

TRAINING FOR CHANGE

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Make Anti-Oppression a Strategy Issue

By Daniel Hunter

“Oh no, not another anti-oppression training,” a leader in the organization complained to me, five minutes before our training was scheduled to begin. “Another training where we hear how we need to be politically correct. We have real work to do, you know.”

I could relate to his sense of impatience. When I am thinking as an organizer, I need our limited time for meetings and trainings to build group morale and develop a sharp strategy.

For groups working on urgent issues, anti-oppression training can feel like a distraction from the “real work.” And trainers can elicit further skepticism by focusing too heavily on group process and interpersonal conflict in these situations. Or trainers may never reconnect an organization’s “anti-oppression work” back to its strategic vision.

Yet, we know that subtle patterns of racism can add up to big strategic failures. Movements fail based on their inability to cross lines of race and class, maximize the participation of all genders, etc. It’s up to us as trainers to approach anti-oppression in a way that bridges this analysis with the movement goals of the groups we work with if we want them to see these concerns as relevant to the every day work of organizing.

I told the resistant participant in this group that I saw anti-oppression as a strategic issue and that I hoped he would keep an open mind. He shrugged.

What’s the problem here?

Luckily, we had prepared for this resistance. After a few short introductory exercises, my co-facilitator and I moved away from the traditional repertoire of classic “anti-oppression” tools and led them into a tool used in strategy workshops – spectrum of allies. We used it to frame the strategic problem that our anti-oppression workshop was trying to help solve.

The spectrum of allies started with a drawing of a standard half-pie. The left side represented the group and those who are actively working with them; those on the right side represented those who are actively opposing them. The group drew several wedges throughout the half-pie. There is a “neutral” wedge in the center, another wedge on the left side for passive allies (people who agree with them but are not engaged) and a wedge on the right side for passive opponents (who disagree but are not active in their disagreement). (See the [complete method of spectrum of allies](#).)

In this organization they had several active campaigns, so we asked that each campaign make its own chart and put them to task filling in those wedges with names of specific groups or categories of people. When they returned from filling out the charts, we shared the results and unpacked the activity. I asked, “What wedges were easiest to fill out?” Unsurprisingly, they said those who were most opposed to them and those closest to them. “Who are those people?” And they listed out those folks. Then came a critical moment: “What wedges were hardest for you to identify?” The passive allies! This is not always the case, but based on conversations with their staff leading up to the training we had a hunch this might be the case. “Who are those people?” They came up with lists of people across the groups for the passive ally list. Unions, poor people’s organizations, certain solidarity movement organizations, and so forth. “What do these

people have in common with each other?” They thought hard. Finally a few lights started to go on: Well, they are almost all poor people. They are largely people of color. Bingo!

I let them reaffirm each other’s noticing and finally leveled with them: “And why are these people passive allies and not active allies?” Boom. Participants began to unfold some of the dynamics in their organization, limitations of their organizational approach, outside factors that made it difficult, problems with communication, and so forth. The point was not to lay out all the specifics – we had the rest of the workshop for that. The real point was framing the rest of the workshop. This workshop was about being an effective organization by working with the people who can strengthen each campaign.

With this framing participants could see that grappling with dynamics of oppression was about movement building. We emphasized, “You have a whole set of potential allies. But big factors make it hard to work with them or bring them into your organization. Through the rest of this workshop we will look at skills to help make these passive allies into active allies.” I glanced at the previously resistant participant. He looked very excited. And at the next break he pulled me aside and said, “I see where we’re going now. This is good.”

All Answers have Problems

A mentor once told me, “All answers have problems. Before you give participants an answer, give them the problem – that way the answer has meaning for them.” Anti-oppression trainers working with activist groups often assume that everyone can agree that oppression is a problem that deserves to be addressed. This may work for trainings focused on individual growth but for groups thinking in an organizational context, that is often too abstract. They might have a harder time seeing how internal dynamics of oppression is bothering their organization, especially when they have a vibrant social justice campaign that has its own complex dynamics unfolding.

One way to raise awareness in these kinds of groups is to work a personal channel– giving space for a margin to speak out about the challenges they face within the organization. In my experience, though, the most resistant and oblivious people will try to escape accountability by blaming me – the trainer coming in “to stir up trouble.” It’s an attack I am willing to take if I think I can use it to bring about learning for the attacker and the group.

However, I have found that framing anti-oppression in a larger context that is relevant to the organization I am working with, is an effective way to defuse more resistance and get more value for a resistant organization. This style encourages activists to stop seeing anti-oppression workshops as separate from strategic planning and instead develop trainers’ skills in integrating an anti-oppression analysis into a larger movement strategy. It moves groups towards living their anti-oppression politics rather than just developing more rhetoric around them.

Use more strategy tools

Since the workshop I described here, I have used the spectrum of allies in a couple of workshops with organizations facing resistance. It has worked each time so far. Sometimes the list of passive allies is not as clear as this group. In those situations I have used my role to help them see where their strategy – at least as it regards successfully or unsuccessfully reaching out to new allies – could be assisted by anti-oppression skills. I found they can get there if I remind myself of the strategic connections and keep probing with the right questions during the debrief of this exercise. It makes me wonder what other strategy tools we can bring into anti-oppression work. Instead of letting anti-oppression work get distanced from strategy development, let’s use more strategy tools for our anti-oppression workshops!

