



## **Witnessing Whiteness: The Need to Talk About Race and How to Do It**

### **Group Structure, Process, and Communication Guidelines**

This guide offers some ideas for consideration, especially for those who have never before been part of a group discussion/workshop series process.

#### **Size**

- Keeping the group size manageable will allow each person to fully engage in the dialogue and offer his/her personal experiences and perspectives.
- The workshop series can be effectively completed with as few as 5 individuals, but it is not recommended for groups over 25 unless highly skilled facilitators are available.
- The larger the group size the more likely it is you will need more experienced facilitation experience to move the group forward successfully.

#### **Scheduling**

- Reading one chapter and completing the corresponding workshop(s) each month is recommended.
- The workshop series includes approved time modifications if the group cannot meet for the full time needed for the complete workshop. (For example, if the original workshop is designed for 2 hrs 30 minutes, a 1 hr. 30 minute option may be available at the end of the workshop agenda.)
- Implement the original workshop design whenever possible.

#### **Coordination**

- Someone will need to take responsibility for keeping things moving forward.
- Logistics to be managed include: date/time/location setting, sending reminders regarding meetings and what is to be read, and facilitation duties (downloads, facilitator preparation, implementation, materials creation/gathering).
- This responsibility can be shared, but a consistent coordinator/facilitation team is essential.

#### **Dialogue Process**

- *Note of caution:* When faced with challenging questions, it is common for resistance to arise and people often move the conversation into less challenging territory. This could mean allowing the focus on white privilege and racism to shift into a focus on other issues or the actions of people of color. Be mindful that anything that takes attention away from how we are facing race issues personally can indicate that we are hitting a place of defensiveness.

#### **Group Composition**

- Is your group mixed race or composed of people with a similar racial background?
- Many issues consistently arise when engaging in dialogues on race. Although not an exhaustive list, here are a few things you might consider:
  - *Mixed race* groups offer contrasting experiences. People can benefit from hearing about differential life experiences.
  - *Mixed race* groups can also reinforce a common problem: when white people are new to race dialogue, people of color are often perceived as resources in the room. This can

- mean that people of color end up carrying the burden of teaching the white people. A multi-racial group would need to address this issue.
- *Mixed race* groups offer practice on being open to talking about white privilege and racism in the presence of people of color. This can be effective when group members already have a trusting relationship with each other. With little or no prior relationship building, these conversations can be very difficult for all involved.
  - *Single race* groups offer people a chance to delve deeply into their own experiences with those with similar exposure and begin to practice keeping each other focused on white privilege. This can lead to deep insights. It can also lead to the group losing focus when resistances arise.
  - *Single race* groups offer people an opportunity to express ideas that usually are kept hidden out of fear or anxiety. Conversations can take place without worry of injuring or burdening people of different racial backgrounds.
  - *Single race* groups of white people can be seen as problematic for a number of reasons. If you are unsure of how to answer questions regarding this choice, refer to AWARE-LA's reasons for meeting in a white space for our group's rationale. (Available on the *witnessing whiteness* website on the AWARE-LA page)
- *A growth model*: You might consider starting with a *single race* group. This would allow those who are new to the dialogue to build skills prior to being required to practice them. Then the group can expand to create a broader, *mixed race* group that extends the dialogue and focuses on developing a witnessing practice.

## Creating a Safe Space

- Essential to recognize is that people enter dialogues on race with a lot of apprehension.
- It is important to take the time to create a sense of safety within the group for people to share deeply and express their true feelings. If people fear attack or vilification, they will remain guarded and open sharing will not happen.
- Here are a few issues involved in creating a safe space:
  - Acknowledge we are all entitled to be treated with respect and the group is engaged in a learning process. It is okay that we each pick up new ideas at different rates.
  - Discuss the role that challenge and critique will play in the group. Respectful challenging of ideas can be beneficial, while defensive critiques are destructive. Consider what each might look like so that the difference is clear to group members.
  - Create a shared agreement for how the group will deal with conflict in a way that maintains each person's humanity.

### **Discussion/Communication Guidelines**

(to be posted and reviewed prior to each workshop session)

Review the following guidelines before each session as part of Section I. Ask group participants to 1) add any additional guidelines they think would be helpful, and 2) pick one guideline to focus on while they participate in the workshop.

1. Speak from your own experience – Recognize the difference between your truth (with a little t) and the idea of The Truth (with a big T). Speak from little t.
  - Be respectful that my experiences may be different from yours.
2. It's a process.
  - Remember that not everything is obvious to everyone.
  - We may be on a similar journey, but the journey is not linear and we are all at different points.
  - Not everything we say has to be perfectly well formulated
3. Consider that issues may be *both/and* rather than *either/or*
4. Step Up – Take risks to grow and push past your barriers.
5. Step Back – Share speaking time and try to speak after others who have not spoken.
6. Listen and hear actively, but discuss civilly and sincerely.
7. Expressing strong feelings is okay and when strong feelings are expressed work at not taking it personally.
  - But, it is okay to ask for a few moments of personal time to regroup when you are experiencing strong emotion or hurt.
8. Impact matters more than intent.
9. Be open to notice and explore moments when defensiveness and denial emerges and be willing to be engaged about these moments.
10. Allow that biases aren't our fault. They don't reflect our character, just the messages we've consumed.