

Building Awareness of Traits of Dominant White Culture & Moving Towards Traits of Inclusive Culture

Strong “hero” leaders	Collaborative leaders
Closed door decision-making	Participatory decision-making
Sense of urgency	Urgent patience
Progress is bigger and more	Progress is sustainability and quality
Debate and linear thinking	Dialogue and mutual understanding
Objectivity	Transparent about Identity and Values
Right to comfort	Acceptance of discomfort
Fear of open conflict	Constructive feedback
Following rules	Co-creating rules
Power of written word & images	Power in relationships & witnessing
Professional credentials	Demonstrated abilities & lived experience
Perfectionism	Mistakes as opportunities for learning
Only one right way	Multiple truths and paths forward
Binary thinking: Either/Or	Creative thinking: Both/And
Pride and martyrdom	Humility & Vulnerability

The list of traits on the left are typically associated with success in the U.S. People in leadership positions are typically good at these traits. They are rewarded when they perform them well and disciplined or redirected when they do not, whether they are named explicitly or not.

They are called **traits of dominant white culture** because they have been instrumental in building a culture and way of doing business that **concentrates wealth and opportunities among white people, historically white men who own property.** They are interwoven with the founding of this country and the development of our capitalist economy. Because they are so widely held, they are uplifted by people of all races, genders and backgrounds and can be found in any organization or individual. While practicing these traits can yield achievements and discoveries, this standard of success harms individuals that do not conform, restricts creativity and innovation and limits the ability for everyone to access opportunities, wellness and prosperity.

Traits of inclusive culture, on the right, are rooted in cultures and practices that emphasize community, shared responsibility and long-term wellness over concentration of wealth and power.

Understanding these traits can help us see how and when they show up in ourselves and our organizations and what can be done to create a more inclusive culture of success.

Traits of Dominant White Culture

“Power over”

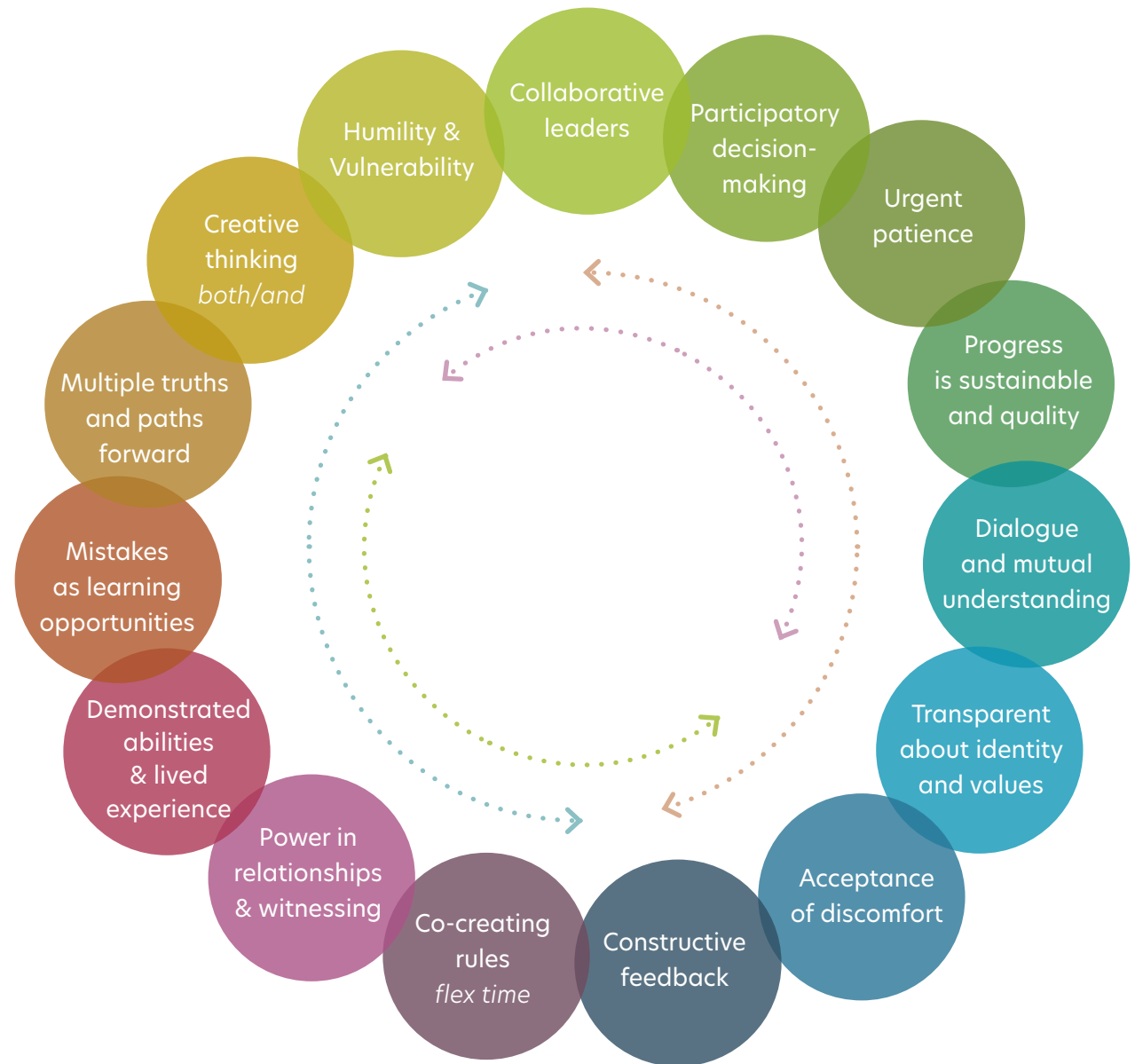
Power is concentrated in a few leaders who are recognized for their innate skill, charisma and societal privilege. They are encouraged to make decisions efficiently behind closed doors. Others are encouraged to follow rules and protect the comfort and position of people in power. When new ideas are introduced, they are judged on a polished presentation, linear thinking, and professional credentials. Efforts are oriented toward rapid growth and publicity.



Traits of Inclusive Culture

“Power with”

Power and responsibility are shared among people within a community, organization or coalition. Diversity within the group is considered a driving force for creativity and success. These practices are fundamentally rooted in trusting relationships and mutual understanding. They encourage transparency through dialogue, trust building through interpersonal connections and action through community organizing. Strategic action is understood as contextual, emergent and dynamic. Efforts are oriented toward sustainable growth and collective power building.





Examples

Some examples:

- Submitting a grant application and naming partners without talking to them,
- Finalizing an agenda that names presenters without asking them,
- Developing a lean timeline that doesn't include flexibility for emergent learning or unanticipated events,
- Sticking to scheduled meeting dates even though prep work and important conversations haven't happened,
- Responding to pressure from funders to "deliver results" before the work is ready, and
- Scheduling a film crew to create a video of your "success" when the work is just starting.



A fast-paced work culture, which emphasizes the need to beat competitors, impress funders or head-off a crisis, makes it difficult for inclusive relationship building and democratic decision-making.



The need for change is seen as urgent with the belief that solid, sustained progress requires patience, including investment in self-care, relationships, long-term thinking and democratic processes.

Some examples:

- Creating timelines and budgets that have flexibility for new learning and feedback,
- Allocating time for relationship building in work plans and timelines,
- Scaling back timelines if resources aren't adequate to be effective and sustain progress,
- Establishing clear expectations for who will be involved and how and shared agreements about the pace needed to maintain trust, and
- Reducing workload when organizational change or equity work require greater emotional and mental energy.

Some examples:

- When a leader communicates a decision, no reason is given. When asked why, the response is there are many factors that are too complicated for people to understand.
- When staff express concerns up the chain, the leader suddenly reverses their decision, but without engaging staff directly to understand their concerns.
- Important decisions are communicated through email without opportunity for broader context, discussion or input.



Decision making is clear to those with power and unclear to those without it.



Decision-making is clear for everyone. People impacted by decisions have opportunities to meaningfully participate in making decisions and giving feedback.

Some examples:

- Leaders encourage iterative cycles of consultation for important decisions with clear rules about who makes decisions and how.
- Group norms are created by the group and encourage candid feedback and questions without fear of retribution.
- When a leader communicates important decisions, they explain clearly who made the decisions, their rationale and how they got input and feedback from others.

Reflection Questions

- Which traits of dominant white culture do you notice most in your organization? *In yourself?*
- Which traits of inclusive culture do you notice most in your organization? *In yourself?*
- How and when do these traits show up? How do they shape your relationships and outcomes?
- What can you do to keep the dominant traits in check and nurture the inclusive traits?