

NATIONAL COALITION BUILDING INSTITUTE

**PEER TRAINING STRATEGIES
FOR
WELCOMING DIVERSITY**

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The quickest and most effective means for empowering work-related anti-racism leadership is to train administrators and staff to conduct replicable programs among their colleagues.

PEER TRAINING STRATEGIES FOR WELCOMING DIVERSITY

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The National Coalition Building Institute (NCBI) has led peer training programs to reduce prejudice in numerous public and private institutions in the United States, Canada, England, Northern Ireland, South Africa, Israel, and The Netherlands (Smith). The following essay will present (1) the operational assumptions governing NCBI's peer training program, (2) the theory and methodology of NCBI's Prejudice Reduction Model, and (3) a process for developing peer training teams with a sampling of institutions that have implemented NCBI programs.

Operational Assumptions

(1) ***To train teams of peer leaders is the most effective way to empower people to take leadership in reducing racism.*** NCBI has found that administrators and staff often experience powerlessness in the face of intergroup tensions in the workplace. For many the issues are so overwhelming that it has been difficult for them to know how to begin. Often the greatest obstacle to taking action to address racism and other forms of discrimination is the sense that individual initiatives have a minimal effect in light of the enormity of the problem. NCBI's strategy to overcome this key obstacle is to train a corps of employees who reclaim power by leading concrete, replicable prejudice reduction workshops in a variety of work settings. By coaching this group to think of themselves as prejudice reduction leaders, NCBI builds a team that becomes a catalyst to effect deeper institutional changes.

NCBI has found that encouraging the development of peer leadership teams to conduct prejudice reduction workshops is not only an effective organizational strategy, but it is also an effective teaching method for training leaders. When participants come to a training program with the assumption that they are preparing to lead prejudice reduction workshops, their learning is both more rapid and more profound. The planning and conducting of the workshops reinforce the learning. The effective leading of prejudice reduction workshops requires each peer leader to be open to examining and working through his or her own prejudices. It has often been observed that one learns best by teaching. The peer group leadership of prejudice reduction workshops operates on a similar principle: one learns best by leading.

(2) ***Programs to welcome diversity require an ongoing institutional effort.*** Too often the only system-wide effort to address diversity issues are briefings concerning civil rights statutes. More needs to be done. Utilizing an in-house training team to conduct ongoing prejudice reduction programs allows both public and private organizations to respond more effectively to the issues of work discrimination. First, the training team is a readily available

resource that can be called upon at any time. Second, the training team can respond to the unique needs of a number of different constituencies, such as senior managers, part-time employees, displaced workers, line staff, and support service providers. Third, the training team, by including members of diverse backgrounds, is able to respond to concerns that involve particular groups as well as to concerns that involve the entire workforce (for example, between women and men; between labor and management). The most effective training teams include the participation of all employees, from the most senior administrator to the most recent recruit.

(3) *The establishment of proactive training programs that build strong intergroup relations on or more effective than programs that respond to specific incidents of racism or crises.* There is a tendency for organizations to launch prejudice reduction programs only following a painful series of racial incidents. Although this response is understandable and at times appropriate, one may be left with the false impression that the primary goal of prejudice reduction work is to curtail overt acts of bigotry. An effective prejudice reduction program, however, must be much more than crisis intervention. The workplace offers a powerful opportunity for human beings from diverse backgrounds to learn how to live together. For many the time at work may be the first and only time to come into close contact with others whom they do not select. Public institutions and private corporations can become models for an increasingly polarized society by developing deliberate, systemic plans of action that foster healthy intergroup relations among all segments of the workforce.

A related tendency has been to view prejudice reduction programs primarily as a tool to manage a public relations problem. Many administrators have been reluctant to implement programs on welcoming diversity, since the very establishment of such programs may be perceived as the admission of a serious racial problem (Metz). The advantages of launching positive, proactive diversity training have often been overlooked. Rather than developing a response under pressure following a racial incident, it is far wiser to foster a climate that views the diversity among employees as a valued asset. The peer training model offers a constructive prevention program. In addition, a major institutional effort to welcome diversity should be inclusive of the many visible and invisible differences among employees, including nationality, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, physical challenges, age, and socio-economic class. For example, NCBI has learned to raise social class issues at all of its prejudice reduction peer training programs. Many United States citizens have little understanding of the ways in which their class backgrounds have shaped their views of the world and their interactions with others. Since racism and classism are so closely related, whenever the issues of class are addressed NCBI has discovered that the dynamics of racism have been better understood. One of the more controversial issues in prejudice reduction work is whether to address a range of discrimination issues or to focus solely on racism. The concern of many anti-racism activists is that the inclusion of other issues can be used as a convenient tactic to avoid the more difficult work on racism. NCBI has found that the effectiveness of anti-racism work is actually enhanced by including a discussion of other institutionalized forms of discrimination. One of the insidious effects of racism is the isolation experienced by many people of color. A common reaction from many people of color who have participated in NCBI prejudice reduction programs that have included a diverse range of issues is the expression of relief at knowing that they are not the only ones who have experienced serious discrimination. For example, an especially powerful bond among African-Americans, Gays/Lesbians, and Jews often emerges at NCBI training programs (Brown, 1988).

(5) ***Prejudice reduction programs that are based on guilt, moralizing, or condemnation often rigidify prejudicial attitudes.*** Some employees respond negatively--some even with hostility--to prejudice reduction programs. It is important not to assume that the problem rests only with the employees. The resistance is often a response to confrontational programs that tend to pressure administrators and workers into admitting that they are racists. A great challenge in doing anti-racism work is avoiding two extremes: if people are targeted and required to label themselves as racists, sexists, etc. they can quickly become defensive and thereby lost to the work; if the programs are too comfortable, the hard issues never get raised and the unaware racism goes unchallenged. NCBI's prejudice reduction workshop model strives for a proper balance by assisting participants to take risks and to raise tough issues without violating their own sense of integrity and self-worth (Brown, 1990).

(6) ***Anti-racism programs are most effectively conducted with a hopeful, upbeat, and sometimes even raucous tone.*** The effects of discrimination are serious, and therefore many mistakenly assume that effective anti-racism work requires a deadly serious approach. In fact, the most empowering NCBI programs, where participants left eager to fight against institutionalized racism, have always included boisterous cheering and riotous laughter alongside more sober moments. When people come to a prejudice reduction workshop motivated by fear or painful emotion they are less able to continue taking powerful leadership. Though the needs are great, NCBI discourages mandatory diversity training programs for employees. Resistant participants undermine the spirit of the work, whereas voluntary participation is consistent with the desired upbeat tone encouraged in all aspects of the program. Bright fliers announcing the workshops are likely to attract greater segments of the workforce; flowers and colorful wall hangings in the workshop environment welcome participants to anti-racism work; and the singing together of liberation songs expresses a spirit of joy in challenging oppression.

Theory and Methodology

The NCBI Prejudice reduction model was designed to assist participants to come to an understanding of the dynamics of institutionalized racism by working through a series of personal and small group explorations. A close correspondence exists between the theory and the methodology of the NCBI Prejudice Reduction Model (Mazza). The principles governing each component of the Model will be presented first, followed by the group activity which demonstrates each principle.

(1) **Theory: The Formation of Stereotypes.** The nature of human intelligence is to store and catalogue similar pieces of information in order to make sense of the surrounding environment. Prejudicial attitudes arise when one takes in misinformation, often in the form of simplistic generalizations, about a particular group. Every distorted piece of information concerning another group is stored as a literal recording, very much like a phonograph record. Everything about another group that has ever been heard in casual conversations, read in the newspapers, seen in the cinemas, or culled from everyday life forms a part of the recording (Jackins). Even when subsequent personal experiences contradict the negative recordings, the earlier stored misinformation is not easily erased. Instead, the earlier recordings continue to exert a powerful, often unaware, influence on thinking and action (for example, "All Blacks are on welfare"; "All Gay people are unhappy"; "All Jews are rich"). An effective prejudice reduction

program will help participants first to identify and then to decrease the influence of the recordings.

Method: First Thoughts. Participants are asked to explore their first thoughts in regard to particular groups. Participants meet in pairs and select an ethnic, racial, gender, or religious group to which neither partner belongs. Choosing a group to which neither participant belongs gives ample permission for participants to learn what recordings are actually stored without first editing the thoughts for fear of offending the partner. With each taking a turn, one partner says the name of the group; the other partner, without hesitation, says his or her first uncensored thoughts. When these thoughts are shared in a large group it becomes readily apparent that everyone has internalized negative recordings about some group. The advantage of this process is the common discovery that everyone harbors negative recordings; no one person or group is singled out for blame.

(2) **Theory: Intragroup Prejudice (Internalized Oppression).** Most prejudice reduction programs focus on the stereotypes people have learned about groups other than their own. But one of the most painful results of discrimination is when people internalize many of these stereotypes and direct them against members of their own group. The external criticism becomes a constant internal critique, resulting in members of a group judging harshly anyone in their own group whom they fear might reinforce the negative stereotype. A subtler manifestation of intragroup prejudice is the rigid self-monitored avoidance of particular behavior (for example, women who never allow themselves to express any dependency needs). Intragroup prejudices, which NCBI terms internalized oppression, are a major mechanism for keeping oppressed groups powerless. As long as members of a group deplete their energies by perpetuating internal divisions they are less likely to rally the power to challenge institutionalized oppression. It is important to help each participant to examine the ways in which internalized oppression has kept one separate from one's own group.

Working through intragroup divisions is one prerequisite for building intergroup coalitions. Some may express concern that the exposure of intragroup stereotypes in the presence of others who are not group members will only reinforce negative stereotypes. NCBI has found, however, that once people are given the opportunity to witness the painful impact of internalized stereotypes, they gain a deeper appreciation of the heroic struggles of each group in the face of oppression.

Method: Internalized Oppression/Pride. IN order to allow participants to examine their own internalized stereotypes, they are instructed to meet in pairs, to select a group to which they belong, to point a finger at one's partner, and to say, 'What I can't stand about you [your own group] is...!' For example, a Catholic might say, 'What I can't stand about you Catholics is your preoccupation with sin!' An important learning point for participants is that the negative thoughts one has about one's own group are usually derived from the prior negative stereotypes others have had about their group.

NCBI has found that once participants have aired many of the negative feelings toward their own groups, they then can more readily express authentic group pride. Many find that releasing the emotionally charged intragroup stereotypes allows them to overcome any resistance to claiming group pride. Participants return to the same partner, but this time they

express what they are proud of concerning the same group. For example, the Catholic may say, "What I am most proud about being Catholic is the global vision of the Church."

(3) Theory: Recognizing the Extent of Group Oppression. A fundamental tenet of the NCBI prejudice reduction model is that human beings have to be mistreated systematically before they will mistreat others (that is, the boss yells at the worker; the worker yells at her son; the son kicks the dog). Therefore, helping every participant to identify and to heal the sources of their own mistreatment is the most effective intervention strategy, since it is directed at the origins rather than the symptoms of mistreatment.

The most effective communication in groups occurs when each member has a chance to speak and to listen. Often it is impossible to listen to the painful experiences of others unless one is also afforded the opportunity to express one's own painful experiences. When a climate is created that allows every participant to convey important information, there is a mutual investment in listening well. By avoiding the pressure to identify a hierarchy of oppression (that is, which group has been more oppressed?), NCBI has found that better coalition building efforts occur. No group issue is too insignificant to be heard. The judgment that one group's experience of mistreatment is not worthy of attention can serve as an opening sledge to isolate groups from one another. People may begin dismissing the legitimate concerns of larger and larger numbers of people. An inclusive approach to examining group oppression consolidates rather than diffuses support for anti-racism work. By listening to each other, groups come to the understanding that their experiences are more similar than they are different, thereby they are willing to work on behalf of each other.

Method: Caucus Reporting. Participants from caucuses of a particular group in which they have experienced injury or discrimination. The list of possible caucuses is proposed by the participants. Caucuses can be formed, for instance, around race, ethnicity, class background, gender, job description, language, sexual orientation, religion, physical characteristics, or any other issue that a participant may suggest. Each caucus is asked to prepare a report, which the caucus then presents to the whole group, responding to the question, "What do you never again want others to say, think, or do toward your group?"

(4) Theory: Attitudinal Change Linked to Sharing Personal Incidents of Discrimination. The most effective communication of the impact of racism is through the sharing of personal stories. People can debate the merits of analytical data concerning the continuing existence of racism; they cannot as easily discount personal experiences of discrimination. Many such personal stories evoke strong emotions in both the teller and the listener. What is consistently surprising about the telling of stories of discrimination is the profound level at which many people are ready to share painful memories. When a person is afforded the rare opportunity to give voice to the experience of injury, the tale commands the group's attention. The stories are always compelling ones, often expressed with considerable personal grief. The telling of personal stories has the unique power to effect attitudinal change (Sales). Oftentimes the listener is stirred to recall parallel experiences, which elicit a strong identification with the storyteller. The purpose of personal storytelling is not to reduce all tough intergroup issues to the level of personal counseling. Instead, one of the most effective ways to communicate a universal principle is to present the issue in human terms. Research on the key motivating factors which have influenced individuals to work against the oppression of groups

relates to the ability of individuals to recognize a similarity between the oppression of a particular group and incidents of discrimination in their own personal histories (Hoffman, Oliner).

The benefits of personal storytelling are not only restricted to the listener. The storyteller also benefits in two principal ways. First, he or she gains a number of new, better informed allies who are roused to fight against the oppression. Second, he or she is often able to heal the internal pain caused by the original injury. The public sharing of the incident with the attention of a caring group of listeners enables the storyteller to release the emotions that have often been buried since the initial incident. The emotional release is usually experienced as healing.

Method: Speak-Outs. A number of participants are personally invited to “speak-out” to the entire group about a specific incident of discrimination. The request is always made privately, aside from the pressure of the group, in order to respect the individual’s right to consider the request thoughtfully, to ask any clarifying questions about the process, and to accept or decline the invitation freely. The Speak-Out format allows the group to focus on the more prevalent forms of institutionalized oppression, such as racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, and homophobia. In succession three or four participants are asked to speak in front of the group, relating a specific incident of discrimination.

(5) Theory: Effective Behavioral Change Requires Skill Training. One of the key principles of community organizing and empowerment training is that people will gradually reclaim their own power through the achievement of everyday, winnable victories.

In training people to claim power in combating racism, NCBI has found that the analogous, everyday, winnable victory in prejudice reduction work is the interruption of oppressive jokes, remarks, and slurs. These comments may not be the most institutionalized forms of discrimination, but they are often the most commonly experienced examples. Sales, Professor of Applied Social Research at Boston University, was commissioned in 1984 by the Institute on American Pluralism of the American Jewish Committee to test the effectiveness of NCBI workshop models on college campuses. Participants in NCBI workshops were tested prior to each workshop and then again six months later. Sales found that participants reported marked shifts in their ability to interrupt oppressive remarks and slurs. Moreover, participants who demonstrated an increased ability to interrupt bigoted remarks were also demonstrating an increased ability to initiate efforts to eradicate institutionalized racism. Feelings of powerlessness underlie the reluctance of many people to work against racism. Providing administrators and staff with practical skills that give them even a small sense of control over their work environment is the first step toward achieving greater institutional changes.

When most people hear oppressive comments they tend to respond in one of two ways. They either freeze and say nothing, or they respond with self-righteous condemnation (example: “Don’t you ever say that again around me!”). Neither response is effective in achieving attitudinal change. The first tactic is a retreat: the person making the bigoted remark goes unchallenged and the person hearing the remark withdraws into self-reproach. The second tactic is counterproductive: the person making the bigoted comment is put into a defensive stance, unable to hear new information; the person responding to the remark may feel empowered but mistakes a rebuttal as an effective intervention. In order to be effective, one must understand the psychological dynamics driving bigoted comments.

There are three principles informing NCBI's skill training efforts to effect behavioral change regarding oppressive comments. The first principle is the debunking of the strangely consoling myth of the unreachable bigots, a distinctive group—fundamentally different—who are responsible for perpetuating the varied forms of discrimination. The unsettling broader picture is rarely considered; that is, that all of us harbor prejudices (see First Thoughts above). A measure of the self-righteous condemnation in reaction to another's bigoted comment may be traced to one's own insecurity. It is often easier to condemn another person than it is to face one's own prejudicial attitudes. Painful as it may be, an effective strategy for anti-racism intervention is built on reaching for a common humanity with those who express bigotry. The second principle is that it is useful to adopt the attitude toward people who are making prejudicial remarks that their comments are a call for help. So much attention is diverted to stopping an offensive comment at all cost that little consideration is given to the underlying forces generating the behavior. The third principle is the acknowledgment that the essential strategy in attempting to heal the prejudicial recordings of others must begin by tending to one's own healing. Bigoted comments often trigger a re-living of our own painful experiences and thereby confound clear thinking in the present moment. In order to be able to assist another person, some preliminary attention must be given to healing disturbing memories of one's own. Once one can release the hostile feelings evoked by an oppressive comment, he or she is better able to intervene and produce a number of creative responses.

Method: Role Playing How to Interrupt Bigoted Comments. Participants generate a list of bigoted jokes, remarks, and slurs most frequently heard in the workplace. A representative sample is selected for demonstration in front of the large group. A participant is invited to come up in front of the group in order to work on the particular offensive comment he or she has heard. First, in order to heal the blocks to effective thinking, the participant is encouraged to vent his or her strong feelings evoked by the comment. Then, the original situation is role played with the participant being coached to experiment with a range of effective responses.

(6) Theory: Welcoming Diversity Includes the Ability to Handle Inter-group Conflict. Most anti-racism training programs emphasize the reduction of bigoted attitudes and behaviors. Attitudinal change work, though essential, is not sufficient for building a diverse work environment. Managers and staff need to learn specific inter-group conflict resolution skills. There are many highly emotional, politicized issues that arise in the workplace: affirmative action policies, drug testing, provisions for child care, maternal and paternal leave, mandated prejudice reduction programs, conducting business in South Africa, extension of employee health care benefits to homosexual partners. Principled people often hold opposing positions on these issues; legitimate differences, however, all too often lead to misunderstanding, tension, and inter-group polarization. Welcoming diversity in the workplace must include the skill of coalition building: the ability to bring disparate groups together in order to identify and work toward common goals. Many people all too readily become advocates, poised to fight for their points of view. Effective prejudice reduction peer leaders at work are those who can articulate heartfelt concerns on all sides of a controversial issue and build bridges among discordant groups (Brown, 1984).

Method: Inter-Group Conflict Process. Participants select a controversial, emotionally charged political issue that can be framed in terms of a pro or con position. A

spokesperson from each side of the issue is invited to speak in front of the group. After each spokesperson explains his or her position, the other spokesperson repeats back with as much accuracy as possible what he or she heard. Next, each spokesperson has a chance to ask a clarifying question that will gather new information about the position of the other. The skills of asking a question that will surface new information, which serves to move the discussion forward, is a hard one to learn. Such questions can only be entertained when one is willing to consider that new information may lead to a revision of one's own initial position.

After each spokesperson has been given an opportunity to present the issue to his or her satisfaction, a written list is assembled of the arguments advanced both for and against each position. Participants meet in pairs first to consider what both sides have in common and then to consider a way to reframe the original question in light of their shared interests. The process involves the entire group in joint problem solving, moving from terms of exclusive position-taking to exploring avenues of mutual concern.

Developing The Team of Peer Trainers

Teams trained in NCBI prejudice reduction models are currently functioning in a number of organizational settings. Establishing the long term success of these teams involves a four stage implementation process (Oliver and Slavin).

Stage 1: Developing the Leadership Team. A three to five person leadership team, composed of representatives of differing constituencies, first receives training from NCBI. One to six months prior to launching the peer training program, the leadership team attends one of the semi-annual international trainers' institutes conducted by NCBI. Participating together in the trainers' institute affords the leadership team an opportunity to establish a cooperative working relationship in learning together how to lead the NCBI Prejudice Reduction Model. After returning to the work environment, they are able to collaborate in practicing the workshop and adjusting the training to respond to the unique needs of their institution. A chairperson is selected from among the members of the leadership team in order to facilitate contact with NCBI and to convene meetings.

Stage 2: Holding the Peer Training Seminar. The leadership team recruits twenty-five to fifty participants for a three to eight day peer training seminar conducted by NCBI staff. The participants are selected from a diverse cross section of the workforce, including line workers, administrators, department heads, and support staff. It is important to seek a range of differences, including African-Americans, Asian-Americans, Latinos, White Ethnics, Native-Americans, Gays/Lesbians, Jews, men and women, persons with disabilities, as well as others. Involvement in the training presupposes an explicit commitment from each participant to lead a number of prejudice reduction workshops in the coming year.

The NCBI staff provides instruction in how to lead all of the components of the NCBI Prejudice Reduction Model. Time is also allocated to responding to the difficulties that participants anticipate in leading workshops in the workplace. Each participant is offered an opportunity for individual coaching in order to address his or her personal concerns.

The members of the leadership team function as leaders of small group practice

sessions during the peer training seminar. Four or five times during the training they convene small groups where participants have an opportunity to practice leading various parts of the prejudice reduction model and to receive supervision, feedback, and encouragement.

Stage 3: Maintaining an Ongoing Support Group. Following the peer training seminar, the chairperson of the leadership team, often in conjunction with the institution's training department, convenes and leads regular support group sessions for all of the peer trainers.

Meetings of the support group serve a twofold purpose. First, they give all the peer trainers a safe place in which to continue honing their prejudice reduction leadership skills. A key component in the success of NCBI's work is providing an opportunity for peer trainers to identify and to heal the emotional blocks which hinder them in leading workshops. Relying on prior training from NCBI, the leadership team is able to assist the peer trainers in developing their leadership. The support group meetings engender a spirit of camaraderie. The peer trainers are moved by each other's "speak-outs"; they cheer each other on in leading parts of the workshop model; and they develop a deeper, mutual commitment to the success of the program.

Second, the support group meetings enable the peer trainers to set new goals and strategies with an eye to effecting long range organizational change.

Stage 4: Follow-Up Training and Supervision. NCBI usually returns six months following the initial peer training seminar in order to offer further institutional support. Advanced consultation is offered to the leadership team; NCBI serves as a resource for reviewing the status of the systemwide effort. Supervision sessions are held for the peer trainers. They are able to receive additional individual coaching in light of any leadership concerns that may have arisen in conducting work-related programs.

Some of the public and private institutions that have implemented NCBI peer training programs include the following: Amherst College, Boston College, Bryson House of Belfast, Cambridge City Hospital, Douglass College, Massachusetts Department of Employment and Training, Macalester College, Montgomery County Government in Maryland, Oberlin College, The Pine Street Inn of Boston, San Francisco State University, Tufts University, Wellesley College, Williams College, The University of Chicago Rush Medical Center, University of California at Berkeley, University of Illinois at Champagne/Urbana, and the United States General Accounting Office. Further information concerning the implementation of the peer training programs listed above can be obtained by contacting the National Coalition Building Institute, 1835 K Street NW, Suite 715, Washington, DC 20006 (202) 785-9400.

The Long Range Impact of Peer Training

The impact of the anti-racism work offered by peer training teams extends far beyond one prejudice reduction workshop. The peer training approach is part of a larger institutional response to racism. In a number of institutions every employee participates in several welcoming diversity workshops each year; and programs have been held for professional associations, senior administrators, and task forces. The peer workshops promote an increased sense of well-being in the work community. Many administrators and staff, who never spoke to one another prior to the trainings, establish a mutual commitment to improve the quality

of life at work.

The peer training team functions as a significant institutional resource in two ways. First, the group members can be called upon during crises to play a mediating role. Second, they can provide invaluable consultation to administrators in formulating policies on diversity issues. As public and private institutions continue to attract a diverse workforce in the next decade, the need for prejudice reduction peer training teams, who can teach their colleagues how to welcome diversity, will only increase.

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