

Caucuses as a Racial Justice Strategy: What We Have Learned

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The following article aims to support individuals and organizations who seek to learn about, organize, and effectively facilitate “caucuses,” or affinity groups, to support learning and development around racial justice. Each section explores common questions and includes links to additional resources. The document is a supplement to the Washington Race Equity & Justice Initiative’s (REJI’s) Organizational Equity Toolkit, which can be found at www.justleadwa.org/learn/reji-toolkit.

Licensing & Acknowledgments

The ideas, concepts, and frameworks contained with this article were written and synthesized by JustLead Washington with no claim of ownership. This article could not have been written without the collective contribution of the many individuals and collectives, past and present, who have been committed to anti-racism, racial justice, and the forging of belongingness and community. While JustLead is pleased to serve as a curator and conduit to communicate this work to our law and justice community partners, readers are *highly* encouraged to explore the resources and links cited within this document to become directly familiar and connected with people and organizations who have created the path JustLead Washington walks on towards its vision of growing a sustainable network of legal and community leaders who can effectively and collaboratively work toward equity and justice in Washington State. We also express our deep gratitude to our funding partner, the Washington State Office of Civil Legal Aid. Please contact info@justleadwa.org with any questions.

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What Are Caucuses?

Caucuses, also known as affinity groups, are opportunities for those who share a common identity to meet separately to gather, connect, and learn.¹ Originating from Algonquian, a caucus means “to meet together.”² Some scholars think “caucus” may have developed from an Algonquian term for a group of elders, leaders, or advisers.³ While the origins of the word have been lost in modern use and appropriated from Indigenous culture, we wish to recognize and honor the origins of the word, as they help to ground our understanding of the value of caucusing for racial justice.

Caucuses based on racial identity allow time for people of color, white people, and people with mixed-race identities to gather together and engage in conversations about their racial identities. Caucuses sometimes develop as a crisis intervention strategy and tool when conversations in multi-racial spaces have become harmful; sometimes they are offered as proactively planned, scheduled learning opportunities to build self-awareness.

For many people who are unfamiliar with caucusing, images of overt white supremacy such as the KKK, Nazism, or Jim Crow-era segregation come to mind when considering intentionally dividing groups by race. These historical and present-day traumatizing realities can reopen wounds and activate fears that division will create more harm than good. These feelings and the fact that our lived experiences with race and racism are indeed different based on how we have been socialized within the U.S. context are precisely the kinds of issues that can be responsibly explored and worked on in caucus space.



Similarly, we recognize that reconciliation and understanding can emerge when people with different lived experiences come together to share and learn from one another. However, we have also learned that when people from different racial identities come together without the benefit of *also* creating and engaging in deliberate caucus space, multi-racial space often results in the people of color – who have been most harmed by structural racism – carrying an additional burden of educating others (at best) or being retraumatized through the reliving of painful experiences. Through this article we hope to articulate how caucusing can be a valuable component of a program or organization’s broader racial justice and equity and inclusion efforts, a means rather than an end:

“White people and people of color each have work to do separately and together.... For white people, a caucus provides time and space to work explicitly and intentionally on understanding white culture and white privilege

¹ Throughout this article we will use the word “caucus,” though “affinity group” and “caucus” can often be used interchangeably. Some agencies use other terminology like “Employee Resource Group.” We encourage the use of “caucus” as a pro-active, action-oriented term that centers the goals of anti-racism.

² Oaster B. Indigenous American Words in the English Language. Day Translations. July 25 2017. <https://www.daytranslations.com/blog/2017/07/indigenous-american-words-english-language-9440/>

³ Caucus. United States Senate Glossary. Accessed June 26 2019. https://www.senate.gov/reference/glossary_term/caucus.htm

and to increase one's critical analysis around these concepts. A white caucus also puts the onus on white people to teach each other about these ideas, rather than constantly relying on people of color to teach them. For people of color, a caucus is a place to work with their peers on their experiences of internalized racism, for healing and to work on liberation."

-From [Racial Equity Tools](#)

Examples of Caucuses You Might Already be Familiar With

The reality is, as individuals we make choices in our daily lives that reflect our desire to seek out and connect with people who share our identities, experiences, values, priorities, or traits. Consider your personal and professional networks. Who are you likely to seek out at a party, or hire?

In contrast to explicit bias or unconscious similarity bias that can lead to homogenous spaces and networks,⁴ racial caucusing is done with explicit, racial justice goals in mind. In fact, we have been surrounded by formal and informal caucusing based on social identity for ages, particularly for those who are targeted or oppressed by structural bias. For example, legislative caucuses such as the [Congressional Black Caucus](#) or [Congressional Caucus for Women's Issues](#) exist to discuss issues of mutual concern and perform legislative research and policy planning for its members.⁵ Informal affinity spaces routinely develop in our communities based on where we live, or our culture. Student and professional associations based on identity (such as minority bar associations) create opportunities for people to come together, share experiences, and work toward common goals. Anti-racist groups have organized white people to become a part of anti-racism efforts, like [Coalition of Anti-Racist Whites](#), [European Dissent](#), and [Showing up for Racial Justice \(SURJ\)](#).

Why Are Caucuses Useful?

Under the call to build community in the name of anti-racism, caucus work benefits both people of color and white people. In addition to building relationships and support, participants can also build strategy and collective power if they commit to working together, becoming a "body politic" that can be capable of generating more influence and energy for race equity change than individuals can generate and sustain on their own.



⁴ PwC. Blind Spots: Broaden Perspectives. June 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HbBTM8bJt8Q>

⁵ Caucus. United States Senate Glossary. Accessed June 26 2019. https://www.senate.gov/reference/glossary_term/caucus.htm

[Why People of Color Need Spaces Without White People](#) and [Becoming an Anti-Racist White Ally: How a White Affinity Group Can Help](#) explore these benefits further.

What is the Work in Caucuses?

Ultimately, caucus work is about learning how to decenter “whiteness and its toxic effects, and to counter this through the centering of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, or “BIPOC”. In the U.S., a person of color is, generally speaking, someone who either does not identify as white or has non-European ancestry. However, It is important to center BIPOC specifically in order to bring attention to the complex and unique histories faced by both Black and Indigenous communities in the U.S. Centering BIPOC acknowledges that even within “non-white” spaces, where common experiences exist across communities of color, people of different races are treated differently, especially Black and Indigenous women, due to [anti-black racism](#) and [anti-indigeneity, targeting, and co-opting of Native communities and culture](#).

Work in People of Color Caucus	Work in White Caucus
<p>Creates a brave space to talk about and address experiences of racism.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Offers a retreat from continuous scrutiny and an antidote to white-dominated spaces ▶ Creates an alternative power base/ “counterspace” for BIPOC within white spaces ▶ Builds relationships and support through courageous and difficult conversations 	<p>Creates accountable space to work through barriers that prevent white people from allying together toward anti-racist goals.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Builds relationships and deepens understanding of power/privilege ▶ Builds collective tools for race equity ▶ Offers space to discuss emotions, questions, and learning edges without causing harm to people of color

When Are Caucuses Helpful?

As a Proactive Anti-Racism Tool

Many programs and organizations committed to equity & justice have already communicated their strategic intent to tackle implicit bias and structural racism, and some have robust race equity initiatives already underway. However, virtually all programs face unavoidable obstacles when they try to undertake organizational change, particularly change that requires a candid evaluation of the ways in which the organization and its people may themselves be complicit in maintaining a status quo where structural racism impacts outcomes. Caucusing can be an opportunity to air and work through complicated relationships, dynamics, and experiences that arise in the context of organizational equity work.

Creating even informal spaces can, in many instances, help put into practice and infuse race equity into our organizational cultures and sometimes lead to more

formalized race equity initiatives. At minimum, it builds capacity for shared understanding for how racism “shows up” in our working relationships and how structural racism is unknowingly infused in organizational habits and practices. It also provides a loose framework to establish goals and strategies for dismantling personal and structural biases.

As a Reactive Conflict-Intervention Tool

When equity and justice advocates find their race equity rhetoric, (i.e. their stated *intent*) disconnected from the consequences of their actual behavior (i.e. their *impact* on colleagues, clients, and/or communities of color) they can experience cognitive dissonance. This, in turn, causes psychic distress and is likely to lead to racial anxiety. A person of any race can experience racial anxiety, a type of distress that may have even caused the conflict or that can worsen it by limiting the ability of people involved to communicate with each other appropriately. When in distress, our subconscious/ parasympathetic systems take over, causing the same responses we experience when navigating any [psychological anxiety or trauma](#) (e.g. *Fight, Flight, Freeze, Appease, Disassociate*). When this occurs, people’s capacity to engage judiciously and constructively can be significantly impaired.

When people of color and white people are poised to avoid or flee the discomfort and distress of engaging in anti-racist discussion and problem-solving, caucusing can be a way to lessen the intensity of the racial anxiety people experience and expand the spaces and opportunities available for more positive engagement. Through this intervention, we can engage in our different though parallel work, building support and exercising our muscles to engage strategically and “respond”, not just “react” in conversations about race and racism.

How Can My Organization Get Started?

1. Start with Clear Goals and Committed Champions

Caucuses are most effective when combined with a broad plan for furthering racial justice, though they can also be an entry point for further work. Like with any new initiative, first identify those who might be most interested in participating or be most impacted by the work to be undertaken. This committed group can then identify goals for the work and help articulate and promote the value of caucusing.

2. Decide What Resources Are Needed

One key question for caucusing is whether to retain an outside facilitator. Outside facilitation can bring in new resources and perspectives and allow the whole group to actively engage and participate, though it may have an added financial cost. Some groups may desire to build their own team’s capacity by rotating facilitation responsibilities through different participants. In these cases, organizers should offer resources and technical assistance so that every facilitator feels prepared.

Facilitators should consider time and space needs as well. Deep work and conversation require enough time and comfortable space. Make sure spaces are accessible and that participants can be fully present and meet their immediate

needs. For caucusing to truly have an impact, invest regularly in the process. A one-time meeting is unlikely to be enough time to surface and resolve issues that emerge in the space.

3. Learn & Use Shared Frameworks for Discussion

Often before starting caucuses we begin our work with a mixed-group training that offers key terms and frameworks that can be brought into caucus space. This initial “alignment” discussion can provide a foundation that caucuses can then build from. Common concepts include:

Internalized Racism

To build relationships and community in the name of anti-racism we must examine and build consciousness around internalized racism – an insidious way structural racism is perpetuated by each of us through our attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs. Internalized racism surfaces differently for white people and people of color, which poses different questions within people color caucuses as compared to white caucuses.

Tools like the “[Gardner’s Tale](#)” by Dr. Camara Phyllis Jones explore the way people of color accept unconsciously negative messages about their own “abilities and intrinsic worth... characterized by their not believing in others who look like them, and not believing in themselves.” Anti-racist community organizers and leaders, such as the [People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond](#), describe this as internalized racial inferiority and describe internalized racism for white people as an internalized racial *superiority*. Through internalized superiority, white people unconsciously accept *positive* messages about their own abilities and worth, and consequently simultaneously take in negative messages projected onto communities of color, thus perpetuating racism through attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs. In the end, internalized racism results in [white supremacy culture](#) getting perpetuated by both people of color and white people, although white people are often most unaware being attached to and benefitting from a dominant culture in the U.S.

“ADRESSING” Model for Understanding Social Identities

One powerful tool to understand our social identities and examine how we interact with others is called the “ADRESSING” model, used locally by psychotherapist and anti-oppression trainer Dr. Leticia Nieto and adapted from the work of Pamela Hayes:⁶

⁶ Nieto L et al. Beyond Inclusion, Beyond Empowerment: A Development Strategy to Liberate Everyone. March 2017. Olympia, WA. Cuetzpalin Publishing.

We use the acronym “ADRESSING,” developed by Pamela A. Hays, to remember the Social Rank categories, as follows:

SOCIAL RANK CATEGORY	AGENT RANK	TARGET RANK
Age	Adults (18-64)	Children, Adolescents, Elders
Disability *	Able-Persons	Persons with Disabilities
Religion ** (relates to religious culture)	Cultural Christians, Agnostics and Atheists	Jews, Muslims, and members of all other non-Christian religions
Ethnicity	White Euro-Americans	People of Color
Social Class Culture	Middle and Owning Class Persons (Access to Higher Education)	Poor and Working Class Persons (No Access to Higher Education)
Sexual Orientation	Heterosexuals	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Questioning
Indigenous Heritage	Non-Native	Native
National Origin	US-Born	Immigrants and Refugees
Gender	Cisgender Men	Intersex and Transgender Persons, Cisgender Women, Questioning

* Now identified by Hays as “Developmental and Acquired Disabilities”

** Now Identified by Hays as “Religion and Spiritual Orientation”

Though everyone carries their own set of complex identities, these social rank categories break down across a duality of either being “Targets” for marginalization or “Agents” seen as the dominant or advantaged group. In the United States, with or without our consent, society treats and socializes us based on our social rank categories.

Our work is to build skills attached to our “Target” or “Agent” identities. For the purpose of addressing race and racism, white people must explore Agent skills, building awareness about what privilege attaches to being white in the U.S. and determining how those privileges can be leveraged toward anti-racist behaviors in support of people of color. Agents use and experience a range of skills, from Indifference (i.e. “colorblindness”) to Allyship.⁷ Allyship - or to take it further proactive *accompliceship* work - requires (1) humility in acknowledging that white privilege insulates Agents from knowing the real lived experience of people of color; (2) taking responsibility for one’s own learning; and (3) relentlessly leveraging access, privilege, and existing power to create space, resources, and power for people of color.

For people of color, whose racial identities have been targeted and othered, the work is “Surviving” racism (i.e. just getting by or conforming to dominant culture) and ultimately activating Empowerment (i.e. gaining a sense of one’s own power), Strategy, and Re-Centering skillsets. Strategy and Recentering involve not necessarily assuming animus when a person says or does a racialized thing, but making strategic decisions about whether you have the energy and will to engage

⁷ About the Book, Beyond Inclusion, Beyond Empowerment. Accessed June 26 2019. <https://beyondinclusionbeyondempowerment.com/about-the-book/>

and ultimately discerning “our own optimal, liberating norms and values from oppressive, dehumanizing ones, and support[ing] members of our own and other Target groups,” including pursuing affinity space as much as possible.⁸ Learn more about this framework [here](#).

Understanding White Supremacy Culture

Culture includes the spoken or unspoken shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterize an institution or organization. White supremacy culture is rooted in the idea that behaviors and values associated with white people or “whiteness” is superior. When it becomes the standard or norm in dominant culture in the United States, Eurocentric norms are projected onto all people and becomes the mold everyone is evaluated against. Some displays of white supremacy culture include quantity over quality, paternalism, and individualism, to name a few. A full list of white supremacy culture characteristics can be found [here](#) with suggested antidotes.

Within caucus space, participants can explore how these characteristics show up in their organizations and how they can collectively understand and work against it. Both people of color and white people can perpetuate white supremacy culture because we have all been socialized within dominant American culture.

[Transforming Culture - An Examination of Workplace Values Through the Frame of White Dominant Culture](#) explores the benefits of understanding white supremacy culture within the context of legal organization.

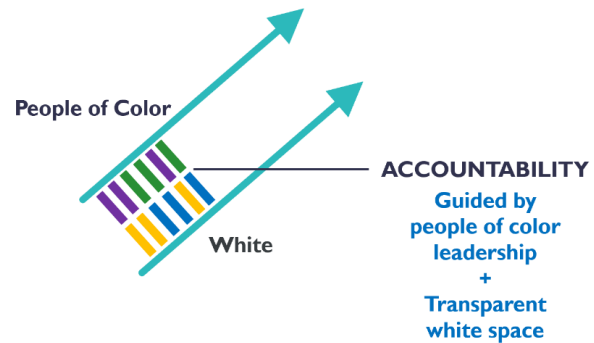
4. Build Solidarity and Accountability Within and Across Caucuses

As described above, although people of color caucuses and white caucuses operate along parallel “tracks” moving towards a common destination, the “cars” they ride in are different, and accountability flows from white people to people of color to counter the overwhelming prevalence of dominant white culture. Therefore, white caucus work must take its lead from people of color, including ensuring discussion in white caucus is both transparent and shaped by the directives of the people of color caucus. White caucus work can run the risk of continuing to center white people’s needs and feelings unless the work is in support of a “bigger vision that is driven by leaders of color...similar to how carpenters use their skills to build based on an architects plan.”⁹ [Confronting Racism is Not About the Needs and Feelings of White People](#), by Ijeoma Oluo, explores the ways the priorities of white people prevents anti-racism work.

⁸ Nieto L, Boyer M. Strategies in Addressing Power and Privilege, Skill Sets for Targets. https://beyondinclusion.files.wordpress.com/2011/07/ask_leticia_part_2.pdf

⁹ Kessler P. How to Plan a White Caucus Agenda. Medium. <https://medium.com/@PippiKessler/how-to-plan-a-white-caucus-agenda-9049847e9bd5>

Parallel "Tracks" with Accountability Towards Racial Justice



Within each caucus, a culture of accountability must be built to ensure it is a constructive space that allows learning and growth for everyone. This can involve a concrete step such as committing to the next meeting to ensure ongoing time is devoted to caucusing. It can also be through group norms or community agreements that all participants agree upon, such as a commitment to “struggle together” through uncomfortable conversations when opportunities for growth is highest. Both people of color and white people should also work to recruit others into the caucusing space to ensure all people are accountable to the organization’s race equity goals.

Caucusing must also put in place some form of communication between groups. This could be identifying a person in each caucus to be the representative of their caucus to communicate with the other caucus. Additionally, at the end of each caucus session, the people of color caucus may decide to hear a report-out of from the white caucus of what was discussed. In these instances, a detailed report often is not necessary (unless specifically requested or specific questions arise), but it must occur if requested as way to practice overcoming white fragility behavior, show respect, and maintain a transparent white space. The people of color caucus may collectively decide on what to share from their discussion, if anything at all, with the white caucus or what they would like from the white caucus.

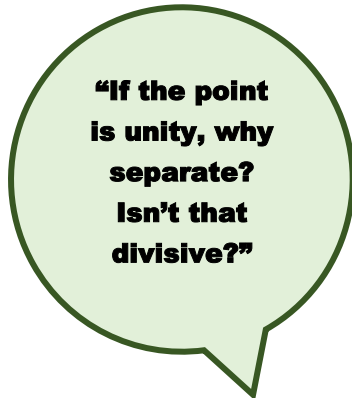
Know Where You Are Going and Why

A primary task within caucus space is to learn and practice creating BIPOC-centered spaces which then can brought into multi-racial spaces as well as primarily white spaces. This validates BIPOC ways of being and creates a sense of belonging and well-being. Simultaneously, white people get a chance to learn how to decenter themselves (and whiteness) and practice existing in spaces that are BIPOC created.

5. Expect, Prepare for, & Overcome Resistance.

Given that caucusing is a strategy to facilitate transformational organizational and culture change, it is not surprising that the idea often meets with some skepticism or even resistance. The strategy itself - intentionally separating by race - can also feel uncomfortable and sometimes just plain wrong. Surfacing, naming, and confronting the discomfort up front can help organizers generate buy-in for the practice. Here

are some of the common concerns we hear people raise and some suggestions for responding:



The point indeed is to work toward more inclusive, equitable, and unified workplaces. Yet people of color and white people have experienced race & racism in the U.S. differently, and therefore as described within this article, the work toward racial justice is different. It can help to emphasize that caucusing is a means, not an end, and that it can be most helpful when used as one of many strategies toward your shared vision and goals. Often caucuses convene jointly beforehand and/or afterward to encourage collective work. However, the if, how, and when groups come together should be guided by people of color.

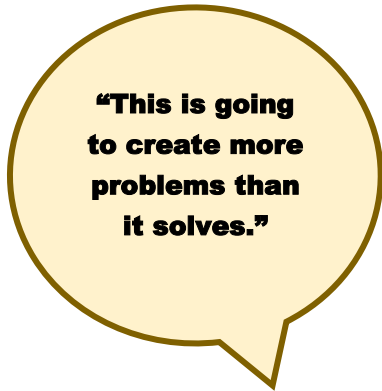


Caucusing can generate anxiety even at a visceral level for some. For people of color, history has shown that real harm can come from spaces exclusively reserved for white people. White caucuses should have established mechanisms of accountability to their colleagues of color, such as openly and transparently sharing what topics and themes are discussed in white spaces and structuring content to be responsive to concerns that colleagues of color have identified.

People of color may also experience racial anxiety and [stereotype threat](#), the fear of being viewed through societal stereotype “lenses” by white colleagues and supervisors. In some cases, especially for staff with less positional authority, some may fear retaliation for speaking out. If the organization is large enough, consider offering space for front-line staff to meet without managers. Organizers can preempt some concerns by front-loading information to help staff understand and buy into the process.

White people may experience stereotype threat in the form of worry that they will say something racist or experience a form of racial anxiety called “white fragility”, a term that Robin DiAngelo describes as *“...a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves, including the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence and leaving the stress-inducing situation.”*¹⁰ Emotionally defensive reactions such as “I don’t see race”; “I have worked for justice for communities of color my whole career”; “I have a child who is a person of color”; etc. can surface. Managing expectations up front and creating space for these fears and questions to be raised in a caucus space – where concerns can be addressed without causing harm to colleagues of color – may help.

¹⁰ DiAngelo R. White Fragility. *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy*, Vol 3 (3) (2011) pp 54-70.
<http://libjournal.uncg.edu/ijcp/article/view/249/116>



“This is going to create more problems than it solves.”

For many another form of anxiety can surface in the form of fearing what may come from organized and empowered spaces for staff to talk about race and racism. What critical feedback may come up? What is going to change in the organization? In reality, the status quo at many organizations continues to result in inequitable outcomes for people of color, and therefore power and resources must shift for organizations to truly take on racial justice work. Surfacing and naming these dynamics and generating buy-in up front can alleviate often unspoken but deeply felt concerns.

Conversations on race and racism are also often emotionally charged, and the typical workplace is not structured to support the healing and deep relationship-building needed for transformational culture shifts. Organizers are encouraged to develop and share expectations and guidelines for participation, including information about confidentiality, where to direct specific complaints about situations like harassment and discrimination, and how caucusing will intersect with other initiatives and policies at the organization (sample included below).

Common Themes & Dynamics in Caucus Spaces

Facilitation Tip

Racial caucuses are spaces for learning and building self-awareness on the role of race in our lives. As a result, most groups have participants at many levels of awareness and understanding about the role race plays in their lives. Those early in their learning may choose first to listen instead of speaking as they navigate their own experience and/or feel uncertain of how they are feeling. Those later in their learning may have much to say, sharing stories and anecdotes that can jumpstart discussion. As a facilitator, embrace this powerful space for learning and create varied opportunities for discussion so everyone can engage. Each time we caucus we are all growing and learning from each other.

People of Color Caucuses

People of color caucuses create a shared space for learning and help build a community of support to discuss anti-racism. The goal of a facilitator is to be fully present and ensure all participants have the opportunity to be heard.

Typically, discussion topics for people of color caucuses fall into two broad categories:

- ➔ Identifying ways internalized racial oppression plays a role in the lives of people of color and building consciousness around its impact (including how to create BIPOC-centered spaces to organize against the ways anti-black racism and anti-indigeneity is perpetuated by people of color)
 - ➔ Workshopping strategies and ideas to organize against white supremacy culture, racist systems, and other racist dynamics playing out within our professional and personal lives, including experiences of discrimination and microaggressions.
- ▶ **Microaggressions:** Managing and addressing racial microaggressions and the subtle racist messages they convey
 - ▶ **Tokenism:** When people of color are given titles and roles (often in part motivated by an organization's desire to improve its "diversity optics"), without the necessary authority or power to be successful. This is a form of exploitation, marginalizing power and voice (even while expecting those tokenized to speak on behalf of all people of color) while the organization benefits.
 - ▶ **Interracial Relationships:** People of color with white partners who do not understand their experience and/or who have mixed-race children who are not accepted by their families, including people of color who are adopted into families from a culture different than their own
 - ▶ **Horizontal Oppression:** People of color navigating anti-black racism, anti-indigeneity directed at Native/Indigenous communities, and competing or fighting with other people of color for attention, recognition, or resources thus thwarting progress towards the solidarity that would otherwise collectivize greater power across communities of color
 - ▶ **Colorism:** Discrimination based on skin tone, specifically favoring light-skin over dark-skin, exists within every community. Tied to anti-black racism and European colonialism, colorism is driven by false notions of success, innocence, and beauty tied to those of lighter skin.

Facilitation Tip

To facilitate a people of color caucus, strive to be aware of the way racism affects those of different racial identities. Allow these experiences to emerge naturally, pose questions allowing participants to see themes across different experiences, and offer your own lived experience of racism, which can model vulnerability and invite others to share their own.

As a facilitator, you might notice certain dynamics between participants that often express themselves within people of color caucuses such as:

People of Color Caucuses: Common Dynamics

Using Caucus Space to First Ventilate and Express Frustration, Grief, and Anger

This is prerequisite to effective people of color caucusing. If you skip this step to avoid discomfort, it may impede long-term progress. However, if you stay in the “ventilation” stage, then additionally meaningful work to either examine internalized racism or organize against racial dynamics may never be realized. The primary goal of caucusing must center long-term consciousness-building and collectivizing power amongst participants.

Invisibilization of Native and Indigenous People

Indigenous heritage overlaps with ideologies of race, yet the experience of tribal nations and centuries of genocidal and colonial policies is a distinct feature of white supremacy in the U.S. which often is invisibilized. For more, check out [Centering Native People in Racial Justice](#). We must ensure acknowledgment of all Indigenous communities within the U.S., including Native Hawaiians and those who are not tied to a tribal nation yet [live under U.S. occupation](#). Further, we must unpack the racism and anti-indigeneity that caused and continues the intentional erasure Native people and culture.

Different Experiences Between Africans & African Americans

Due to anti-black racism in the U.S., Africans coming to the U.S. often share their experience of dealing with racism for the first time. African Americans born and raised in the US have a distinct experience compared to African immigrants who are exposed to anti-black racism through the media even prior to arriving in the U.S. Potential divisions between Africans and African American is an example of horizontal oppression, meaning the ways racism can pit people of color against each other. [This article](#) explores how the film Black Panther highlights these differences.

People of Asian Descent not Feeling Seen & the Model-Minority Myth

Due to conversations of racism often bring framed under a [Black-White Binary](#), people of Asian descent may not see their experiences of navigating racism reflected in typical conversations on racism, despite decades of anti-immigrant legislation targeting Asian communities in the U.S. Relatedly, the [Model-Minority Myth](#) projected onto Asian-American communities pits communities of color against each other and promotes a false belief that there is one way to behave as a person of color living in the U.S. Relevant articles include [Between Black and White: The Coloring of Asian Americans](#) and [The Invention of Asian Americans](#).

People of Color Caucuses: Common Dynamics

People Who are Multi-Racial Who Feel Like They Don't Belong Anywhere

People who identify as mixed race, particularly if they identify as white as well as a person of color, [may feel they do not belong](#) in a people of color-centered space due to ways racism systemically aims to wholly categorize people into a single race. When possible, offer multi-racial caucuses, yet people of color-centered spaces must also ensure those who identify as mixed race can share their unique experiences. Facilitators should not reinforce beliefs that participants must choose [one race over the other](#), but instead encourage exploration of their multiple racial identities as desired.

Noticeable Generational Differences

Facilitators may notice a difference of approach between those of different generations, such as people of color of older generations who carried a heavy burden of isolation, tokenism, and enduring explicit racism for decades, compared to younger generations who are prepared to further challenge power structures and systems of oppression with righteous urgency to create fundamental change. Engaging the wisdom of both older and younger generations caucuses can help foster a [new generation of racial justice advocates](#).

Perpetuating the American Myth of Meritocracy

[Meritocracy](#), or the idea a person is more worthy of comfort and success because of merit or hard work, is often used to measure deservedness by white people and within communities of color. In the context of immigration, a person may only value “high-skilled” immigrants (i.e. engineers and doctors) living in the U.S., which as a result devalues the basic rights and humanity of other immigrants seeking asylum, path to citizenship, economic opportunity, and fair wages. Relevant articles include [The Myth of White Meritocracy](#).

White-Passing People of Color Expressing Uncertainty

People of color who identify as white-passing (someone who may be seen by others as white) may express conflict about the unearned privilege of being able to “pass” as white, which can lead to the loss of cultural identity and belongingness and potentially guilt and shame. As a facilitator, if someone asks you “which caucus should I go to?”, don’t choose for them. Instead, ask the individual to reflect on their lived experience, consider what learning and strategies would feel most valuable for them in that moment, and treat their decision as an exploration to notice what comes up for them during discussion of the caucus they choose. Learn more at [What is White Passing Privilege?](#) and this [video](#).

White Caucuses

Generally speaking, many white people have been socialized to be uncomfortable with “no-agenda” social gatherings in the workplace, creating challenges for white caucuses. This reality, coupled with the racial anxiety prompted by examining structural racism and individual roles in perpetuating racism will, in some instances, result in a debilitating level of distress which can itself become a barrier to doing the necessary work. In the early stages of creating white caucuses, it can help to openly name and identify these common dynamics and accommodate this by building some structure to group meetings.

[How to Plan a White Caucus Agenda](#) explores these dynamics and notes that discussion topics for white caucus fall into three broad categories: Processing white feelings, retraining minds to learn new behaviors, and taking actions to shift power. Other questions you might explore within white caucus include:

- ➔ What are you doing to redistribute your privilege and power?
- ➔ How are you addressing the reality that "comfort is our enemy"? (i.e. white people need to be uncomfortable in order for the status quo to change, otherwise, comfort will be the enemy by thwarting progress)
- ➔ How are you building your own personal accountability towards meaningfully answering the above questions?

Facilitation Tip

One common theme that emerges within white caucuses is accountability: What does it mean to be accountable to people of color and racial justice work? Facilitators can guide participants by naming or inviting examples of being held accountable and exploring questions like: What did you learn? What kind of process was used? How did you feel? What was the outcome?

More questions to explore can be found in the FAQ of what makes an effective white caucus from Roots of Justice found [here](#).

White Caucuses: Common Dynamics

People Who Need to Feel “Comfortable”

Participants of a white caucus typically feel uncomfortable and must explore how to move through and move on from feelings of discomfort, guilt, and shame in order to develop a mutually accountable, brave, and compassionate learning space that is oriented toward building solidarity in the name of racial justice. As a strategy for transparency and accountability, be prepared to report back discussions to the people of color caucus if requested, although take care to do this in ways that do not center white participants’ needs and feelings or force people of color to relieve painful experiences.

White Caucuses: Common Dynamics

Evading Emotions As an antidote to white fragility, defensiveness, and other forms of racial anxiety, white caucus participants and facilitators must check-in with their feelings and pay attention to emotions. Listen for understanding. “Turn to wonder” when you become more aware of your defensiveness or start to judge others. If you are intellectualizing racial justice work or constantly challenging the process or facilitator, explore the roots of your reaction to reflect on what else might be challenging you.

Getting Detoured White caucuses can easily get caught up in logistics, scheduling, record keeping and process. Just get started! (As long as you are aligned with what colleagues of color are wanting.) Be prepared to make mistakes and offer compassion and grace in a mutually accountable space. Remember, white caucuses are designed to explore whiteness in ways that can help dismantle problematic processes, ways of being, and systems. Focus on white privilege and internalized [white supremacy culture](#) and consider hard questions every session such as: (1) What are you doing to redistribute your privilege and power? (2) How are you addressing the reality that “comfort is our enemy”? (3) How are you building in ways to ensure that your efforts are in relationship with and accountable to your colleagues of color?

Over Intellectualizing & Using Academic Jargon White people may feel and express empathy, act in solidarity, and take action against racism. However, because white people have not had personal experience as targets of racism and often lack the “muscles” to engage in authentic ways, it can seem easier to default to over-intellectualizing and getting caught up in the “head” vs. the “heart” work of anti-racism. This is a tactic often used to avoid the pain associated with (even unintentionally) harming people of color. However, this tactic creates a barrier to personal and community transformation. To combat this, facilitators must encourage vulnerability and risk-taking and invite participants to pay attention to and share what they are feeling rather than what they are thinking.

Thinking and Talking about Other White People and their Racism It’s easier to judge others rather than examine and undo our own internalized white superiority. Encourage participants to stay focused on their own experiences and personal accountability. Cultivating a space of trust and risk-taking will also create space where others begin to help one another in promoting mutual accountability.

White Caucuses: Common Dynamics

Questioning the Process: “This is a Waste of Time”

If there isn't a specific action taken or goal established immediately, sometimes white participants will express frustration, either directly or passive aggressively. Part of the work is expecting discomfort and non-closure in order to build an equitable future that hasn't truly yet existed. As part of the journey, caucusing is about engaging in deeper personal, interpersonal, and relational work in a way that is responsive and accountable to communities of color, including colleagues of color in their own affinity space.

Suggested Practices for Organizations Operationalizing Caucusing

Although caucusing does not have to be a formal process, you may desire to operationalize or make “official” caucusing within your organization. Doing so you may encounter questions or concerns of how it intersects or abides by various aspects of the organization such as its HR practices, policies and approaches to complying with existing anti-discrimination laws. The following suggestions are drawn from partner organizations that have actively engaged in caucusing, with special thanks to ACLU-WA:

1. Support and endorse caucus participation by offering it during work hours and encouraging participation, yet do not make it mandatory.
2. Provide staff with information in advance about what to expect and how caucusing will be integrated with and complement other planned equity and racial justice work.
3. Offer clarity as needed about how caucusing does and does not intersect with existing specific human resources policies and requirements. For example, some organizations share guidelines with staff using language such as the following):
 - a. **Complaints:** “Caucuses are not the place to address employee complaints about discrimination or harassment. Employees who have such concerns should refer to the relevant harassment and discrimination policies in [insert Organization Name’s] Employee Manual. Such complaints should be directed to [insert reporting instructions/contacts].”
 - b. **Confidentiality:** “For caucuses to have value, employees need to feel safe sharing their ideas and thoughts and therefore conversations in the caucus are confidential. However, please note that complaints regarding discrimination or harassment at work trigger specific actions under federal and state law, and managers present in the caucus are required to take action should such complaints arise.”
 - c. **Where to Direct Feedback:** “Suggestions for change arising out of the caucusing space should go to the [include equity team or appropriate organizational contact here] for further development and presentation as appropriate.”

Additional Resources

If you think you are ready to get started with caucusing, we encourage you to consider how this strategy will support a broad plan for racial justice learning and growth at your organization. If you don't know where to start, check out the [REJI Organizational Race Equity Toolkit](#), a curated set of resources and information for legal aid organizations and other equity & justice partners.

General Resources

- [Caucus and Affinity Groups, Racial Equity Tools](#)
- [Racial Identity Caucusing: A Strategy for Building Anti-Racist Collectives, Crossroads](#)
- [Dismantling Racism Workbook](#)
- [11-Step Guide to Understanding Race, Racism, and White Privilege](#)
- [Transforming Culture – An Examination of Workplace Values Through the Frame of White Dominant Culture, Merf Ehman](#)

Organizing People of Color Caucuses

- [Invisibility is the Modern Form of Racism Against Native Americans, Rebecca Nagle](#)
- [We Should Stop Saying “People of Color” When We Mean Black People, Joshua Adams](#)
- [Why People of Color Need Spaces Without White People, Kelsey Blackwell](#)
- [Race Caucusing in an Organizational Context: A POC Experience, Kad Smith](#)
- [How Racial Affinity Groups Saved My Life, Trina Moore-Southall](#)

Organizing White Caucuses

- [Separatism, Paul Kivel](#)
- [Becoming an Anti-Racist White Ally: How a White Affinity Group Can Help, Ali Michael and Mary C. Conger](#)
- [From White Racist to White Anti-Racist, Tema Okun](#)
- [How to Plan a White Caucus Agenda, Pippi Kessler](#)
[Waking Up White: A Discussion Guide, Jenny Truax and Grace Hagen](#)

Want to learn more? Contact [Omid Bagheri](#) at JustLead Washington, omidb@justleadwa.org.