

TRAINING FOR CHANGE

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An Open Letter to Anti-Oppression/Diversity Trainers

Fellow trainers --

If you're like me, you're getting lots of requests for 2-hour and 1-hour workshops. Sometimes it's on very specific skill sets -- like how to do a march or increasing facilitation skills. But I'm increasingly finding people asking for short workshops on topics that require deep work and thoughtful attention, like anti-oppression issues (race, class, gender, etc).

Sometimes I've found situations where doing short workshops helps make space for longer workshops to happen. But often I'm faced with groups that are cutting back on longer anti-oppression workshops (moving from 3 days to 4 hours); or I see groups using the workshops as cover for their organization ("see? we offered a workshop!").

And what most frightens me is that as trainers we're often agreeing to such constraints -- knowing full well that we can't build the safety to do deep work in two hours.

I've been thinking about this especially since a recent conversation with folks who asked me to do a 2-hour workshop on race, class and gender differences (I thought it unlikely this workshop would lead to longer workshops; many of them had already undergone shorter trainings).

Rather than colluding with the minimal coverage approach to anti-oppression training -- our own "race to the bottom" -- I pushed back and found I could actually use that interaction as a teachable moment about structural injustices.

(At the group's request, I've stripped their name.)

THE REQUEST:

Hi Daniel,

We're looking to schedule a workshop on conflict and power dynamics in community living, particularly around race, class, and gender differences.

We thought you'd be a great facilitator and were wondering if you're interested. The date is still up in the air... both from 3-5pm.

If you are free one of those days and interested, I can tell you more.

I RESPOND:

Hiya! I'm open to doing a workshop with you -- and the date you suggest is good for me. However, the idea of doing a two hour workshop on -- let me just repeat what you wrote -- race, class and gender differences....

Frankly, I wouldn't do that. I would consider one-day barely enough time to really get in to the issues. So, to be honest, I think it would be short changing your time and my time to go with a 2-hour workshop on such a deep and broad set of issues.

If people are open to devoting more time to working race, class, and gender and maybe have some more specific goals in mind, too, I'd be interested.

Warmly,

- Daniel

THE RESPONSE:

Daniel,

Yes, I understand your reaction, but that really is what we are looking for. Let me try to explain and maybe this will help.

This workshop is a part of a monthly series. The goal of the series is to have more intentional discussion and skill sharing about the best practices of living in intentional community. (We also hope that others besides just the community will benefit from this.) Around some aspects of community living, some communities have very good practices that can be passed on. Around other aspects, we have a lot to learn and talk about.

In planning the series we tried to alternate one month having a process-focused workshop and the other month having a hands-on focused one. So the process ones are deeper than you'd really think you could go into in 2 hours... like "income sharing" is one. And "consensus decision making." And this one - power and conflict around identity differences. The goal in each of these is not really to talk about these things in general -- they are big topics and most community members probably address them from a broader perspective in general in other contexts -- but more to talk about them from our experiences of living in community.

In terms of this workshop, it will be a challenging one and we do have some ideas about how to make it effective - mostly around creating an atmosphere where people feel welcome to share the good the bad and the ugly so to speak. There are a lot of conflicts that go on around these issues in our houses, and not too many areas to discuss them explicitly.

I hope what I wrote here helps to clarify a bit - what do you think? If you're interested, we could talk further about this, and you may well have suggestions for us... that would be awesome.

I RESPOND BACK TO THEM:

Thanks for giving me more context, I do understand more of where you are coming from. And I agree with you that it's often surprising how much can be done in two hours. I'm asked to do lots of two hour workshops on a range of topics and often I'm willing to do them -- consensus-building for example.

But consensus-building and race/class/gender work are very different. One is a skill set with high transferability -- the other is doing deep work around issues of race and class and gender. The latter requires a strong container, people getting time to share vulnerably, and coaching and prodding in areas to take one's next steps. Doing relevant work on those issues requires working with entrenched attitudes and beliefs.

There are some trainers who will do two hour workshops on race/class/gender -- and it's hard to say no since oftentimes groups structure themselves to not spend more time on such issues. But, in and of itself I think it's a structural injustice to give so little time to issues that need way more time. People simply don't grow from such entrenched positions in two hours.

And, I think it's a major disservice to suggest that it does or can. So that's why I'll have to say no again to your offer, even with the context you gave. Again, I'm open for something longer and I do understand the stretch your under.

And I hope I'm at least being clear that my saying no is part of me trying to be consistent in my attitude about growth: that surface level issues could be addressed around race/class/gender in two hours, but that deeper issues couldn't -- and, rather than going in with "something is better than nothing" attitude, I'm holding on to the value of anti-privilege work as worthy of being deeply addressed, not merely glanced at.

- Daniel

THEN THE SHIFT GETS REALIZED:

I agree. Perhaps this kind of workshop needs to be separate from the regular workshop series and a day long or week long activity for us, scheduled in the future. Perhaps later when folks are less summer busy and ready to really do the work that it takes and that we need (cause ya know we do need it). Thank you Daniel for pointing out the obvious, and we will definitely contact you later on if you are still interested.

And we're now picking that one-day date!

What became so clear to me in this conversation was:

1. We trainers need to offer clear thinking about what works for good training and stand up for the importance of taking the time to do it!
2. If we devalue our work by accepting gigs that we know won't go anywhere, it's to be expected that others will begin to devalue our work, too -- why not a 15-minute fast track version of anti-oppression?
3. I got reminded that doing surface level trainings on anti-oppression is likely to result in folks with surface level skills -- Malcolm X called that the "liberal fox" and of any skin color they're worse than the wolf in wolf's clothing!

Hope others will join me in this push back!

Warmly,

- Daniel Hunter

A few responses from TFC's Training Associates:

Judith Jones, PhD, writes:

Daniel, I truly appreciated your post about "pushing back" when asked to do anti oppression work under severe time limitations. I was recently approached by Haddington Friends to do a workshop on communication with a focus on race and class differences. I agreed to lead a one day (8 hour) workshop with a follow up event within 90 days. The Head contacted me with a revised proposal namely that I do two workshops, 2 1/2 hours and 3 hours respectively. I was not totally convinced that the original one day event would have moved the teaching and support staff forward so I knew the proposed time changes would have led to a superficial experience for all concerned. And quite frankly, I did not want to put a lot of energy into an event that was designed to "fail." Like you, Daniel, I told the Head that I could not work under those circumstances and why. And my reasons were similar to yours. I agree with you, if we devalue our work, those groups requesting our work will do likewise. I also think it helps to hear from others who are "pushing back."

Erika Thorne writes:

Here's a story illustrating some of the dynamics around whites confronting our racism:

Several years ago, a Methodist church known for being progressive politically, which is thoroughly based in European American sensibilities, interviewed me for an anti-racism training. My diagnosis was that the most effective first step would be white people in the church

confronting their own racism in depth. I said I could facilitate that over a period of time, and/or I could recommend a number of local trainers of color for the job.

The Diversity Committee said no, they wanted a cross-racial team to do one general anti-racism training (they hadn't pinned down a length). I believed that request came from wanting to avoid in-depth work on their own racism.

While validating their commitment in general, I said I would not be part of a team doing this at this stage, because I didn't believe it would move the church forward on their stated goals (become an anti-racist institution; change in ways that will move the congregation to both more action and more racial diversity.)

They decided on an African American trainer from the local university, who I'd seen work, and I'm confident he did a fine job at what was asked of him. There was no more progress on racism by the church, to my knowledge.

Over a year later, though, the Committee came back to me, having noticed lack of movement, and more open to my diagnosis. We worked out a summer 3-hour intro workshop as part of their regular after-sermon forums, to be followed by a one-day workshop in the fall, and a half-day follow-up one month later. The focus was white people working on our racism; tackling our behavior, beliefs & complicity as blocks to the churches mission; and on coalition skill-building. The agenda invited work that was deep, vulnerable and honest, without being shame-based. They really responded.

They got positioned to make more progress on their own...and that's another story.

Other formats I've found that can foster in-depth oppression work:

- * Anti-racism consultation group, meeting for 6 sessions over 5 months, 3 hours a session, to assist employees in moving their organization, agency, community group toward racial justice. Follow-up meetings evry 4-6 months.

- * 3.5-hour anti-racism/racial justice training that is in the context of a many-day training for phone volunteers with a sexual offense services agency. In the larger training they are covering many aspects of oppression/liberation dynamics, as well as hands-on skills & site visits to hospitals, police stations, etc. The group is so primed by the time I get them that we are able to make real headway.

- * Agreeing to a shorter workshop (I rarely go below 3 hours) as a chance to let people experience the Direct Ed, non-shaming approach, with the assumption that at least a full-day will be scheduled once people see if it's a "good fit." (I take this risk because my experience is that people really want good oppression/liberation work, and getting my foot in the door almost always results in them wanting to go further, deeper. If I think it won't, I don't do the gig.)

- * I recently designed a long-distance process for a non-profit, which guided their staff in self-facilitated sequence, with one conference phone call, building up to an 8-hour training 4 months later. (I traveled to their office for that.) This was actually quite successful and I believe they'll want more.