are racist.

Built on a foundation of adult learning research and theory, the CARE framework embodies a continuum of awareness and learning beginning with engendering awareness (dysconscious/unconscious – I don't know but I think I do, uncritical racialized knowing), to co-constructing knowledge, to application (semi-conscious – I know I don't know racially, and I am questioning), and ultimately developing an anti-oppressionist lens (consciousness – I know that I know racially). Note that the arrows in Figure 2.1 are bi-directional, suggesting that progress does not always occur in a one-way trajectory. An understanding of this growth process provides us with a common vocabulary to define and communicate how and what we are experiencing. We also rely on conversation protocols that allow for truth, transparency, and permission to create shared accountability.

Whether we enter the organization as the founder or a hired employee, we commit to engage in this work to promote anti-racism. While we may be inclined toward diplomacy and building a “culture of nice,” we must recognize that such uninterrupted cultures are grounded in the many racist beliefs that hurt all people, especially those of color.

In fact, they rob White people of the opportunity to examine a false sense of privilege that has been bestowed upon them—a legacy of caste that began with the slave trade and institutionalized an unjust definition of property and power, and a well-entrenched false doctrine that was used to resist change. All of us have been impacted in some way by racism across generations. We have to interrupt it! Interruption starts within the community and, with diligent persistence, will change the institutional and structural systems that ultimately harm us all.

### What Nobody Talks About

Anti-racism requires courage, perseverance, tenacity, and sacrifice. As you embark on the journey to be anti-racist, having a safe group of people who are outside of the organization will help serve as thought-partners who can aid in creating space to struggle, reflect, and grow.

### Your Lived Experience

Your lived experiences shape who you are as a person and ultimately how you view and behave within your leadership role.

- Based on your title and those you influence, what commitment will you make to creating space for marginalized members of your organization's community to share their lived experiences?

### Chapter Reflection

- What data metrics are your organization currently using to measure its effectiveness?
  - Are more quantitative metrics used versus qualitative metrics?
  - What is the racial makeup of the organization's community?



- How has your personal racial journey shaped how you engage within your organization?
  - Are you afforded space to share your racial identity journey and its implications on your role within the organization?
  - What marginalized groups sit within or are served by your organization?
    - How are they positioned within the organization?
    - Who are they? What type of voice do they have? How are data collected?
- Is there evidence of a change within the organization that shows transition to anti-racist practices?

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