# Transforming Culture — An Examination of Workplace Values Through the Frame of White Dominant Culture

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**culture** noun cul·ture \ ˈkəl-chər \
b **:** the set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes an institution or organization[2]

Every organization has its own culture. It is "the way we do things around here." Some of it is written down and some of it is not. As legal aid organizations consider issues of diversity, race equity and inclusion, we have begun to examine the culture of our organizations.

At Columbia Legal Services (CLS), we started looking at our culture in depth after we conducted a 2012 diversity survey.[3] That survey found that over three in four employees witnessed inattention to diversity issues that created negative consequences for staff morale and staff retention. This finding was in spite of an active Inclusion, Diversity and Multi-culturalism committee (IDM). We were hiring diverse staff, but not retaining them. We had a statement on IDM issues and conducted regular trainings for staff, but significant issues remained. In the survey, the highest level of satisfaction at our organization was among staff who identified themselves as white, male, heterosexuals. Other groups reported consistently lower satisfaction rates. While satisfaction rates among these groups was discouraging, the level of engagement and attentive critique that staff provided in survey comments revealed a collective desire to grapple with the complex and difficult issue of diversity in the workplace.

As a result of the survey, we revamped our internal volunteer-staffed IDM committee and renamed it the Equity Committee, and formed several subcommittees

one of which was the Culture Committee. The Culture Committee discussed how to improve staff morale and change the culture at CLS. This committee really struggled to get to the root of the problem and how to address it. We discussed many ways to improve our culture and be more inclusionary — reading a book with a diversity or equity theme together, having more equity trainings, conducting another survey, including IDM issues at staff meetings, figuring out ways to learn more about each other and encouraging staff to exchange ideas and communicate about these issues. We undertook most of these activities. Staff enjoyed them and we learned more about each other and about IDM issues, but after more than two years of implementation we had not experienced a significant change in retention rates of diverse staff. There remained some morale issues as well. We had made forward progress in expanding our range as an organization on IDM issues but significant challenges remained.

In other words, we became aware of a problem and acted to fix it. This is exactly one of the problems with what are identified as white cultural norms — "we gave into the pattern of moving from awareness to action without taking the necessary steps that help us to be more effective and successful in reaching our vision and goals."[4] Looking back what we failed to do was to undertake an analysis of our organizational culture, norms, and power relations.[5] We did not take time out to reflect on our values as an organization — both explicit and implicit. While we were "good people" trying to make change for the better, we did not consider the dynamics of internal racism, power relations or the need for accountability to people and communities of color. We also did not examine how these issues played out in our advocacy. While we

celebrated having a diverse staff and board and had made progress on these issues, we had not yet specifically analyzed our organization through a race equity frame or as an institution working in a legal system that had regularly and systematically reinforced white supremacy.[6]

As we undertook this next analysis, we reviewed our office culture through the lens of "white culture."[7] (This analysis continues as this is not a static straightforward process.) Under this frame, the norms of an organization are examined by looking at dominant cultural norms to see how they play out at work. There are a series of questions that can be asked to help one pull out these underlying assumptions about what is "normal."[8] For example, we asked what do we consider the characteristics of a "good" employee? How are people informed about this standard? Are there unwritten rules about this? Is a good employee someone who works long hours or someone who sets good boundaries around work? Is a good employee someone who separates their personal and work life or someone who integrates their life as a whole? Is a good employee someone who does not work when they are sick or someone who tries to work from home or comes in even if ill? Is a good employee someone who comes to work on time or someone who works a flexible schedule? Or both or neither?[9]

Our organizations often have values about how people should work and how they should behave without considering how these values were developed. At our organization we continue to think about these questions so that we can be more conscious about what we value and why. This type of evaluation is imperative when trying to make our organizations inclusive because "listing characteristics of white supremacy culture is to point out how organizations which unconsciously use these characteristics as their norms and standards make it difficult, if not impossible, to open the door to other cultural norms and standards."[10] These characteristics are "interconnected and mutually reinforcing —perfectionism, a sense of urgency, defensiveness and/or denial, quantity over quality, worship of the written word, the belief in one right way, paternalism, either/or binary thinking, power hoarding, fear of open conflict, individualism, progress defined as more, the right to profit, objectivity, and the right to comfort."[11] These characteristics are particularly valued in the legal profession.[12] Below on page 43 is a chart about some of the values and behaviors of white culture at work. The chart does not cover all fifteen characteristics, but information about them all can be found in the resources in the end notes.

This summary chart is based on the Dismantling Racism 2016 Workbook, as well as the information and experiences I received at a recent training — Undoing Racism from People's Institute for Survival and Beyond, and mistakes I have made.[13]

Understanding this framework is essential: [O]rganizations which unconsciously use these characteristics as their norms and standards make it difficult, if not impossible, to open the door to other cultural norms and standards. As a result, many of our organizations, while saying we want to be multi-cultural, really only allow other people and cultures to come in if they adapt or conform to already existing cultural norms. Being able to identify and name the cultural norms and standards you want is a first step to making room for a truly multi-cultural organization.[14]

We started this process by creating caucus teams that included the Collective (made of persons of color in the organization) and a White Allies group. Participation in either team is voluntary. The Collective sent a letter to all staff pointing out the ongoing problematic issues in our organization and calling for us to become #OneCLS. This letter was painful for some white staff to read and process; others were excited that this conversation was happening and some attributed it to "whining."

Following this letter, the Collective developed a second letter containing suggested solutions. Management implemented the suggestions that it could right away and the rest were addressed through a two-month staff-wide process where management stepped aside except to provide support and information as needed. Staff formed teams to address each issue area and draft suggested policy or process changes. We held our first annual Equity Day in 2017 where the staff presented their proposals to everyone. Following this work, we set out to implement the policies.[15] Everyone in the organization had a chance to comment on them. Part of this work also included starting the process of adopting restorative justice values into the internal work of our organization. We also all worked together at our subsequent staff retreat to adapt values for how we interact with each other #OneCLS. These include:

1.  We choose to be conscious of our differences and the uniqueness of others
2.  We choose to be accountable for our impact
3.  We choose to listen with kindness and compassion
4.  We choose to communicate with respect

5.   We seek to understand before rushing to judgment

We try to see this process as an unfolding ongoing journey that we are taking together as an organization. We are moving toward becoming a transformative and anti-racist organization.[16] We are not there yet, but this is our vision:

> Based on an analysis of the history of racism and power in this country, this organization supports the development of anti-racist white allies and empowered people of color through the organization's culture, norms, policies and procedures.
>
> The Anti-Racist Organization integrates this commitment into the program, helping white people work together and challenge each other around issues of racism, share power with people of color, take leadership from and be accountable to people of color, feel comfortable with being uncomfortable while understanding that we are all learning all the time.
>
> The Anti-Racist Organization helps people of color become more empowered through taking leadership, sharing in the power, transforming the organizational norms and culture, challenging white allies and other people of color, sharing in decisions about how the organization's resources will be spent, what work gets done as well as how it gets done, the setting of priorities, and allowing people of color to make the same mistakes as white people. The organization does this by forming white and people of color caucuses, providing training and encouraging discussions about racism, white privilege, power, and accountability, setting clear standards for inclusion at all levels of the organization, reviewing the mission, vision, policies, procedures, board agreements, etc., to insure that the commitment to end racism is a consistent theme, helping people to understand the links between the oppressions, and devoting organizational time and resources to building relationships across race and other barriers.[17]

We are excited about this work going forward. Our internal transformation process will impact how we undertake advocacy and what we focus on. We hope to instill these principles in all of our work. This process has not been linear or comfortable. We have looked to other organizations who are leading in this area. We

in legal aid are in the process of changing our cultural values from those steeped in white law firm culture to ones rooted in transformation and anti-racist work. Ours is but one story among many other legal aid organizations taking on this work. We look forward to hearing your stories.

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2   Merriam-Webster, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/culture.

3   We had a response rate of over 90%.

4   Dismantling Racism 2016 Workbook, dR Works, p. 41. https://resourcegeneration.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/2016-dRworks-workbook.pdf

5   From White Racist to White Anti-Racist, Tema Okun, dR Works https://wwhatsup.files.wordpress.com/2014/10/wwhatsup-week3-readings1.pdf/

6   Dismantling Racism 2016 Workbook, p. 9-15; Race — The Power of an Illusion, Film Transcript for Episode 3 (sets out the ways policies and subsequent related court decisions advantaged certain groups over others) http://www.pbs.org/race/000_About/002_04-about-03-01.htm; History of Racism and Immigration Time Line, Racial Equity Tools (stops at 2005) http://www.racialequitytools.org/resourcefiles/racismimmigration-timeline.pdf; A History of Racial Injustice, Equal Justice Initiative (through 2010) https://racialinjustice.eji.org/timeline/2010s/; http://www.eraseracismny.org/structural-racism-timeline.

7   We also created an Race Equity Toolkit for advocacy, but that work is beyond the scope of this article. I am happy to share the toolkit.

8   http://www.racialequitytools.org/images/uploads/N._White_Culture_Handout.pdf.

9   *Id.*

10   Dismantling Racism 2016 Workbook, p. 28; Tena Okun, From White Racist to White Anti-Racist — The Lifelong Journey, p. 19. https://wwhatsup.files.wordpress.com/2014/10/wwhatsup-week3-readings1.pdf.

11   Okun, Tema Jon, Ph.D. *The Emperor Has No Clothes: Teaching About Race and Racism to People Who Don't Want to Know.* (2010) at p. 42.

12   *Id.* at 43 (″[O]ne young [law] student spoke for her

# Values of White Culture at Work

| Value | Issues Related to the Value | Antidote |
|---|---|---|
| Individualism[ix] | ■ Staff are asked to work in teams, but do so in name only<br><br>■ Discomfort working as a team<br><br>■ "Accountability, if any, goes up and down, not sideways to peers or to those the organization is set up to serve"<br><br>■ Focus on individual successes and achievements<br><br>■ Creates feelings of isolation<br><br>■ Feeling in offices that there is not a team, but rather several solo practitioners sharing space<br><br>■ Little time or resources devoted to developing skills in how to cooperate or work collaboratively<br><br>■ "Creates a lack of accountability, as the organization values those who can get things done on their own without needing supervision or guidance" | ■ Provide training and support for collaborative work and thinking i.E. Teach people how to work in teams<br><br>■ Include teamwork in our values<br><br>■ Explain and make explicit the ways team work improves outcomes<br><br>■ "Evaluate people's ability to work in a team as well as their ability to get the job done"<br><br>■ Support a culture where it is the norm to bring an issue to the group rather than have it be solved by an individual<br><br>■ Create an atmosphere where all meetings (staff, intake, case review, project or team meetings) are used to solve problems rather than just report information |
| Objectivity[x] | ■ Assuming policies are neutral and objective without conducting an analysis of possible racial implications<br><br>■ Seeing emotions as removed from decision making processes<br><br>■ Prioritizing or requiring linear and logical thinking over other types of thinking or imagining | ■ Appreciate everyone's way of seeing and thinking about the world and how that impacts the way their understanding of the world<br><br>■ Understand that discomfort with different approaches or ways of thinking can be a positive experience<br><br>■ Listen<br><br>■ Start with the assumption that everyone has a valid point<br><br>■ Try to understand that point |

Table Notes
i    Dismantling Racism 2016 Workbook, p. 28-35.
ii   *Id.* at 28.
iii  *Id.* at 29.
iv   *Id.*
v    *Id.*
vi   *Id.* at 30.
vii  *Id.* at 33, 35.
ivii *Id.* at 33.
ix   *Id.*
x    *Id.* at 34.

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group, sharing that the list represents all the characteristics taught by law schools as essential to success in the profession.")
13  https://www.pisab.org/our-principles. I have provided end notes for each grouping in the chart that cover the entire section of that chart. I have placed quotes where the quote is direct. Most of the ideas come from the work cited. There are a few places where I list specific problems or solutions based upon my experience.
14  *Id.* at 35.
15  The policies are available if requested.
16  *See* n. 4 at 31-33; People's Institute Handout, Continuum on Becoming an Antiracist Multicultural Institution.
17  *Id.* at 30.