

Talking and Working with White People

From Uprooting Racism by Paul Kivel

One of the responsibilities of a white ally is to work with other white people. But what does this really mean? If we look at Western history, we can see that members of exploited groups have rarely gained political or economic change by converting more and more members of the group in power to their side. Groups in power don't generally make concessions to disenfranchised groups just because they understand that it is the right, moral or just thing to do. Social change comes when people organize to challenge the everyday practices and policies of the organizations and institutions in society. Popular opinion is important at certain times in efforts to create change, but I believe it is unrealistic to think that most white people will become active participants in the struggle for racial justice in the near future. We could spend all of our time talking with other white people, trying to convince them that racism is indeed a problem and that they should do something about it, but I don't think this is an effective or strategic use of our time or energy.

Training, workshops, talks and other forms of popular education are important. I do a lot of each of these things. But to what end? In many of the workshops I find there are a few white people - often young or adult males - who resist even acknowledging that racism exists. Sometimes loud and vociferous, sometimes soft-spoken, they demand lots of time and attention from the group. They assume that they and their concerns deserve center stage. I know that when white people express such common responses to discussions of

white behavior as “White people are under attack,” “What I said was misunderstood or misinterpreted,” or “I didn’t intend to hurt anyone,” I want to take care of them by giving them time and attention. It can be difficult for me to set limits with them, to ask them to stop responding and just listen for a bit, to acknowledge their feelings but to juxtapose their perceptions to the greater reality in the room. There are a lot of things I could say:

- I recognize that you don’t feel safe, but this is not about safety. Many of us don’t feel safe, but we have to keep addressing the structures that put us at risk and that may mean operating out of our comfort level.
- Although it is, of course, personal, it is not personal. The problem under discussion is institutional racism, not their personal behavior, although they have a responsibility for their personal behavior and for addressing racism.
- Rather than defending yourself, I encourage you to just take in what was said, understand the spirit in which it was offered and take some time to reflect upon it before responding.

However, I have never found that it is useful to get into a long discussion with someone who is defensive. It just increases their defensiveness and my frustration. I get caught up in attempting to win them over to the anti-racist side, converting them by the power of my arguments and reasoning.

I’ve decided that I don’t want to be an anti-racist missionary trying to convert white people to a belief in racial justice. This decision has increased my effectiveness as a

facilitator because it means I don't get locked into a passionate debate with participants as often, and I no longer try to meet their every defense with a response. I can listen to them and move on to working with other participants and, more importantly, with the group itself.

Make no mistake; my goal is partly to motivate white people to take a stand against racism. But there are plenty of well-intentioned white people who want to move forward in this work. I find it more useful to help them find the understanding and tools to make their work more effective than to spend large quantities of time trying to convert the unconvertible.

I also try to be clear with myself that I am not invested in how many white people I win over. My role as a facilitator is to provide the safety, information and exercises that allow people to understand their role as community members and to figure out how to address injustice. I have no control over what they do with the opportunity, and much as I would like to have the magic dust that would turn everyone I spoke with into anti-racism activists, I know that every individual makes his or her own moral choices. When I work with people, I am trying to send them out the door more connected to each other as part of a community, more aware of injustice in their midst and committed and better equipped to take some specific actions to challenge racism.

When the goal of a group is organizing against racism, then we are not talking about winning people over. We are trying to achieve some concrete changes in the institutional

practices we confront, and that requires a combination of social, economic and political pressure. We are not trying to change the minds of government officials, judges and corporate executives; we are trying to change public policy, judicial practice and corporate behavior. Being persuasive by itself is rarely a tactic that works in achieving organizational change.

There were large numbers of African Americans involved at all levels of the Civil Rights movement, but perhaps not even a majority of African Americans were active participants. There were a substantial number of white allies in the struggle, but certainly they were far from a majority of whites. But those that were active were effective enough in confronting white power that the country could not continue to operate without attending to some of the most glaring aspects of racism at the time.

There are ongoing struggles today to end racism. The question I hope to leave white people with is “Which side are you on?” The side of resistance and backlash, the side that protects white interests and perpetuates injustice? Or the side that is fighting to end racial discrimination, racial violence, and racial exploitation? I can challenge others with the question, but I can only answer it for myself.