

AWARE-LA

Alliance of White Anti-Racists Everywhere - Los Angeles

~ www.awarela.org ~

Orientation

At every Saturday Dialogue, we have newcomers take part in a brief orientation. This serves a few functions: a) it welcomes people in a direct fashion that can address some of their questions, hesitations, or uncertainties head on, b) breaks the ice and facilitates their participation in the dialogue, c) ensures that you have the chance to make meaningful connection with newcomers, especially for post-Dialogue follow up, and d) while not acting like a “how-down-are-you?” test, does give you the opportunity to make sure people are entering with good intentions.

The first question that often comes up is what to do with returning members while newcomers are in orientation. AWARE-LA has done a few different things. The first is that we ask newcomers to arrive 15 minutes early. With a 15-minute grace period for returning members arrival in which they can engage in informal conversation, this provides a 30-minute window of time for orientation before bringing everyone together to start the formal dialogue. In the past, we have also invited returning members to create small groups for quick go-around check-ins. We would set up two or three circles of chairs and as returning members entered, they would be ushered into one of the circles and invited to check in about how they are doing, informed that these groups would meet briefly until the orientation was complete.

You will need to figure out what your orientation looks like - how long or short it needs to be, how brief or extensive in content, and what to emphasize. Here is how AWARE-LA approaches its new member orientation:

1) We meaningfully welcome people and recognize the courage it takes to show up

Coming to an all-white space to talk about racism and work on racial justice issues is not an intuitive step. Nor is it comfortable or familiar for most people. Many come to the dialogue with a sense of doubt or skepticism, wondering what others would think of the decision.

We address this tension by acknowledging that it took courage to show up. We thank them for taking the step and feel confident that they will, at the very least, leave today's dialogue with a deeper understanding of the purpose of this space and group.

We also want to break the ice. We invite a go-around in which people introduce themselves with names and gender pronouns (this is a good opportunity to explain in detail why we do this) and what brought them to the meeting. The facilitator of the orientation space typically starts this off by sharing their own personal motivation to attend and model how to do so with brevity.

2) We set the tone and name the key foundations of the space

This is an opportunity for the facilitator to speak confidently and passionately about the purpose of this space. We strive to find a tone that suggests both humility and determination. Our group is always willing to evolve and meet the challenges of racial justice work with flexibility, and we believe firmly in white anti-racist affinity group spaces as a necessary tool.

We figure that people want to make sure they're in the right space. The question to address is "who is this for?" In AWARE-LA, we make it clear that this space is not exclusively reserved for people who have a certain political analysis or affiliation and does not require extensive knowledge or experience around issues of anti-racism. We see this space as open to any white person who is interested in honest conversation, reflection, and confrontation with race, racism, and white privilege. It is open to and strives to hold the needs of people at the very beginning of the journey of uncovering the realities of race and racism in the US and in their lives to people who have been on the journey for years.

We see the dialogue as being rooted in healthy learning dynamics, using love, respect, and dignity as our tools for listening and challenging each other when necessary. We do not believe in using guilt and shame to spur learning or changes in behavior, and we make space for people to feel and express the range of emotions that surface in reflecting upon race.

Formal membership or commitment to AWARE-LA or the Saturday Dialogues is not required. We make it clear that dialogues do not follow a set curriculum, and that people can drop in and out of meetings as they are interested or available throughout the year.

3) Make it clear why we do this as an all-white group

Whether or not people are comfortable with the format, we want to give newcomers language and rationale for our work. We do this by reading Why a White Space [\(link\)](#) together.

This is a good time to ask for feedback. Let the group know you'd love to hear from at least one or two people. They can a) ask questions, b) raise concerns, or c) talk about what resonates for them.

4) Let people know what they can expect

This can be brief, but spell out for them what's next. After this orientation, we'll join the larger group, do another round of brief check-ins. Then give a general overview of the topic and format of the dialogue. This is where we let them know about our four rotating formats [\(link\)](#), and personal solidarity [\(link\)](#).

5) Provide an overview of the group or organization running the dialogue

For AWARE-LA, this means letting people know that Saturday Dialogues are just one component of our work. We let them know about our other areas, namely our four-day summer institute and our activist/organizing workgroup.

You may not be at an organizational level of development. If the extent of your collective is hosting the dialogues, that's perfectly ok. You could take this time to name potential opportunities for greater involvement, letting newcomers know who they can talk to if they're interested after the dialogue.

6) Make space for questions

Don't let this go too long, however. If it starts to become dominated by one person's questions or if it feels like dialogue itself is starting to take place in the orientation, interrupt the process and suggest that you now move into the larger group. You can invite people to check in with you after the dialogue if any questions remain unresolved.