

UCLA

Other Recent Work

Title

Toward a Restorative Culture-Building Praxis: Nurturing Belonging and Inclusive Excellence

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7k11d1mn>

Author

White, Ariane, EdD

Publication Date

2024-08-09

**Toward a Restorative Culture-Building Praxis: Nurturing Belonging and Inclusive
Excellence**

Ariane White, EdD

UCLA Library, University of California, Los Angeles

Abstract

Amid targeted attacks on the field of diversity, equity, and inclusion, especially in institutions of higher education, it is essential to uplift and demystify key elements of work that can catalyze structural shifts to foster a sense of belonging among all constituents. It is particularly necessary to foreground the work individual people are empowered to undertake through rigorous self-reflection and in dialogue with proximate people who can shift institutional dynamics and lead to broad-reaching systemic change. Small groups of people have invariably found ways to overcome narratives of powerlessness to build coalitions and effect change by strengthening relationships with each other. By cultivating shared practices that ensure people's needs are met, including and especially people whose minoritized identities have historically prevented them from experiencing a deep sense of belonging, such groups have generated sufficient momentum to enact structural changes. This article aims to highlight potential elements that can support such transformation and to foreground the synergies that become possible when individuals practice a restorative version of accountability and embody a commitment to inclusion and equity.

NURTURING BELONGING AND INCLUSIVE EXCELLENCE

Justice, which entails acknowledgment, recognition, and loving attention, is not a state that can be achieved once and for all. There are no solutions; there is only the ongoing practice of being open and alive to each meeting, each intra-action, so that we might use only our ability to respond, our responsibility, to help awaken, to breathe life into ever new possibilities for living justly. The world and its possibilities for becoming are remade in each meeting. How then shall we understand our role in helping constitute who and what come to matter?

—Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*

Introduction

The organizational practice of considering working people to be interchangeable and expendable cogs in the machine with a singular focus on maximizing productivity—a legacy of the Industrial Revolution in Europe and North America—has proven to be as unsustainable as it is inhumane. Yet, most organizations still fail to acknowledge individuals' needs in ways that result in a more positive work environment. Even when not intending to replicate such dehumanizing conditions, organizations, guided by a specific mission or purpose, often default to a task-focused orientation with an emphasis on products or outcomes that relate directly to their primary reason for existing (Okun, 2021; Vong, 2022).

That said, organizations are comprised of human beings who are responsible for the effective execution of the organization's functioning—and humans, as social beings, experience a need for connection or belonging (Hemphill, 2024; Meenadchi, 2021; Wiltse, 2021). These fundamental human needs, although they might seem to function on purely individual and interpersonal levels, can have a tremendous impact on structures and systems (National Equity

NURTURING BELONGING AND INCLUSIVE EXCELLENCE

Project, n.d.). In striving for inclusive excellence, it is essential to foster human-level connections that can interrupt and transform systems of oppression and structural barriers (Christopher, 2022). Otherwise, these barriers continue to perpetuate inequities and imperil the development of a genuine sense of belonging, especially among those who have been minoritized or historically excluded (Kezar et al., 2021).

What follows is an explanation of recommended areas for ongoing learning and practice that support the cultivation of inclusive excellence in an organization. Inclusive excellence can be defined as follows: “address[ing] diversity, equity, and inclusion as critical to the well-being of democratic culture” (McNair et al., 2020, p. 6). This overview is informed by several key frameworks: (a) the University of California Los Angeles Center X Leadership and Coaching framework; (b) the shared equity leadership framework (Kezar et al., 2021); (c) the four levels framework (Batts, 2017); (d) the truth, racial healing, and transformation framework (W.K. Kellogg Foundation, n.d.); and (e) the traditions of restorative justice and restorative practices (Wachtel, 2013; Zehr, 2015). The following examples, organized by each of the four levels articulated in Batts’s (2017) framework—intrapersonal, interpersonal, institutional, and cultural (or ideological)—illuminate some possible interventions, and additional tools and practices can be added ad infinitum.

Community Building

Organizations function more effectively and humanely when the people working within them feel supported and connected (Wiltse, 2023). The latest insights in the field of neuroscience have underscored the power of positive relationships and how neurobiology is impacted by individual’s connections with other people (Siegel, 1999). Investing time and attention toward cultivating positive relationships may seem to some like it takes away from the myriad tasks at

hand; however, the result of these efforts is people feel better about the work they are doing, and the workflow becomes more efficient and effective because of these improvements.

Nervous System Discernment

Developing positive relationships with others begins with looking inward to detect evidence of one's own internal state and the feelings that arise when interacting with others. In Batts's (2017) four levels framework, this inward look constitutes work at the intrapersonal level. One set of practices individuals and groups can undertake is to cultivate awareness of nervous system activation, also known as nervous system discernment. Once this awareness has been cultivated, it becomes possible to practice quick and simple interventions to re-regulate nervous systems when activated (Ndefo, n.d.). These interventions include strategies that take no more than 30 seconds to use, such as deliberately deepening breaths or crossing arms to tap or rub on the opposing limb. The efficacy of these practices can be understood through research on polyvagal theory, which has explored the significance of the vagus nerve and its role in sending information throughout the body, based on cues of danger and safety, that prepare an individual to act in the face of potential threats (Dana, 2021). By developing skills to promote neuroception in community, such as in the tradition of generative somatics, people can deepen their capacity to support each other in coregulating nervous systems and communicating effectively through stressful situations, potentially catalyzing broader systemic transformation (Hemphill, 2024).

Psychological Safety and Trust

Understanding how the nervous system works reveals the importance of undertaking deliberate efforts to cultivate psychological safety and trust as a foundation for effective working relationships. Individuals who feel a sense of psychological safety can give and receive feedback, ask and reflect openly on questions asked by others, and take responsibility for their

emotions and the impact of their actions on others (Hemphill, 2024; Zimmerman et al., 2019).

Developing these skills and capacities at the interpersonal level enhances communication and collaboration, helping to create conditions in which people feel respected and valued, which ultimately results in improved outcomes and climate.

Identity Development

Engaging in ongoing self-reflection to understand the significance of the myriad aspects of identity that shape individual perspectives and worldviews is an essential element of working toward inclusive excellence in organizations (Batts, 2017). Each person must undergo a personal journey to consciousness through which they develop fluency in naming experiences of inclusion and exclusion at the level of social identities and learn how to leverage privileges while recognizing the gifts gleaned even through challenging experiences endured (Kezar et al., 2021). Although aspects of this work must be undertaken individually, affinity groups can form around shared identities where people who share that identity can grapple together with the patterns of their shared experiences even as some of the elements of their personal journeys diverge. The work of race-based affinity groups can be powerful for people who identify as Black, indigenous, people of color, as well as those who identify as white (JustLead Washington, 2019). In organizations, it is most effective when everyone has access to an affinity space where they can explore the significance of shared identities together, in service of the shared goal of inclusive excellence (Johnson, 2023; White et al., 2023).

Community-Building Circles

One proactive way of building community and cultivating these positive relationships is through circle practices from the tradition of restorative practices. These circles use a gentle structure and process to make space for people to share with each other on a range of topics in a

NURTURING BELONGING AND INCLUSIVE EXCELLENCE

self-reflective way that shifts the tone in a direction that makes it possible for people to listen to each other more deeply (White, 2019). There are many different types and styles of circles, each with lineages that draw upon the wisdom of traditional and indigenous cultures where belonging and interconnection are woven more intrinsically into how human groups function (Zehr, 2015). Circles like these serve a humanizing purpose in that they allow colleagues to connect beyond their roles or shared tasks and to witness each other's full humanity.

Skill Building

Cultivating inclusive excellence in organizations requires a commitment to continually develop, refresh, and practice skills that undergird interpersonal interactions. This foundation ultimately makes it possible for coalitions to form and advocate effectively for necessary institutional and structural changes. Dedicated skill-building sessions serve a dual purpose in that they support the development of key skills while also providing opportunities for additional community building and connection (White et al., 2024). These sessions also provide venues for the development and practice of shared language and tools, which promote effective collaboration.

Developing Shared Language and Tools

Shared language, tools, and frameworks provide a shared lexicon among members of an organization and are essential foundational elements that support skill building to foster inclusive excellence. The establishment, for instance, of a shared set of communication guidelines is a crucial tool in promoting equitable exchanges among colleagues. Typically, in groups where there are no preset communication norms that everyone practices together, the norms of the dominant culture will be replicated through interpersonal interactions (Vigorous Interventions in Ongoing Natural Settings [VISIONS], Inc., n.d.). Such a dynamic often manifests results such as

NURTURING BELONGING AND INCLUSIVE EXCELLENCE

who feels entitled or empowered to speak often and for a long time and who tends to sit quietly and defer to others. With an established set of guidelines, such as the “Guidelines for Effective Cross-Cultural Dialogue” recommended by VISIONS, Inc. (n.d.), individuals and groups can support each other in working toward equitable exchanges with each other, mindful of social identities as well as power and positionality in the organization.

Additional tools such as the framework used in nonviolent communication that underscore the relationship between feelings and needs can anchor a range of skill-building activities that simultaneously support people in developing communication skills and building deeper connections with each other. Additional practices that draw upon this framework, such as paraphrasing and I-Messages, help deepen individual and collective capacity for direct and assertive communication and support people in cultivating the ability to give and receive feedback productively. Such practices, when regularly engaged, support the further deepening of psychological safety and trust, catalyzing a virtuous cycle of growth and connection (Zimmerman et al., 2019). The practices also help to interrupt and transform norms from the dominant culture (e.g., conflict avoidance) that might otherwise go unexamined (Okun, 2021).

Restorative Culture Building

Efforts at individual and interpersonal levels can catalyze changes at institutional, structural, or cultural levels. Committing to interoception, increasing self-knowledge, cultivating understanding, and improving communication all enable effective coalition building toward enacting broader structural or cultural changes (Christopher, 2022; Hemphill, 2024). The full spectrum of this human side of the work is encapsulated by the restorative practices continuum, which highlights the need for proactive, ongoing development of trusting relationships, shared language, and skills so that when conflict or harm happens, there is a foundation from which

NURTURING BELONGING AND INCLUSIVE EXCELLENCE

such issues can be addressed (Wachtel, 2013; White et al., 2024). Inherent in this identity-conscious approach to deepening skills and awareness is a commitment to cultural humility, through which individuals embody a deep understanding of how perspectives are formed through lived experiences (Abe, 2019). A practice of cultural humility enables bridging—engaging directly with others across lines of difference in ways that make possible new understandings and creative solutions to previously intractable challenges or conflicts (powell, 2022). This work on the interpersonal level then empowers coalitions that are prepared to move collectively to shift institutional policies and broader societal norms. Out of these efforts, a deep sense of belonging, dignity, and collective agency among constituents can emerge—a clear indicator of successful work toward inclusive excellence (Christopher, 2022; Hemphill, 2024; Moyer, 2001).

Conflict Engagement

Cultivating a restorative culture entails ensuring everyone has access to support when they are dealing with conflict and that there is a shared commitment to nondisposability. In other words, it is imperative that personnel in organizations strive to cocreate cultures that are more open, curious, and resilient than the prevailing trends of cancel culture and notions of ideological purity that have divided groups into ever-tightening circles of self-righteousness; often, these trends have come at the expense of being able to build broad coalitions to enact necessary changes in everyone's interest (Giridharadas, 2022; Manji, 2019; Ripley, 2021). In seeking to address conflict, all the skills developed at individual and interpersonal levels are put into practice, including the ability to name, analyze, and account for power dynamics and to create the conditions where dialogue across power differentials becomes possible (powell, 2022).

Addressing conflict skillfully also requires analyzing the role of conflict entrepreneurs or those

who benefit from the escalation of conflict in ways that obscure potential solutions most ordinary people would be happy to accept (Ripley, 2021).

Furthermore, addressing conflict in a restorative manner often requires building capacity and creating more informal channels for addressing conflict that are outside of the official, more legalistic measures employed to punish those who are accused of wrongdoing (White et al., 2024). If institutions are serious about creating noncarceral and nonpunitive pathways toward accountability, considerable investment is needed to develop and sustain the informal infrastructure needed to provide such support. This includes supporting people in cultivating the internal awareness and interpersonal skills needed to establish and sustain noncarceral practices, given how deeply most people in U.S. society have been socialized to believe in the efficacy of only punitive forms of accountability (White, 2019). These consciousness-raising efforts must exist alongside the development of infrastructure and corresponding communication and educational strategies needed to ensure people can secure the support that is needed in heightened moments. Such work is especially challenging in most existing institutions, given that such approaches run counter to the prevailing attachment to carceral approaches to addressing harm (White, 2019). Culture change work is deep work that must be sustained over time with ongoing support and care.

Creative Problem Solving

Once a critical mass of people cultivates their skills and awareness to the point that organizational culture begins to shift, a whole new era of possibilities emerges through which the generative potential of conflict is unlocked. Challenges can be addressed directly, productively, and creatively by harnessing the wisdom of the multiplicity of perspectives and strengths present among the people involved. Decision making becomes much more transparent, and levels of

NURTURING BELONGING AND INCLUSIVE EXCELLENCE

trust increase accordingly, spurring a virtuous cycle of engagement of all people and commitment to the mission of the organization (Wiltse, 2023). Processes such as convergent facilitation can be used to maximize input on decision making while making excellent use of everyone's time and expertise (Kashtan, 2021). In short, organizational life can operate according to truly democratic principles, which can have ripple effects in other areas of people's lives and, more broadly can deepen their sense of agency in addressing crucial issues in the public sphere (Moyer, 2001).

Conclusion

There are no shortcuts to nurturing a deep sense of belonging and a corresponding praxis of inclusive excellence in organizations, and there is no single intervention at any of the four levels that will bring about all the changes for which people desire. Rather, it is essential a concerted effort be sustained over time to develop consciousness as individuals and to establish shared norms and practices for how to engage with each other interpersonally, mindful of power dynamics and larger structural forces that can create needless rifts and divides between groups. It is through the strength of relationships that individuals will develop the momentum needed to change policies and practices that impede equity and inclusivity. This transformative work will happen in synergistic and often nonlinear ways at all four of the levels and requires a sustained commitment undertaken with a shared vision and purpose.

References

- Abe, J. (2019). Beyond cultural competence, toward social transformation: Liberation psychologies and the practice of cultural humility. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 56(4), 696–707. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2019.1661911>
- Batts, V. (2017, November 22). *Is reconciliation possible?: Lessons from combatting ‘modern racism’ in the US and South Africa*. VISIONS, Inc. <https://www.visions-inc.org/this-is-a-first-post>
- Christopher, G. C. (2022). *Rx racial healing: A guide to embracing our humanity*. American Association of Colleges & Universities.
- Dana, D. (2021). *Anchored: How to befriend your nervous system using polyvagal theory*. Sounds True.
- Giridharadas, A. (2022). *The persuaders: At the frontlines of the fight for hearts, minds, and democracy*. Alfred A. Knopf.
- Hemphill, P. (2024). *What it takes to heal: How transforming ourselves can change the world*. Random House.
- Johnson, M. C. (2023). *A space for us: A guide to leading Black, indigenous, and people of color affinity groups*. Beacon Press.
- JustLead Washington. (2019). *Caucuses as a racial justice strategy: What we have learned*. <https://justleadwa.org/learn/rejitookit/>
- Kashtan, M. (2021). *Highest common denominator: Using convergent facilitation to reach breakthrough collaborative decisions*. BookBaby.
- Kezar, A., Holcombe, E., Vigil, D., & Dizon, J. P. M. (2021). *Shared equity leadership: Making equity everyone’s work*. American Council on Education; University of Southern

- California, Pullias Center for Higher Education. <https://pullias.usc.edu/download/shared-equity-leadership-making-equity-everyones-work/>
- Manji, I. (2019). *Don't label me: An incredible conversation for divided times*. St. Martin's Press.
- McNair, T. B., Bensimon, E. M., & Malcom-Piqueux, L. E. (2020). *From equity talk to equity walk: Expanding practitioner knowledge for racial justice in higher education*. Jossey-Bass.
- Meenadchi. (2021). *Decolonizing nonviolent communication*. Co-Conspirator Press.
- Moyer, B. (2001). *Doing democracy: The MAP model for organizing social movements*. New Society Publishers.
- National Equity Project. (n.d.). *Lens of systemic oppression*.
<https://www.nationalequityproject.org>
- Ndefo, N. (n.d.). *The resilience toolkit*. <https://theresiliencetoolkit.co/about/>
- Okun, T. (2021). *White supremacy culture: Still here*. <https://www.whitesupremacyculture.info>
- powell, j. a. (2022). Overcoming toxic polarization: Lessons in effective bridging. *Law & Inequity*, 40(2), 247–280. <https://doi.org/10.24926/25730037.645>
- Ripley, A. (2021). *High conflict: Why we get trapped and how we get out*. Simon & Schuster.
- Siegel, D. (1999). *The developing mind: How relationships and the brain interact to shape who we are*. Guilford Press.
- Vigorous Interventions in Ongoing Natural Settings, Inc. (n.d.). *Guidelines for effective cross-cultural dialogue*. VISIONS, Inc. <https://visions-inc.org/guidelines-workshop/>

- Vong, S. (2022). More critical, less managerial: Addressing the managerialist ideology in academic libraries. *Partnership: The Provincial and Territorial Library Associations of Canada*, 16(2), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.21083/partnership.v16i2.6354>
- Wachtel, T. (2013). *Defining restorative*. <https://www.iirp.edu/pdf/Defining-Restorative.pdf>
- White, A. (2019). *Transformative school-community-based restorative justice: An inquiry into practitioners' experiences* [Doctoral dissertation, Loyola Marymount University]. Digital Commons @ Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. <https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/etd/806>
- White, A., Nygaard, S., & Puza, F. (2023). White people working to end White supremacy: The purpose and practice of a White anti-racist affinity group. In V. Steel (Ed.), *Toward abolishing White supremacy on campus* (pp. 427–441). Peter Lang.
- White, A., Wade, J., & Alexander, G. (2024). Co-creating a restorative campus culture: The evolution of Loyola Marymount University's TRHT alliance—Loyola Marymount University. In T. McNair (Ed.), *Strengthening campus communities through the truth, racial healing, and transformation framework* (pp. 175–182). American Association of Colleges and Universities.
- Wiltse, E. (2023). *Lead with ease: A field guide for high-trust leadership*. Sentendre. www.futureproofskills.lab.com
- W. K. Kellogg Foundation. (n.d.). *Truth, racial healing & transformation framework*. <https://www.healourcommunities.org>
- Zehr, H. (2015). *The little book of restorative justice, revised and updated: A best-selling book by one of the founders of the movement*. Skyhorse Publishing.

Zimmerman, D. P., Roussin, J., & Garmston, R. J. (2019). *Transforming teamwork: Cultivating collaborative cultures*. SAGE Publications.