

# WHITE DOMINANT CULTURE & SOMETHING DIFFERENT

## a worksheet

'Preservation of one's own culture does not require contempt or disrespect for other cultures.' –César Chávez

'All learning happens through culture. Thus, we all have culture.' –Zaretta Hammond

We all have culture which we express in observable ways, how we interact, what we value and hold to be true. No culture is better than another. As lovers of freedom and justice, we can aim to create inclusive spaces where we all can bring our best and highest selves. At the same time, we can be mindful of how our environments impede our ability to unleash our unlimited potential.

In our society, the dominant culture that shapes our institutions, our media, the way we see ourselves and each other is that of the white, middle class. Racial equity trainer Tema Okun suggests that the characteristics of white dominant culture can be harmful not in and of themselves but 'when they are used as norms and standards without being pro-actively named or chosen by the group.... These attitudes and behaviors can show up in any group or organization, whether it is white-led or predominantly white or people of color-led or predominantly people of color.'

In the table below, Okun calls the attitudes and behaviors in the [left column](#) aspects of white supremacist culture. The definition of white supremacist culture, or, white dominant culture, that we like to use is simple and expansive:

The explicit to subtle ways that the norms, preferences and fears of white European descended people overwhelmingly shape how we → organize our work and institutions, see ourselves and others, interact with one another and with time, and make decisions.

We invite you to take a look at the characteristics of white dominant culture in the [left hand column \('Norms of White Dominant Culture'\)](#). Think about how they might apply to you as an individual or play out in your organization. Take a look at the [right hand column](#) for some antidotes, or, alternatives, to white supremacist culture (['Something Different'](#)). How are you or could you apply those to yourself, your work or your organization?

What can you personally do to make a change, or pivot, from the **left column** to the **right column**? What can your organization do?

<b>'NORM' of White Dominant Culture</b>	<b>PIVOT</b>	<b>SOMETHING DIFFERENT</b>
<p><b>Either/or thinking</b> Believing people are racist or not racist, good or bad. Seeing incidents of inequity as isolated events.</p>		<p><b>Systems and complexity thinking</b> Understanding context and intersectionality. Seeing patterns, holding contradictory thoughts &amp; feelings simultaneously.</p>
<p><b>Paternalism</b> No consultation or transparency in decision making. Taking over campaigns, mediating and facilitating others.</p>		<p><b>Partnership</b> Decision making is clear, affected parties are consulted. Evaluations include staff at all levels. Leadership of Frontline communities is respected and nurtured.</p>
<p><b>Competition</b> Taking unearned credit for wins. Coopting local organizing efforts, or the work of other staff. Treating core campaign issues as more important than issues that other people are working on.</p>		<p><b>Collaboration</b> Taking time to build relationships based on trust. Focus is on 'building a bigger pie' instead of fighting over a slice. Mutual support and promotion of each other's campaigns and issues.</p>
<p><b>Power hoarding</b> Ideas from less senior people are treated as a threat, information and decision making is confidential. Holding on to resources, scarcity mindset.</p>		<p><b>Power sharing</b> Ideas at all levels are valued for the positional expertise they represent, ideas from others are requested and space is made for them to be heard. Budgets are made available for viewing, providing input on, and resources are shared equitably and appropriately.</p>
<p><b>Comfort with predominantly white leadership</b> Defaulting to all or mostly white leadership using urgency and lack of available, qualified people of color as justifications for doing so.</p>		<p><b>Leadership representative of the communities most affected by inequity</b> Take time to weave into the fabric of the organization a critical mass of equity-oriented people of color in leadership and on staff at large. Create inclusive culture. With graceful awareness, acknowledge that we're all unconsciously socialized to see physical features that are more white European, including lighter skin, as 'better'. Be mindful of how norms of the white, middle class can easily permeate the main organizational culture.</p>
<p><b>Individualism &amp; Separateness</b> Focus is on single charismatic leaders, Working in isolation, from each other and from other organizations.</p>		<p><b>Community &amp; Collectivism</b> Working together, working from a movement lens. Understanding that to change everything it takes everyone. Understanding interdependence of all social struggles. Working for all who are impacted by destruction and seizing of land, air, water and climate, especially those hit first and worse.</p>
<p><b>Fear of open conflict</b> Right to comfort. Politeness is valued over honesty. White fragility goes unchecked. Those who bring up discomfort for others are scapegoated. Useful feedback not given in</p>		<p><b>Direct and constructive feedback/ Growth and learning</b> Peers call each other in and continuously learn from each other. Managers are skilled at providing timely,</p>

<p>timely manner resulting in underperformance, lack of growth and distorted sense of how one is doing. Smaller problems left unattended become bigger ones down the road.</p>	<p>supportive feedback in culturally and individually responsive ways.</p>
<p><b>Priorities and timelines that perpetuate white supremacy culture</b> Sense of urgency for funder-driven deliverables, but not for community building, capacity building or equity work implementation.</p>	<p><b>Priorities and timelines set for sustainability and equity</b> People have space for what comes up that is important to address in the moment. More realistic timeframes set. Allocating time for the unexpected and based on how long things actually took last time.</p>
<p><b>Superiority of the nonprofit written word</b> If it's not written down, it is not valued. If it's written down in any way other than "Standard American English", it is seen as incorrect or less intelligent. Superiors "correct", edit and change documents to reflect a particular normalized language for that non-profit.</p>	<p><b>All forms of communication valued and taken seriously</b> Communication is treated simply as communication, stripped of "right" or "wrong", recognizing that an individual's use of language involves culture, power, lived experience and geography. Editing focuses solely on communicating more clearly to a particular audience and done with permission of the writer. Appreciation for how in some communities, info relayed effectively through relationship networks and the spoken word, not just the written word.</p>
<p><b>Comprehensiveness</b> Continual research and writing that leads nowhere. Creating multiple reports, groups, committees that are working in isolation and don't build on each other's work. Vision, values and goals that no one can remember nor easily refer to in a meeting.</p>	<p><b>Clarity &amp; alignment for action</b> Simple, memorizable and repeatable shared vision, values and goals.</p>
<p><b>Transactional relationships</b> Detached "professional" communication, for the purpose of completing a transaction and efficiency. Reaching out or acknowledging people only when you need something from them.</p>	<p><b>Transformational relationships</b> Building relationships internally and externally that are based on trust, understanding and shared commitments. Even in the simplest ways, taking time to see, greet and acknowledge each other to sustain caring connections, especially when there's 'no time' to do so. Space to appropriately be in one's majesty, and share in each other's cultural bounty.</p>

<p><b>Transactional goals</b> Transactional deliverables / quantifiable are ranked above meaningful engagement or qualitative goals. Rushing to achieve numbers.</p>	<p><b>Transformational goals</b> Working towards meaningful engagement with depth, quality; using qualitative goals in addition to whatever deliverables a foundation is asking for. The timeline for the deliverables includes enough time for quality.</p>
<p><b>Defensiveness</b> Nowhere to air grievances. Focus placed on protecting power instead of addressing harms, naming intention instead of acknowledging impact.</p>	<p><b>Vulnerability</b> Give and receive feedback non-defensively, have a clear structure to hear and address grievances. Skills are supported in being both self-critical and self-loving.</p>
<p><b>Progress is bigger, more</b> Focus on quantity; less focus is put on the cost of growth on people, communities and relationships.</p>	<p><b>Progress is sustainability and quality</b> Cost/ benefit analysis includes all costs. Focus is on sustainability.</p>
<p><b>Over-working as unstated norm</b> Encouraging people to work through weekends and into the night (directly or passively by setting up work plans that are unachievable in a 40 hr week) - ignoring how Black and Brown people have been historically and systemically requested to take on physically taxing work by white bosses.</p>	<p><b>Self Care/ Community Care</b> Actively encouraging a culture of self-care and community care in which people care about each other's physical and emotional wellbeing, support time boundaries and are considerate of time zone difficulties, parental needs, personal health issues, etc. Work plans include 20% of unscheduled time to enable space for the inevitable unpredictable tasks that emerge.</p>
<p><b>Perfectionism</b> Mistakes are seen as personal, reflect badly on the person - the person is seen as a mistake. Little time for learning.</p>	<p><b>Appreciation</b> Mistakes are valued as opportunities for learning. People verbally show their appreciation for one another</p>
<p><b>Skeptical management</b> As new hires slowly learn their job, it is subtly or directly communicated that they "must prove themselves", setting them up to hide mistakes or face discipline.</p>	<p><b>Supportive management</b> As new hires slowly learn their job they are supported, given freedom to make mistakes and learn from them. Supportive feedback is provided in real-time or soon thereafter.</p>
<p><b>White mediocrity</b> People of color given extra work, and scrutinized while white staff with more years and/or formal credentials are given a pass, or promoted.</p>	<p><b>Fair evaluations and just promotions</b> Based on a broader range of competencies than what has been historically valued (skills in the <a href="#">left column</a>)</p>

<p><b>Equity washing</b>          Signing on to big lofty values, but not enacting them. Hiring people of color but not supporting a culture shift to retain them, focusing on inclusion internally while the field work perpetuates inequities.</p>	<p><b>Real equity</b>          Focus on all dimensions of the organization</p>
<p><b>Official title outweighs experience</b>          Regardless of someone’s broad skill and experience base, they are treated as though they only know how to do what is in their job description, and their ideas are valued based on organizational rank. When offering to do more or different, are told to “stay in their lane”</p>	<p><b>Holistic view of people</b>          People’s experience and skills are understood to likely expand beyond what they have been hired to do, and opportunities to contribute more of who they are, are offered.</p>
<p><b>Changing the subject away from the role of race</b>          Limited understanding of how biases (preferences and dislikes) based on race and culture interplay with all aspects of our lives and systems. Seeing difference as bad. Perception that talking about biases is an attack on white people or that white people can’t handle the conversation.</p>	<p><b>Compassionate curiosity about how race, cultural differences, racial bias may be at play</b> With 360-degree compassion, assume there may be unconscious biases at work with respect to race to some extent. Create an environment that celebrates the courage to explore racial bias in all its forms, avoiding ‘gotcha’ and good person/bad person dynamics and camps. Acknowledge we all carry unconscious bias that is not helpful and each have a role in addressing it. Focus on building stamina and healing for self-reflection; focus on the consciousness and behaviors, not on shaming the person.</p>
<p><b>Narrow valuation of intelligence / performance</b>          Assessing higher value to <b>left column</b> attributes over <b>right column</b> attributes. Verbal/linguistic and logical-mathematical intelligences treated as superior</p>	<p><b>Broad appreciation of differences</b>          Valuing attributes on the <b>right column</b>. Including spaces for work that needs musical-rhythmic, visual-spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalistic intelligences.</p>

Adapted for ACCE from adaptation by Partners for Collaborative Change based on “White Supremacy Culture” By Tema Okun and Kenneth Jones, for large, majority white environmental organizations, using interviews with staff and partners of these organizations.

Tema Okun’s Partial Bibliography: Notes from People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond Workshop, Oakland, CA, spring 1999. Notes from Challenging White Supremacy Workshop, San Francisco, CA, spring 1999. Beverly Daniel Tatum, Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? NY: HarperCollins, 1997. Derrick Jensen, A Language Older Than Words. NY: Context Books, 2000. Paul Kivel, Uprooting Racism. PA: New Society Publishers, 1996. Anne Wilson Schaef, Living in Process. NY: Ballantine, 1998. For complete bibliography, see complete notebook for dRworks Dismantling Racism process. dRworks is a group of trainers, educators and organizers working to build strong progressive anti-racist organizations.