

INFILTRATION

HOW THE VALUES OF OPPRESSIVE SYSTEMS TEND TO ARISE IN ORGANIZATIONS (AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT)

Because of how deeply systems of oppression are institutionalized in our society and culture, it is almost inevitable that symptoms and manifestations of these systems will arise even in our organizations working to do good. Often, the values of oppressive systems (such as white supremacy/racism, patriarchy/sexism, ableism, and others) arise in subtle ways that can go unnoticed, especially when the story we have about our organization is that we “aren’t oppressive” or “don’t have those problems” because of our progressive/social justice mission. Below are some problems related to systems of oppression that we often see in progressive organizations.

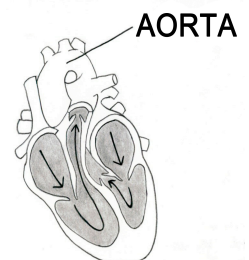
RED FLAGS AND INDICATORS

White Supremacy, Anti-Black Racism, Islamo-racism: race, culture, ethnicity, color, language, religion

- the assumption of whiteness as the norm, universalizing white experience
- talk about needing to “pull” people of color in, or “reach out” to people of color to “diversify” the organization, rather than needing to change the organization's culture, build skills and analysis so that people of color will want to/be willing to join (and stay in) the organization
- an articulated desire for racial diversity as a goal unto itself, without an analysis about what racial diversity accomplishes
- intentional effort made to hire people of color, without addressing the way the workplace may be hostile, uncomfortable, or alienating to people of color; setting POC up to fail
- leadership or public face of the organization is disproportionately white
- members of the organization as a whole are majority or predominantly white
- higher turnover of people of color
- lack of adequate translation for folks who don't have English as a first language
- the assumption that "we don't have racism here"
- de-racializing: removing or not including race in discussions, not recognizing or addressing the impacts of race on the organization and the people in it
- challenging the creation or existence of people of color spaces, not understanding the need for them
- conversations dominated by white people, white voices held in higher esteem
- downplaying or ignoring organizational concerns raised by people of color

Patriarchy, Sexism, Cis-sexism, Transphobia: gender, gender expression

- policies and bylaws that use gender binary language (he/she) rather than gender neutral pronouns (they/them)



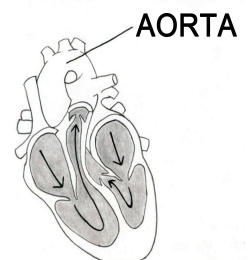
- office space or work space has gender segregated bathrooms
- needs of parents not accounted for (members expected to attend off-hours meetings on short notice, no time/space for nursing parents to pump breastmilk, etc.)
- insufficient parental leave, or parental leave only for women/birth parents
- leadership or public face of the organization is disproportionately male
- men's voices dominate at meetings
- men's opinions are held in higher esteem
- men feel more entitled to propose changes to policies or practices in order to get their needs met
- organization is majority or predominantly men
- higher turnover of women and gender nonconforming people
- women do the majority of the unrecognized and undervalued work: taking notes, cleaning, answering the phones, taking care of co-workers, recognizing and appreciating others' work
- men restating words, statements, ideas of women, and gender nonconforming people in meetings, or not listening to what women and gender nonconforming people are saying
- health benefits do not cover trans health care, reproductive health, or other forms of gendered care
- failure to refer to trans people by their correct pronouns

Capitalism, Classism: class, income, wealth

- food not provided at meetings (especially long meetings or ones that fall during meal hours)
- meetings held outside of work hours (in evenings or on weekends)
- low paying jobs, with the assumption that people will be able to coast off their partner's jobs
- not providing health benefits, retirement plans
- expectation to work more than 40 hours/week, or long hours to "get the job done"
- people who have more money considered more trustworthy, valuable, legitimate, intelligent
- assuming that everyone has the same class background and needs the same money (equality)
- requiring a degree to help a position when the position doesn't require specialized knowledge or licensing that can *only* be gained through formal education
- devaluing life experience, placing higher value on institutional education, or conflating institutional education with "intelligence"
- universalizing middle class experience: assuming it as the norm

Ableism, Sizeism, Anti-fat Oppression: mental, physical, and emotional way of being

- only full time workers get health benefits
- un-diversified work structure with no room or options for people with disabilities
- no options for part time work
- if you can't work, you don't get paid
- if you can't work fast or "hard" enough, you aren't hired, or should quit/leave



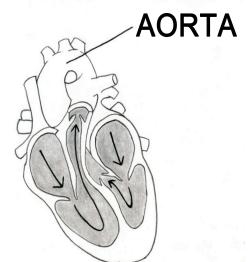
- not providing health benefits, retirement plans
- expectation to work more than 40 hours/week, or long hours to “get the job done”
- using the word “crazy” in ways that equate it with wrong, bad, or broken
- casual use words like “retarded,” and “lame” to mean unpopular, bad, or negative
- work values that build burnout culture, with no support provided when people are unhealthily stressed or burned out (they often instead are shut out or devalued)
- not taking access needs seriously; not prioritizing wheelchair accessible spaces, scent free/reduced spaces
- fat jokes, fat shaming, and weight loss talk in the workplace
- health benefits and other benefits that incentivize weight loss (more affordable insurance for those with low “BMI”, for example)
- employer-sponsored weight-loss programs
- concern trolling about weight or mental health from supervisors

Homophobia and Heteronormativity: sexual orientation, family structure, gender expression

- assumption of straightness as the norm: lack of recognition or visibility of queer people, assuming people are straight
- offhand comments, jokes that equate gay with bad, weak, lesser, gross
- tokenizing queer people, asking intrusive questions about lifestyle or family structure
- expecting queer people to remain closeted
- celebrating traditional family structures and milestones (legal marriage, the birth of children), but not nontraditional family structures (polyamorous relationships, adoption, supporting relatives aside from a spouse or child, etc.)
- low paying jobs, with the assumption that people will be able to coast off their partner's jobs
- higher turnover of queer people
- health benefits don't cover same sex partners, or only cover legal spouses
- harassing or socially ostracizing people with non-normative gender behaviors

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- Who are the leaders of the organization? How did they get there?
- Who do people go to to get questions answered?
- Who are the ‘experts’?
- Who holds the power in the organization? Whose opinions and voices matter most?
- What is the division of labor in the organization?
- What types of knowledge and skills are valued? Which are not valued?
- Are there types of work that are unpaid? What are they?
- What language is used around sexuality?
- How is gender identity talked about and addressed?
- Are there people who speak English as a second language in the organization? If so, what



structures, if any, exist for language development, interpretation and translation, to ensure their full and knowledgeable participation?

- Is the organization willing to make changes to become more inclusive to marginalized members?

TACTICS FOR INTERRUPTING AND CHANGE-MAKING

Exit surveys

High turnover is usually a red flag that there's something going on within the organization that's leading people to feel unsatisfied, uncomfortable, or unwilling to stay with the organization. This can be structural, interpersonal, or both. When this turnover is greater in some groups of people (women, people of color) than others, that's an even more sure sign that there's something the organization needs to address. Try to understand why people are leaving the organization. Collect exit surveys from all members that leave the organization, to help capture the factors contributing to people's decisions to leave. You can even contact folks who have been gone from the organization for a while to see if they'd be willing to offer input retroactively.

People are often more willing/able to be honest about their decisions and the factors contributing to them after they've left the organization, when they have less concern about how their honesty will impact their job stability, pay, or social relationships. So, it can be helpful to ask people for this information after they've left.

Ongoing individual and organizational education

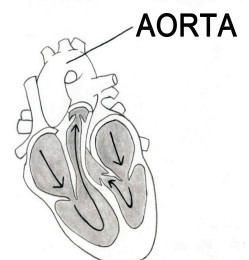
Offer educational opportunities for the whole group, to catalyze discussion, build trust, and facilitate ongoing conversations with the membership. Also, be sure to remember that “the work is not the workshop”—a good workshop will leave your organization with a better understanding of the ongoing work you need to be doing to better address systemic power dynamics within the organization. It should leave you with a long list of work to do!

Clearly define roles and expectations.

Ensure all jobs (especially ones that often get overlooked and then pushed to women, such as note taking, cleaning, phone answering, etc.) are included and accounted for and assigned. They can be assigned to one job role, or they can intentionally be rotated between all workers or groups of workers.

Develop policies for addressing conflict, tension, and hurtful behavior.

You don't want to be doing this during a flare-up, when any policies or practices you adopt can feel very personal to whoever is involved in the current conflict. As a group, decide how you want to address these moments, when/where you want to address them (in meetings, through a specific committee, one on one), and by whom you want them to be addressed. Note that conflict, tension, and hurtful behavior are slightly different and you may want to choose to address them differently.



Identify, encourage, and intentionally develop leadership, especially among people from marginalized and disinvested groups.

Being surrounded by and socialized into the values of white supremacy, patriarchy, capitalism, and ableism, it's very easy to internalize these values, even when they are hurtful to you. For this reason, people of color, women, trans and gender non-conforming people, poor people, fat people/people of size, disabled people may not seem to recognize their own leadership skills or strengths, even though they may seem very apparent to others. When building leadership, don't just leave people to self-identify and step up into roles of their own volition. When you do, you will be more likely to get folks who feel comfortable in leadership or entitled to leadership positions. Take a moment as an organization to identify active leaders, potential leaders, and the different kinds of leadership you see in the organization.

Also, intentionally build leadership development in your organization. Ways to do this include:

- Mentorship: working in teams or pairs, experienced leaders exercise restraint and train others, make space for potential leaders to ask the group or individuals for assistance and feedback.
- Skill Building
 - have a budget for professional development
 - cross training
 - pairing
 - rotation of tasks
 - mentorship
 - breaking down skills rather than just doing them

