

To prepare for the session, read this [article](#) below by Marita Phelps and Molly Penn at Penn Creative Strategy and complete the reflection questions..

Designing Power: How to help Anti-Racism Take Root in Your Organization

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Many of us are asking ourselves, in both our personal lives and professional roles: What can I do to end racism and create equity for people of color? Last year, many formerly complacent Americans woke up. The deaths of people like Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Eric Garner, and Tamir Rice—and the xenophobia and hate crimes committed against Asian Americans—served as a tipping point for people of all races in our country. Collectively, as a nation, we began to act against racism.

But 2020 was not the beginning of racial profiling nor the killing of innocent African Americans at the hands of the police in the United States. These horrific realities have been festering in our nation for decades, due to systems that institutionalize racism and disproportionately allocate power.

In this blog article we will explain how to design structural opportunities for anti-racism to take root in your organization.

It Starts At The Top

Traditional hierarchy is one of the biggest problems when it comes to dismantling white supremacy and distributing power. The unfortunate reality is that the leadership of nonprofit organizations does not represent the racial and ethnic diversity of the United States. According to [Race to Lead](#), People of Color represented a mere 17 percent of Executive Directors or CEOs in 2019. Most executives in nonprofit organizations are white, and this percentage does not reflect the racial demographics of the country. This is sobering evidence of the deep connection between race and positional power.

Shared Definitions

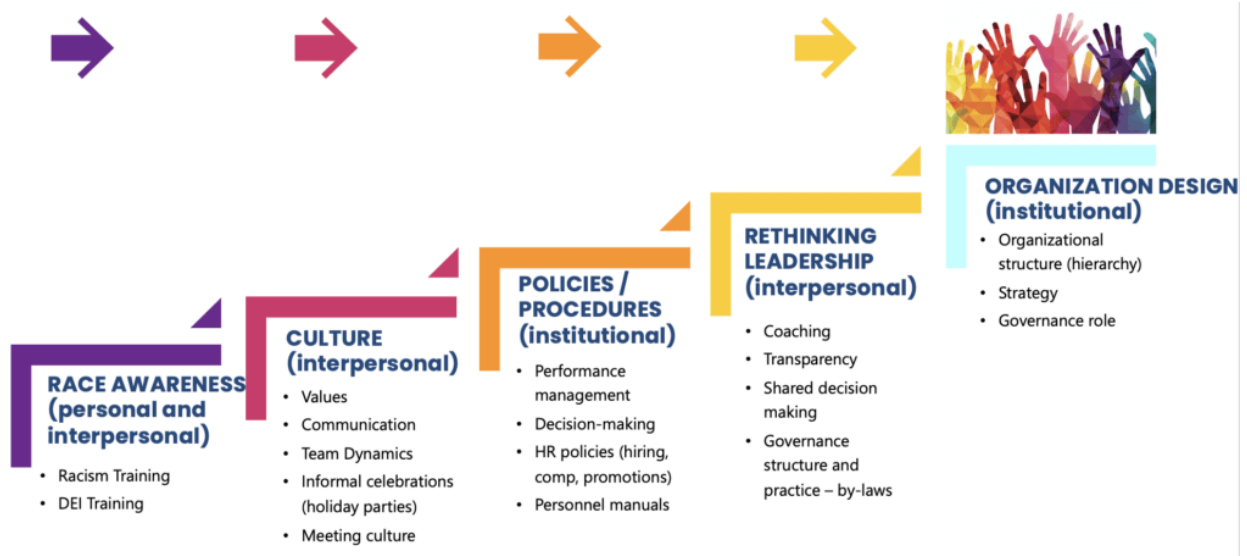
Creating a shared vocabulary is important to ensure we are all working toward the same goals. Here is what we mean by designing power.

- **Designing** is the understanding that organizations are systems made up of individuals with explicit agreements about how they work together. While traditional notions of hierarchy are the default, these systems can be “designed” in different ways. If we want to imbed equity in our organizations, we must design with equity in mind.
- **Power** in organizations is about decision-making. Typically, those at the top make the decisions, regardless of their experience with the decisions in question. This makes “authority” positional—related to a title in the organization, not experience.

Working Toward Institutional Change In Organizations

Designing power is not just about reshuffling the hierarchy. The problems with traditional hierarchy transcend the organizational chart and exist in the life-giving (or life-taking) arteries of your agency, such as culture and policies. Even if you are not a senior leader in your organization, you can begin to make shifts by thinking more systemically about where power resides and what form it takes.

We have identified five steps you can begin to take today for long-term change.



Race Awareness

First, take a journey through the multiple levels where racism resides, such as internalized, interpersonal, institutional, and systemic. Through racism training, implicit bias training, and DEI training your organization can increase its collective understanding of racism and shared definitions.

- **Understanding of racism.** It is critical to understand how racism is operating in society. How is racism expressed systemically? What races have been historically marginalized? What groups have historically been given power? After exploring these questions, employees will be better equipped to detect how racism shows up in your organization.
- **Common language.** Like our explanation of “designing” and “power,” everyone needs to know in some shared fashion what concepts like racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion mean.

Culture

Think of culture as the air your employees and you breathe. While it is crucial to survival, it cannot be seen and often is taken for granted. Culture includes values, communication, team dynamics, informal celebrations such as holiday

parties, and even meeting norms. It is the “secret sauce” of organizational change—it can either facilitate positive change or inhibit it.

Keep these tips in mind when working to design a culture of anti-racism.

- It is not the job of any one person to create racial equity; rather, everyone contributes to and is responsible for a culture of racial equity.
- Purpose leads to values, which lead to principles, which lead to practice. If your organization has not articulated values, or if your values do not reflect the way people behave, then you have culture work to do.
- The ability to communicate with others respectfully and without bias is foundational to a healthy and racially equitable culture.
- Trust is a hallmark of healthy culture; people must feel comfortable speaking up about things they need or want to see differently.

Policies And Procedures

Institutional practices such as performance management, decision-making channels, and HR policies often work to the benefit of white people and the detriment of people of color, usually unintentionally or inadvertently.

Here are some practical ways to create institutional equity.

- Redesign your hiring practices with an equity lens
- Convey decision-making authority to anyone in the organization, providing clear criteria for how to make decisions
- To share power in an organizational structure, intentionally move authority away from the person at the top of the organization and toward others across the organization.
- Train people at all levels in conflict management so they can be prepared to constructively disagree or express different opinions without causing harm to the person making the decision
- Reward performance that upholds the organization’s values by using a competency-based performance management system

Rethinking Leadership

Organizational design and distributed power are directly affected by an organization's leadership structure and practices such as coaching, transparency, shared decision making, and governance. Leaders must increase their own awareness of racism, be committed to changing the culture, and proactively champion equitable policies and procedures.

Additionally, rethinking leadership could mean the following:

- The role of supervisors shifts from directive to facilitative, providing coaching and support.
- All supervisors at all levels work hard to reinforce new anti-racist models.
- The organization adopts a distributed leadership approach.

Organizational Design

This final step toward institutional change is all about an organization's structure, strategy, and role in governance. As referenced at the beginning of this article, the goal is to dismantle traditional notions of hierarchy because they perpetuate white supremacy. But first, you must change the DNA of your organization so that the system does not pull you back toward a top-down leadership approach.

The good news is that our nation is a work in progress, and younger generations are helping to shepherd in new change. A recent study by TSNE Missionworks in Boston found that Millennial leaders of color are interested in exploring new structures that better distribute power throughout the organization, rather than centralizing it in one or a few individuals. According to the report, respondents are "exploring alternate organizational structures that flatten the hierarchy of leadership and allow organizational knowledge to be shared across departments, and, in turn, build the leadership of all staff members from top to bottom."

Reflection Questions

- When you think of power, how would you personally define it? (As many definitions as are true for you)
- What are different types of power that you see in the world?
- What kind of power do you value the most? The least?
- What are examples of power you've seen wielded well? Wielded poorly?
- How does hierarchy impact you in your role and how you relate to your own power, and the power of others within the organization?