

Racial dynamics to watch for...

As you approach a large community-change initiative, pay attention to racial dynamics.

Consider the following examples. Talk about how you might prevent or correct these situations.

Planning and organizing

- The organizing committee recruits one person of color to “represent” the African American / Latino / or Asian “community.”
- The chair of the group selects a large, prosperous, white church—or another venue frequented by whites—as a regular meeting site for the organizing team.
- The group decides to rotate meeting sites between a prosperous white church and a local black church. White attendance is very low when the meeting takes place at the black church.
- The leadership of the organizing team is all white. Whites dominate the conversation and make most of the decisions.
- The organizers speak only English in groups that include people who have limited English skills.
- People use academic language or “insider” jargon when trying to recruit working class people or immigrants.
- The organizers schedule meetings in the middle of the day, assuming everyone can take a long lunch break.
- Leaders run meetings without considering cultural differences around time, or the need for some cultures to connect socially before getting down to business.

Dialogues and facilitation

- The white facilitator seems to lead most of the time; the person of color who is co-facilitating tends to do more note-taking.
- The white organizer checks in with the white facilitator about how things are going.
- One or two people of color in a circle of 10 are asked to speak for their whole group.



- People of color do most of the storytelling. Whites listen a lot, but they're not willing or encouraged to share stories on race on a deeper, more personal level; instead, they are more likely to talk about gender, etc.
- The conversation on race is dismissed and replaced by socio-economic or gender or sexual orientation (for example). Knowing that it is easier to talk about other issues, the facilitator is not willing to press the group to focus on race.
- The facilitator steps out of the neutral role and begins to “teach” the group.
- During the dialogue, participants make racially charged statements. The facilitators are inexperienced and uncomfortable, so they shut down the conversation.

Working on action

- Action groups are often dominated by whites. While people of color may be invited to participate, they are more “for show.” Old habits and behaviors continue, and whites stay in the lead.
- As people form new partnerships to address problems in the community, they hesitate to include people from different racial groups.
- People who are most affected by new policies are shut out. They have no voice in the policy making.
- Even though many new “actors” are speaking up and trying to make change, they are gradually closed out of the process, and things revert to “business as usual.”

Have you seen this happen in your community?

Are there other examples you can think of?

How can these dynamics be shifted to reflect equity among different racial groups?

Many of the ideas in this document were drawn from a workshop—Dismantling Racism: An Essential Element in Creating Community Change.