Organizational Change and Accountability

By Paul Kivel

I routinely get requests for workshops on racism, diversity and multiculturalism from diversity coordinators, members of a diversity team or someone in the HR department of an independent school, community-based non-profit or institution of higher education.[1]

These requests are one result of the success of the civil rights movement, although the person making the request is probably not aware of this. The existence of their job, and their access to the education that enables them to be credentialed to do the job, were the result of the demand that institutions be integrated, responsive to the needs of communities of color, and that their staff and those they serve be representative of the general population. I receive these calls for talks and consulting because, to some extent, individuals and organizations are still affected by the call for racial justice, however much that call has diminished. People still feel a pressure to address issues of racism in their organizations, however little they understand what those issues really are.

However, the legacy of the movement and the tremendous backlash against its achievements has led many to define racism superficially, reducing it to trainings and workshops, calls to "get along" and respect our differences. The core issues of institutionalized power, systemic racism, economic, political and social disparities in opportunities and outcomes — the continuing existence of white privilege and racial injustice — are now denied, minimized, ignored and even justified. Instead of receiving requests for information and training about how to achieve organizations with full participation and empowerment of people of color, dedicated to eliminating racism both within themselves and in

the greater community, I receive requests for a one-day training on diversity. I could certainly fly in, take the money and fly out. However, that would be completely unaccountable on my part because I know that I would be colluding in a deception: the illusion that one talk, workshop or training would shift how racism operates in an organization

My first question to people who call is "Why do you want a one-day training on diversity/racism?" We proceed to have a conversation about what they want to accomplish. Their goals are usually quite circumscribed. They often want white people to be educated, more sensitive, more supportive of efforts to address racism. This is a small goal within an organization or institution that was founded to benefit white people, has white people in control, has no deep organizational commitment to racial justice and probably is unwilling to dedicate significant resources to eliminating the racism within it.

My experience has led me to conclude that talks and trainings only make sense in an organization that is committed to serious organizational change. Otherwise they are window dressing — ineffective and possibly even damaging to the cause of racial justice. They lead individual participants to believe they have done something. They allow organizations to claim they are serious about racial justice. They provide the illusion to the public that something has changed. But business continues as usual.

I am not interested in furthering the illusion of anti-racism work where it is not happening. Therefore, through a series of questions, I try to indicate what I think needs to be in place for a talk or training to make a difference:

1. How will the training relate to preceding and ongoing efforts to create a practice of racial justice within the organization?

2. Is there sustainable leadership at the highest levels for this effort?

3. Is a serious commitment to diversity built into the core mission of the organization?

4. Is there a strategic plan for diversity within the organization at all levels, and/or is it an integral part of the overall strategic plan?

5. Is there an adequate, sustainable and dedicated budget for long-term antiracism work?

Basically I am asking "Is this organization serious and committed to working towards racial justice?" I am not willing to settle for a verbal assurance. I want to see concrete indications that the money, commitment, leadership and sustainability of the project is in place so that it has some chance to succeed. If the organization is ready, then we can talk about trainings, hiring and retention practices, organizational culture, accountability to various communities served, allocation of

resources and leadership development.

Almost always when I ask these questions, I am met with a polite response indicating that the person I am talking with had not thought about any of these things. They say something about taking this information back to their director/the diversity committee/the board — and I never hear from them again.

Few organizations are serious about anti-racism work in their organizations, which is why most remain toxic environments for people of color, providing them with limited opportunities to thrive and succeed. Opportunities which do exist come with an unacknowledged requirement to assimilate and be submissive within an impenetrable culture of whiteness. These organizations are unaccountable to communities of color, and no matter how much they claim to do on behalf of those communities, they leave the structural problems of racism unaddressed and white institutional power intact.

Those of us who are educators, trainers and consultants on issues of diversity and multiculturalism and who are committed to the struggle for racial justice need to ask ourselves some hard questions:

1. What is our role when affirmative action is being attacked by politicians and devastated by the courts, violence against Muslims and immigrants is increasing and welfare mothers and young men of color are being blamed for a variety of social ills?

2. What is our role when large-scale unemployment, environmental degradation, deterioration of public services and the deflation of the housing bubble have disproportionately affected the jobs, housing and living conditions of people of color?

As diversity professionals, we are also facing tightening economic constraints within our field. Many consultants are having increasing difficulty finding work, reputable training centers have closed their doors for financial reasons and more and more training is being conducted by in-house staff in corporations, schools and community-based organizations. Although multicultural training has become a multi-million-dollar profession, the context of that work is still largely marginal, maintained by networks of consultants, increasingly besieged professional staff within large organizations and overworked, isolated teachers without adequate support or resources.

1. How can educators and trainers be accountable to communities of color?

2. How do we maintain the political integrity of this work within increasingly conservative and embattled organizational environments?

3. How are the participants in our trainings connected to social

justice activism?

4. What role does anti-racist action play in our work and in our lives?

Since our work occurs in an extremely polarized and unequal economic hierarchy, and in an increasingly segregated and racially polarized society, we can only begin to answer these questions by analyzing the effects of our work on the communities of color we claim to serve.

In other words, who benefits from our work?

To answer this question honestly, many of us would have to admit that although our work may benefit many individual people, including many people of color in the bottom 80% of the economic pyramid, in the larger scheme of things, our work and the organizations we work for maintain the status quo, perpetuating the inequalities of the pyramid. Our work primarily benefits the top rungs, the managerial and ruling classes. Our jobs may help many people have greater access to job and educational opportunities, promotions and training and greater access to social services, but often they do not challenge the distribution of power, wealth and resources which maintain the basic structure of inequality in the US. Many of us work in the middle area of the pyramid, providing a buffer zone between the frustration, pain and anger of the people at the bottom and the concentration of wealth and power at the top. We may keep people and their hopes alive, but without giving them enough information, material resources and skills to seriously challenge the racial hierarchy.[2]

We should not be surprised by this situation. Multicultural educational work developed partly as a response to the demands of the civil rights movement and its anti-racist allies. However, the growth of a group of professionals who do multicultural, diversity, unlearning or other trainings, as opposed to anti-racist organizing, was partly a progressive response to incorporating grassroots demands for inclusion and diversity, and partly a reactionary response to deflect further such demands. During the 1960s and 1970s, there was a more liberal social climate and more immediate grassroots pressure on institutions. Multiculturalists had more leverage to fight for changes within organizations.

More recently, the question of how we can all get along, work together, succeed as a team and hear everyone's voice superseded the questions of who has power and how can it be shared more equitably. With less external social pressure, organizations were quick to take racism off the agenda and to put team building and celebrating diversity in its place. Today, in the second decade of the 21st century, teachers and trainers currently have even less leverage to challenge this backlash, although that does not mean we have none.[3] Even from within large organizations and institutional structures, it is possible to work for social justice. It is possible to serve the interests of the poor and working-class, people of color and women, lesbians, gays, bisexuals and trans people and people

with disabilities. But doing so is not without risk. We each need to determine the amount we can risk financially against the spiritual and emotional risks we bear by not standing by our commitment to social justice. These are strategic decisions that we cannot make in isolation from the inside of the organization(s) we work for. Our work is part of a much wider network of individuals and organizations working for justice on the outside. To make effective decisions about our own work, we need to be accountable to those groups and their actions and issues. This accountability[4] then becomes a source of connection which breaks down our isolation and increases our effectiveness as social justice activists.

There are three questions we need to ask ourselves in the current political context:

Who Supervises My Work?

I don't mean who employs us or funds us, although that is an important consideration in a conservative political climate when jobs are scarce. Who are the grassroots activists of color who advise us, review our work and with whom we consult? I think it is particularly critical for those of us who are white to be accountable to people of color so that our work doesn't inadvertently fuel the backlash or otherwise make it more dangerous for them. But regardless of our ethnicity or race, we need to be accountable to people who are on the front lines of struggles for racial justice and who have leadership positions in local communities of color.

Am I Involved In Community-based Anti-racist Struggle?

If we are not fighting for affirmative action, for immigrant rights, against environmental dumping in communities of color, against police brutality, or for access to healthcare or for anti-racist policies and practices within our own institutions, what are we modeling? How are we learning? What informs our work? Can we be accountable to communities of color if we are not politically involved ourselves in some aspect of anti-racist struggle?

Are Current Political Struggles Part Of The Content Of What I Teach?

Do we connect the participants in our networks, classes and trainings to opportunities for ongoing political work? Do we bring current grassroots political struggles into our activism and organizing, or do we teach about diversity and multiculturalism without dealing with the issues that most directly affect the lives of people of color? Do we give participants tools and resources for getting involved in the issues people of color identify as most immediate for them, whether those be public policy issues such as immigration, affirmative action, welfare, healthcare or workplace, neighborhood and community issues such as jobs, education, violence and toxic waste? When they leave the (class)room after our training or

workshop, can they connect what they just learned to the racism people of color experience in their lives? Are we responsive to their needs for survival, safety, economic well-being and political action?

Who we are accountable to is a crucial concern in a contracting economy during conservative political times in which racial, sexual and homophobic scapegoating and backlash are widespread. We may be discouraged about the possibility of doing effective anti-racist work in this context. But this is also a time of widespread organizing and resistance to the backlash.[5] It can be a time for us to realign clearly with those organizing efforts and reclaim the original vision of racial justice and equality which brought our work into being. A focus on organizational and institutional change within a framework of accountable practice is essential to any work for racial justice.

Notes

1. I do not work for corporations or the military because I don't think systemic change can come from organizations whose mission is inimical to social justice.

2. For more on these dynamics, see my article "Social Service or Social Change?" in Incite! Women of Color Against Violence, ed. The Revolution Will not be Funded: Beyond the Nonprofit Industrial Complex. South End, 2007, pp. 129-150. Also available under articles at paulkivel.com.

3. For more on the history of this work, see "Part I The Rise of the Non-Profit Industrial Complex." in Incite: Women of Color Against Violence. The Revolution Will Not Be Funded. South End, 2007.

4. Other resources on accountability: Bonnie Berman Cushing et. al. Accountability and White Anti-racist Organizing: Stories from Our Work. Crandall, Dostie & Douglass Books, 2010; Jen Margaret. Working as Allies. Auckland Workers' Educational Association, Winston Churchill Fellowship Report, August, 2010. [online]. [cited March 2, 2011]. awea.org.nz/allies_north_america; Lynne Davis. Alliances: Re/envisioning Indigenous-non-Indigenous Relationships. University of Toronto, 2010.

5. You can find contact information for a variety of social justice organizations at PaulKivel.com.