

AWARE-LA

Alliance of White Anti-Racists Everywhere - Los Angeles

~ www.awarela.org ~

If You Build It, They Will Come: What We Learned Along the Way

AWARE-LA has been incredibly fortunate to survive and thrive as an all-volunteer, grassroots racial justice organization for over a decade. The journey, however, has included steep climbs and scary falls, heartbreaking conflict, and numerous moments of doubt and near termination. It was not luck that has kept us going, however. Rather, dedication, reflection, collaboration, strategy and persistence proved essential in moving our efforts forward.

We started our monthly Saturday Dialogues in November of 2003. Three of us were inspired to create this intentional white anti-racist space for dialogue because of our transformative experiences at Brotherhood Sisterhood Camp, an annual week-long retreat for high school youth coordinated by the National Conference for Community and Justice. In seven days of what felt like non-stop dialogue and experiential activities, facilitated by committed and well-trained adults, we explored racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, ableism, and antisemitism. It was the vulnerable, honest, and uncomfortable confrontation across differences of power, privilege, and oppression that allowed us to build a truly connected multicultural community.

One of the key tools in the process was the use of affinity groups. On the day we journeyed into race and racism at all levels (personal, interpersonal, institutional, and cultural), we went in and out of race-based affinity groups. What felt incredibly awkward and uncomfortable the first time (“isn’t this racist to meet as a group of white people?”) became brilliantly appropriate, grounding, and healing with each successive meeting (“how can I get support from and in turn support my white peers in taking responsibility for racism?”). This space helped participants sustain a vigilant self-reflection on the dynamics of race, maintain a sensitive level of honesty with people of color, and find a path out of white denial and guilt and towards responsibility and action.

We recognized the value of a white anti-racist affinity group. We just wanted to have it more often. So we rented a space, put the word out, and waited to see who would show up. What we learned is that other white people were looking for just such a space. Not many at first. They came and went, sometimes came back again – some never missed a dialogue.

What follows is some of the history of AWARE-LA’s Saturday Dialogues and eventual expansion into an organization with different “wings” of white anti-racist work, broken up into some key lessons or suggestions.

IT'S EASIER TO CREATE SOMETHING YOU'VE EXPERIENCED OR SEEN.

Having experienced a structured, well-facilitated white affinity group was probably one of the greatest catalysts for not only starting, but also establishing our Saturday Dialogues with consistency. We knew it could work. We knew how beneficial it could be from personal lived experience. A theoretical sense of the importance of an affinity group isn't the same as the visceral experience of being in one that serves its core purpose.

If you've never actually been a part of a white affinity group or anti-racism training, we highly recommend you prioritize attending one.

Further, we've heard stories from many people who have participated in a white affinity group that did not go well. They'll point to dynamics such as a reliance on guilt and shame as the fabric of the conversation, competition between white people to be the "downest" or most able to call others out on their racism, or a space that was far too polite and evasive.

It was critical to our early formation that our model was rooted in what we had experienced ourselves: a non-competitive environment (we're all learners in this process, regardless of how long we've been thinking about this issues or how accepted we think we are in communities of color), a focus on responsibility and positive white anti-racist identity development rather than guilt and shame (we make space to process guilt and shame, but we don't believe in staying there), loving accountability and challenging (we are clear we are there to grow and confront our racism, we need each other to point out our growing edges and help us learn from mistakes, but we do it by calling each other in and tending to relationship).

THE POWER OF WORD OF MOUTH.

If we had immediately promoted our Saturday Dialogues far and wide (these were the days before social media), we probably would have been exposed to more critique and skepticism than favorable reception. That may be a different reality now – the circumstances and conditions for this work have certainly changed with the growth of [Showing Up for Racial Justice](#). But even now, there is a lot of misunderstanding about why white spaces can be beneficial to racial justice efforts. Critique will come eventually, and we all have to navigate and respond to it with open-mindedness and humility, but it's easier to do that once a group or community has been established around core principles and analysis.

We outreached for our Saturday Dialogues mainly by word of mouth for the first year. People who showed up knew for the most part what they were showing up for. They may have had questions or reservations, but they were open and even hopeful and willing to give it a try. That helped us build community and relationships instead of constantly having to defend our approach. It also helped us grow at a reasonable rate. If we had been flooded with people, we would have been excited but overwhelmed. We may not have been able to establish a basic set of principles and inclusive culture before many of those people decided to move on and try something else.

WE KEPT EACH OTHER COMPANY DURING THE SLOW MONTHS.

Early on, we had dialogues with somewhere between 6-12 people present. The dialogue was thought provoking and people shared honestly. We saw some people come back the next month and share about how the previous dialogue impacted them in so many unforeseen ways. And then the next month nobody would show up. Maybe people were busy, or maybe they felt uncomfortable, or they changed their minds about the group. We didn't know. And we could have interpreted the absence as an ominous sign. We certainly had enough meetings with low attendance to draw such negative conclusions.

But we decided that we'd roll with it. The most important thing was to keep it going. If it was just the three of us facilitators that month, or only one or two really committed participants who joined us, we would still check in. We'd scrap the agenda if we needed to. We'd end a little early if it made sense. We remained patient, and what we learned is that we couldn't predict how many people would show up. A slow month or two was not a referendum on our purpose. The next month often brought a slew of new people ready to dive in.

IT'S BEST TO HAVE A PARTNER OR A TEAM.

So much of what makes white anti-racism a challenging endeavor to sustain is the all-too-frequent feeling of isolation and alienation as a result of our political convictions or beliefs. Many of us have had family and friends scrutinize us for feeling so passionately about or being so focused on issues of race and racism. Many of us have internalized a voice of self-critique about our role in this work that probably varies from healthy to unhelpful.

Try not to do this work alone. Enlist the support of a friend or associate, or assemble a team that can take on this commitment with you. You'll be able to hold each other up during the challenges and share the burden of coordination. You don't need to be close friends or have a history of working with each other - what you need is a clear commitment to the project, some basic expectations for communication and follow through, and an intention to build trust over time with each other.

INVEST IN LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT AND SET UP ONE-ON-ONES.

Once you get started and people start showing up, you will occasionally or even quite often meet someone who seems to have a whole host of talent, passion, experience, skills or potential that you'd love for them to apply to this project. Don't wait for them to magically come to that conclusion themselves. Reach out to them personally. Ask them what they thought of the meeting and if they'd be willing to set up a one-on-one conversation with you.

When you have that one-on-one, learn about what compelled them to come to the meeting or to confront their whiteness in the first place. See if you can find out what is at the core of their interest in pursuing racial justice. By tapping into this internal motivation, you might be able to help them transfer these feelings into action by providing them an opportunity to take leadership.

AWARE-LA was able to grow and expand for a number of reasons, but one of the keys was a leadership development process. Some of these one-on-ones led to participants becoming leaders and stewards of the group. And if you listen to some of their stories today, they will often recall a key conversation with someone that made them feel recognized in the group, encouraged them to stay involved, and planted a seed for their own eventual leadership.

THERE SHOULD BE SOME STRUCTURE - NOT TOO MUCH, NOT TOO LITTLE.

Our Saturday Dialogues have gone through a number of cycles in terms of structure. We started with very basic agendas that relied on participants to ignite the dialogue and keep it going by asking each other questions and responding to emerging themes. Then we developed a more formal facilitation team that would meet as many as three times prior to the dialogue to craft a very detailed and structured agenda. At this point, the dialogues played out more like workshops with specific topics and goals, experiential activities and numerous set ups for conversation including self-reflection, pair-shares, small groups, and whole group debriefs. This eventually became an unsustainable work load for facilitators.

In the past few years we shifted to a rotating themes format (see Agenda Construction). This reduces the amount of preparation needed ahead of time and also offers a range of dialogue experiences for people who learn through different methods.

Probably the most important lesson from this was that people looked for a clear sense of structure. Remember, most of us still feel insecure and uncertain when having conversations about race and we want to know there is a container to hold us. And yet, too much structure can stifle the deep connections and vulnerability people want and need in this process.

LOOK FOR CRITICAL MASS AND THE OPPORTUNITY TO GROW FORMALLY.

When we started the dialogues, only one of our founding members had a long-term vision and hope for what we might become. And that was almost never a topic of our conversations, whether in planning the dialogues or in the dialogues themselves. The dialogues were our main focus and they met the needs of participants. Had we tried to develop other capacities such as external trainings or activism and base-building too early, we might have diverted much-needed attention and effort from the dialogues. As a result, we may not have been able to create the kind of space that ultimately proved to be fertile ground for successful expansion.

After a year of hosting dialogues, we then realized we had reached critical mass. We had enough participants who were now regular members. They showed up consistently, enhanced the dialogue, and shared that the dialogues helped them develop their own personal sense of identity rooted in anti-racism. At that point, it made sense to begin dreaming and proposing some new possibilities and steps for our work. A desire to engage people beyond our dialogue circle led to the formation of a committee to begin developing curriculum and exploring options for external workshops and trainings. Common experiences of awkward activist moments as white people led to an ad-hoc group forming to think about the strategic role of white anti-racist activists and the eventual formation of an activist/organizing wing.

CONNECT WITH LOCAL ORGS AND CONSIDER HOSTING AN OPEN HOUSE.

After several years, Saturday Dialogues had expanded in scope and structure. Six of us attended the White Privilege Conference together, presented on our dialogues, connected with other groups, and came away with the sense that what we were doing was important and worth formalizing further. We debriefed our experience and decided to form a Coordination Team. We were now a small organization that held monthly dialogues as a consciousness-raising and community building space, created a series of workshops that would eventually become a four-day summer institute, and formed a collective of activists who would mobilize others to show up for marches. We committed to remaining volunteer-led and grassroots.

We were now ready to get the word out more broadly about our work to attract white people beyond the reach of our personal networks. We also sought greater public recognition, which could invite feedback from and potential collaboration and partnership with community organizations. In order to initiate this process, we held a public event that we titled an “Open House.” We invited local people-of-color-led organizations, produced a short program to provide an overview of our work, and then invited questions and dialogue.

There was certainly some skepticism. Some organizations had a strong political opposition to the idea of a white anti-racist formation. Some people wondered how we would be accountable to people of color. There was also overwhelming excitement and support. Many participants expressed a sense of gratitude that finally a group of white folks were ready to do the hard work of engaging our own community rather than flock to communities of color as “saviors.” This event led to more formal relationships with some organizations and a host of well-respected individuals and organizers of color who would eventually engage us in regular, formative dialogue about liberatory models of accountability (see Accountability and Alliance Building).

BE MINDFUL OF THE ORGANIZATIONAL LIFECYCLE AND ANTICIPATE CONFLICT.

An organization will inevitably experience its share of internal and external conflicts, crises, and challenges. AWARE’s journey included periods in which the relevance of white anti-racist affinity groups was questioned. We struggled in our attempts to expand our activist and organizing work and saw factions develop that nearly tore the organization in half. We lost leaders and failed to plug holes in our leadership development system until we nearly had to close our doors for lack of capacity to keep things going. Luckily, we managed to get through these trials and we learned from them.

One dynamic to anticipate is the natural lifecycle of projects and organizations. The beginning is often tough, and if we can stick it out and get over the initial hump, there are exciting opportunities that follow. That success should never be taken for granted, however. You must continuously cultivate it through intentional effort (identify what works, then systematize it). You should also probably anticipate a decline. At some point, things won’t keep moving so smoothly, meetings and events won’t feel as exciting, or clarity about your purpose will become muddy. This is natural - it happens to every organization or project. And it’s ok, as

long as you normalize it, don't panic, remain patient, and turn into the skid rather than trying to avoid it.

The other episode to anticipate is conflict. We're human beings doing this sensitive work. We're often doing this on top of regular paid employment, raising families, or taking care of our health that has us tired and stretched thin. We might be outraged at the brutalities of the system or sad and overwhelmed by the hurt we witness and experience. And because we can't take it all out on the system itself, we easily, and typically unconsciously, transfer our unresolved emotions onto each other. A simple disagreement becomes a full-blown fight and we want others to take a side.

To prepare for this, develop some protocols for conflict. Consider identifying a few individuals or developing a team that will respond to conflict within the group - ideally folks with conflict resolution skills such as nonviolent communication strategies. What we learned the hard way years ago was that there are three different types of conflict that often play out in an organization or collective.

The first is personal, which includes hurt feelings, miscommunication, and personality dynamics. The key here is usually making space to talk directly with each other, listening non-defensively, recognizing each other's humanity, and finding ways to reconnect and repair ruptures.

The second is philosophical, which includes disagreements over analysis or how to pursue change. This might show up when deciding which organizations to align with, what campaigns to participate in, or what tactics to employ. These are decisions made based on assessments of conditions, worldviews, and beliefs about strategy. When conflict in this area arises, the key is creating space to dialogue and develop group consensus, including clarity about your theory of social change.

The third is structural, which includes the roles and responsibilities of group members, decision-making protocols, and the organization of workgroups or committees. Resolving conflict at this level can include checking in about personal capacity, revising communication systems, and shifting structure or resources for greater efficiency.

The problem is when these three different categories become conflated. You don't want a structural conflict (such as "I'm overwhelmed and being asked to do too much") to become a personal conflict ("I'm not being seen or recognized") or a philosophical conflict ("I guess this organization doesn't prioritize self-care as part of the work for liberation"). In this case, you might find a relatively easy solution by clarifying an individual's role, shifting some of their responsibilities to someone else, or asking what structural support they need to carry out their duties. When conflict becomes so loaded and intertwined, it gets much harder to resolve without loss of trust and commitment to the organization.

THE MORE YOU PUT IN, THE MORE YOU GET OUT.

There is no way around it; maintaining our Saturday Dialogues over the years has meant a lot of work. It has required many people digging deep into their personal reserves of energy and committing time on top of work, raising families, participating in other social justice organizations and movements, navigating intersectional oppressions, and practicing self-care. On multiple occasions, however, many of us would check out from a meeting with the same sentiment: “this morning I was dreading the fact that we had a planning meeting. I was busy and tired coming here. I’m leaving feeling so much better - energized, connected, and hopeful.”

This work is rewarding. It is humanizing. It is connective.

While not always easy or convenient, and certainly challenging on a personal level given the reality of white supremacy and our responsibility to confront and leverage our privilege for social change, the relationships that result from shared struggle and collaboration are profound. Our oft-repeated mantra is that the white affinity group is not THE work – it should not take the place of multiracial dialogue, community, and alliances for justice. But there is no doubt based on our experience that affinity groups often catalyze us to do the real work.

We hope that you find this journey and endeavor just as transformative.