

# PIVOTING AWAY FROM WHITE SUPREMACY CULTURE AT WORK

## a worksheet

In order to unlearn centuries of white supremacist conditioning and mythologies, we have no choice but to fall apart. In piecing ourselves back together (over and over again) we can more fully participate in this deeply communal project we call life with our hearts and souls intact and present. The qualities on the left side were taught to everyone for the “benefit” of white people. What could catalyze the unlearning of these cultural habits and support a shift towards something more liberatory?

As you read through this document as an individual or a group, notice (or star) on the left under “Norms of White Supremacy Culture” which norms have you witnessed or experienced. What do you recognize? Think about what the impacts might be, and who may experience these impacts. What is your role in changing these patterns? Notice (or star) on the right side under “Norms that Support a Culture of Dignity and Belonging” what you may also recognize as your current practice, or your organization’s practice. What do you want to nurture and grow?

Then, after noting the rows that have the most relevance to you or your organization (or the most stars), fill in the middle column with your strategy: What actions, commitments, practices, policies, values, skills, or goals will help you or us move from the left to the right? What will reduce harm and shake up the status quo towards greater equity, fairness, and justice?

Specifically, for each relevant “Pivot”, consider planning at three levels:

- A practice you can do each day
- A task you can complete in the next few months
- A bold audacious visionary goal that may take years to achieve

**What can you personally do to make a change, or pivot, from the left column to the right column? What can your organization do?**

Norms of White Supremacy Culture Patterns and Examples	PIVOT	Norms that Support a Culture of Dignity and Belonging
<p><b>Paternalism and Power Hoarding</b> No consultation or transparency in decision making. Taking over campaigns, meeting design or meeting facilitation. Ideas from below are treated as a threat, information and decision</p>		<p><b>Partnership and Power Sharing</b> Decision making is clear, affected parties are consulted. Evaluations include staff at all levels. Leadership of frontline communities is respected. Ideas at all levels are valued for the</p>

<p>making is confidential. Holding on to resources. Gatekeeping who is heard and who is held up as an expert. Speaking over and for others.</p> <p><i>"I think what they really meant to say was..."</i></p>		<p>positional expertise they represent, ideas from others are requested and space is made for them to be heard. Budgets are made available for viewing and providing input on. Resources are shared equitably and appropriately. A tool such as <a href="#">DARCCi</a> is used</p>
<p><b>Individualism</b> Focus is on single charismatic or high profile leaders. Working in isolation, from each other and from other organizations.</p> <p><i>Lifting up the same "movement leaders" on all communication opportunities and conference panels. Giving speakers of color less time and smaller stages to share their knowledge.</i></p>		<p><b>Community</b> Working together, working from a movement lens. Understanding that to change everything it takes everyone.</p>
<p><b>Fear of Open Conflict</b> Right to comfort. Politeness is valued over honesty. White fragility goes unchecked. Those who bring up critical feedback or discomfort are blamed for creating a problem where "none existed". "Tone policing" or requesting someone change their tone towards one that is devoid of feeling.</p> <p><i>"If they weren't so angry, I could hear what they have to say."</i></p>		<p><b>Direct and Constructive Feedback/ Growth and Learning</b> Peers call each other in and continuously learn from each other.</p>
<p><b>Hiding in Plain Sight</b> Remaining silent while harm unfolds, or choosing to be a wallflower during conversations about power and privilege and (if white) harnessing the invisibility of whiteness as the norm. If called upon, finding refuge in academic language. Potentially stemming from a combination of perfectionism, white mediocrity, white fragility and white guilt.</p>		<p><b>Showing up Imperfectly</b> Participation that is honest, vulnerable and transparent. Working towards unpacking and naming what is actually happening so that true collaboration among people who are showing up with their full selves is possible.</p>

<p><i>"I'm just here to listen."</i></p>		
<p><b>Priorities and Timelines That Perpetuate White Supremacy Culture</b> Sense of urgency for funder-driven deliverables, but not for community building or equity work implementation.</p> <p><i>"I know in an ideal world we would have time for that [_____equity initiative], but we just don't right now."</i></p>		<p><b>Priorities and Timelines set for Sustainability and Equity</b> People have space for what comes up that is important to address in the moment.</p>
<p><b>Superiority of the White Non-profit Written Word</b> If it's not written down, it is not valued. If it's written down in any way other than "Standard American English", it is seen as incorrect or invalid.</p> <p><i>Superiors "correct", edit and change documents to reflect a particular normalized language for that non-profit. Deeming language that deviates from this as "improper".</i></p>		<p><b>All Forms of Communication Valued and Taken Seriously</b> Communication is treated simply as communication, stripped of "right" or "wrong", recognizing that an individual's use of language involves culture, power, field, and geography. Editing focuses solely on communicating more clearly to a particular audience and done with permission of the writer.</p>
<p><b>Transactional Relationships</b> Detached, cold "professional" communication, for the purpose of completing a transaction.</p> <p><i>"Hi, nice to meet you, this is what I need from you."</i></p>		<p><b>Transformational Relationships</b> Building relationships internally and externally that are based on trust, understanding and shared commitments.</p>
<p><b>Progress is Bigger, More</b> Focus on quantity; less focus is put on the cost of growth on people, communities and relationships. This leads to <b>Transactional Goals</b>. Transactional quantifiable deliverables are ranked above meaningful engagement or qualitative goals.</p>		<p><b>Transformational Goals</b> Working towards meaningful engagement with depth and quality. Using qualitative goals in addition to whatever deliverables a funder is asking for. The timeline for deliverables factors in all costs in the cost-benefit analysis, and</p>

<p>Rushing to achieve numbers.</p> <p><i>“In order to reduce carbon 1% in this sector, we need to efficiently go in, win, and then move on to the next project.”</i></p>		<p>centers sustainability for all involved.</p>
<p><b>Defensiveness</b> Nowhere to air grievances. Focus placed on protecting power instead of addressing harms. Naming good intentions instead of acknowledging harmful impacts.</p> <p><i>“Well I didn’t mean it that way.”</i></p>		<p><b>Vulnerability</b> Give and receive feedback non-defensively, have a clear structure to hear and address grievances. Skills are supported in being both self-critical and self-loving.</p>
<p><b>Toxic Work Conditions/Over-working as Unstated Norm.</b> Encouraging people to work through weekends and into the night (directly or passively by setting up work plans that are unachievable in a 40 hr week).</p> <p><i>Just take vacation time whenever you want, as long as the goals (that I set for you) are achieved on time.”</i></p>		<p><b>Self Care/ Community Care</b> Actively encouraging a culture of self-care and community care, in which people care about each other’s physical and emotional well-being, support time boundaries and are considerate of time zone difficulties, parental needs, personal health and a spectrum of physical abilities and needs. Work plans include 20% of unscheduled time to enable space for the inevitable unpredictable tasks that emerge.</p>
<p><b>Perfectionism</b> Mistakes are seen as personal and reflect badly on the person. Little to no time for learning. Tendency to over-compensate for insecurity or be more comprehensive than necessary</p> <p><i>Creating unnecessary reports, groups, and committees that don’t build on each other’s work, but instead create more work</i></p>		<p><b>Appreciation</b> Mistakes are valued as opportunities for learning. People show their appreciation for one another. The time spent preparing, researching, writing and planning fits the need and does not stem from insecurity.</p>
<p><b>Rigidity</b> Holding on to the way things have been. Negating</p>		<p><b>Fluidity</b> Honoring the histories and roots of a project</p>

<p>new ideas, and “out-of-the box” thinking. Experiencing newness as threatening and too risky. Not accepting input as important enough to question one’s thinking. Implies that the ideas or needs of others are irrelevant and inferior. Rigidity can also show up as having no time to address unexpected events or what is actually needed in the moment.</p> <p><i>“These new people (with new ideas) just don’t understand or appreciate what we’ve been doing here, how can we get them to do things the right way?”</i></p>		<p>while at the same time proactively inviting innovation and the generation of new ideas and new ways of working. This also means having capacity and schedules that are spacious enough to be able to pivot quickly when the unexpected inevitably occurs.</p>
<p><b>Skeptical Management</b> As new hires slowly learn their job, it is subtly or directly communicated that they “must prove themselves”, setting them up to hide mistakes or face discipline.</p> <p><i>“Based on your resume, I’m not sure you are qualified to take on this responsibility, but we’ll give you a chance and see how you do.”</i></p>		<p><b>Supportive Management</b> As new hires slowly learn their job they are supported with the resources they need to adequately learn any new skills they don’t arrive with and are encouraged to make mistakes and learn from them.</p>
<p><b>White Mediocrity</b> Staff of color are given extra work, and scrutinized while poorly performing white staff are given a pass, extra support, or even promoted. Shifting responsibility of equity learning onto targets of inequity. This is the other side of the coin of <b>BIPOC Tokenism</b> in which staff of color are not given honest feedback or support to learn out of fear of being called out for scrutinizing staff of color.</p> <p><i>“You tell me how to be an ally.”</i></p>		<p><b>Fair Evaluations and Just Promotions</b> Honest feedback and fair evaluations based on a broader range of competencies than what has been historically valued (skills in the left column).</p>
<p><b>Equity Washing</b></p>		<p><b>Real Equity</b></p>

<p>Signing on to big lofty values, but not enacting them. Hiring staff of color (into lower-ranking positions) and not supporting a culture shift to retain them. Focusing on inclusion internally while the field work perpetuates inequities.</p> <p><i>“We underwent a huge diversity initiative and now we have doubled how many people of color work here (in entry-level positions).”</i></p>		<p>Focus in depth on all dimensions of the organization, internally <i>and</i> externally; making space for transformative shifts in organizational theory of change, strategic plans, campaign goals, vision, mission, values, HR policies, evaluations, job descriptions, leadership structure, decision-making processes, pay structure, partnership protocols.</p>
<p><b>Official Title Outweighs Experience</b> Regardless of someone’s broad skill and experience base, staff or volunteers are treated as though they only know how to do what is in their job description, and their ideas are valued based on organizational rank.</p> <p><i>When someone offers to do more or different work, they are told to “stay in their lane”.</i></p>		<p><b>Holistic View of People</b> People’s experience and skills are understood to likely expand beyond what they have been hired to do, and opportunities are offered to contribute more of who they are and what they bring.</p>
<p><b>Pretending History and Current Social and Political Realities Don’t Exist</b> Imagining that each interaction or decision that someone makes is just an innocent stand-alone thing. Equating your experience with the experience of others, imagining you fully understand something that you don’t.</p> <p><i>“I face discrimination too. I experienced the same thing.”</i></p>		<p><b>Speaking and Acting with Consideration that Historical and Social Context Matters</b> Acknowledging what you don’t know or understand from life experience, and that while everyone may face stigma - they are not the same.</p>
<p><b>Either/or Thinking</b> Believing people are racist or not racist, good or bad. Seeing incidents of inequity as isolated events.</p> <p><i>“I’m not racist - you are, they are.” Leaving out what might be uncomfortable or</i></p>		<p><b>Systems Thinking</b> Understanding context and intersectionality. Recognizing the repeating patterns that reinforce a white supremacist system. Holding contradictory thoughts &amp; feelings simultaneously.</p>

<i>complex.</i>		
<p><b>Narrow Assessment of Intelligence or Performance</b> Assessing higher value to left column attributes over right column attributes.</p> <p><i>“We just can’t find diverse applicants who are qualified for this job”</i></p>		<p><b>Broad Appreciation of Differences</b> Valuing attributes on the right column.</p>
<p><b>View of Nature as Separate from Humanity</b> Perpetuating the worldview that nature is “empty” of humans - and forgetting that humans don’t breathe air, drink water or rely on a stable climate. Stuck in a binary of either concern for nature, or concern for humans (who exist outside of the environment).</p> <p><i>Using polar bears as a symbol for climate change.</i></p>		<p><b>Humans as Part of Nature</b> Understanding interdependence of social and environmental struggles. Working for all who are impacted by destruction of land, air, water and climate, especially those hit first and worst.</p>

Developed by Levana Saxon, with support from Zara Zimbardo of Partners for Collaborative Change, for majority white organizations, informed by interviews with staff and partners of these organizations. Inspired, and drawing heavily from by [“White Supremacy Culture”](#) work by Tema Okun and Kenneth Jones. For a version of this document specifically integrated with the Jemez Principles for Democratic Organizing that was developed for environmental organizations, see our [Pivoting to Principled Practice of Jemez](#).

