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Presentation Material

SESSION G

Understanding the Role of White Male Leadership
in Diversity

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White men can understand oppression

by Cooper Thompson

As a White, heterosexual man who has led workshops on diversity for the past 17 years, I've come to believe that we face unique barriers as we try to understand the experiences of people of color, women, and gay people. In this article I'm going to explore some of those barriers and make suggestions about overcoming them.

Barrier: to change

Lacking information about The experience of oppression

As children. we received little information about the negative impact of sexism, racism, or homophobia; as adults we sometimes ignore the oppression experienced by others. Even if we acknowledge that, historically, there was oppression, we can easily see it as belonging to another era and place.

I believe that we experienced a form of oppression as children through the impact of adultism. But, as boys, we were taught to deny our feelings and get on with the business of life. If we can't feel our own pain, how can we acknowledge that of others?

Believing that we have a market on the truth

We were never told directly that people like us are the bearers of truth in the world, but how could we believe otherwise? God, political leaders, philosophers. judges, sports heroes, and our fathers were all White men. Consequently, we are often skeptical about the validity of other peoples' perspectives.

Discounting the anger felt by *oppressed* people

When women, people of color, and gay people express their anger at the oppression they experience, we generally stop listening. Instead of trying to understand, we get defensive. as if we were the cause of their oppression. Or, we blame them for what has happened.

Maybe we have said or done something offensive, and maybe they could have done something different. But sometimes, they are simply venting their frustration at a system that treats them as **'less than."** Ironically. they may be expressing their anger to us because we are seen as potential allies who will under-stand.

Belief in the superiority of hetero-sexual White men

Our culture bombards us with information about the accomplishments of White heterosexual men and the deficiencies of people of color, gay people, and women. We don't see ourselves as needing help: we can't imagine them teaching us anything. Not surprisingly, we wonder if they are **"qualified"** to work alongside us. and we resist their full participation at every level of decision making. As women, gay people. and people of color request-or demand-a place at the table, we tell ourselves that standards are declining.

Overcoming the Barriers

Despite these barriers. I believe we can begin to understand how racism, sexism, and homophobia affect people's lives. I have found the following guidelines helpful.

We can listen to one another rather than *judge* one another

Listening, in this context, is the process of accepting others' experiences as real and true for them, with a goal of simply understanding; it doesn't mean interpreting others' experiences through my frame of reference or getting enough information so that I can "solve their problem." In addition, it's critical that we not blame ourselves for the prejudices we've inadvertently learned, but take responsibility for learning new information.

We can *speak of* our own Experiences

When heterosexual White men are encouraged to speak about our past. we often recall painful memories of witnessing the oppression of others or being oppressed ourselves as children, working class men, or older workers. A colleague of mine believes that we are unable to recognize our privilege until our pain has been acknowledged. Telling our own stories creates the space for hearing others' stories.

We can encourage feeling as well as thinking

As a White man, I have been taught that the search for truth is an intellectual process. My experiences

tell me that my heart knows as much as my head. If we are willing to feel the paid, anger, and fear associated with prejudice and discrimination, then we can begin to understand why others feel the way they do about racism, sexism, or homophobia.

We can Identify the way that oppression has hurt us

Because of oppression, we have limited or no personal contact with people who are different from us. Our understanding of the world is based only on the perceptions of other heterosexual White men. We live with the contradiction that the United States promises, but does not deliver, a commitment to equality.

We can explore the benefits of living in a multicultural, inclusive society

The world is a richer and more exciting place when we have relationships with diverse people. We need the creative thinking of all people to solve the problems facing our world. And finally, we can free ourselves from the legacy of injustice we have inherited.

UNDERSTANDING WHITE MEN'S FEELINGS ABOUT AFFIRMATIVE ACTION
By Cooper Thompson

The following is one of a series of essays and reports, composed by friends of Community Change, that address various issues inherent in the anti-racism effort. We believe that the distribution of these works is integral to our anti-racism mission.

We introduce Cooper Thompson, Founder, former National Coordinator, and currently the Educational Coordinator of the Campaign to End Homophobia. For the past 5 years, he has been a consultant with Visions,Inc., an organization devoted exclusively to providing training on multiculturalism. Cooper is a long-time friend of Community Change and former Drylongso Awardee.

1995 gave me plenty of opportunities to hear other white men's thoughts about Affirmative Action and other programs to support people of color and white women. Whether it was the daily news, comments in workshops on diversity, or articles in political journals, I got an earful. Unfortunately, most of the comments I heard were at least misinformed, at worst hostile, and I found myself seeing the issues raised by my white male brothers from completely different perspectives. Where some white men believed that **"minorities"** have an unfair advantage, I saw the extraordinary privileges that white men have. Where white men believed that they are losing out to **"less qualified"** people of color and women, I saw that racism is alive and well. Where white men believed that **"those people"** are causing the **"deterioration"** of American culture and **"our"** standard of living, I saw greed in our society and a total lack of concern for those living on the margins of society.

When I stepped back from the content of their comments and noticed the feelings that accompanied their attacks on Affirmative Action, I saw that anger was the dominant, and usually the only, feeling expressed. I almost never heard expressions of fear, sadness, or even excitement in their voices. It made me wonder: why aren't white men expressing their fear of living and working with people from different backgrounds? Why aren't they expressing their sadness about the new perspectives that diverse people bring to the workplace, the community, and the culture at large?

People often use the word **"feelings"** to describe thoughts as well as emotions. But psychologically, all feelings really fall into four basic categories, or families of feelings: *joy, anger, sadness,* and *fear*. Furthermore, most of us grow up learning, and then believing, that certain feelings are **"good"** and others are **"bad"**. White men are generally encouraged by significant adults to feel mad (**"stand up and fight like a man!"**) and chastised if they feel sad (**"get on with your life!"**) or scared (**"don't be a sissy!"**) This socialization can be so powerful for some adult men that they no longer recognize feelings of sadness or fear, hence the popular perception that men are **"out of touch with their feelings,"** or at least the feelings we usually associate with being vulnerable. The result is that white men may, in times of change, when they would otherwise seek support or find a place to grieve a loss, substitute the more familiar feelings of anger for their fear or sadness.'

'Thanks to Wekesa Madzimoyo for his conceptualization of feelings.

In workshops I lead on diversity in the workplace, I've received enthusiastic responses from white men when I talk about this process of substituting feelings. It's as if I've given them a new language to describe their experiences. When I've asked them, **"If white men weren't feeling angry about Affirmative Action and programs to support diversity in the workplace, but were truly feeling scared or sad, what might they be scared of or sad about?"** A sample of their comments:

- Not knowing how to operate in a diverse environment;
- Reporting to a woman or person of color;
- Offending someone;
- Loss of familiar environment;
- Potential loss of jobs, promotions, compensation, opportunities;
- Dealing with someone we don't understand;
- Loss of status and self-esteem;
- White male culture might be deemed worthless;
- My ignorance and prejudice will be found out;
- I might not be smart enough to compete with other groups;
- More difficult to make friends in a diverse environment; and
- Appearing vulnerable.

I then ask them to brainstorm some ways that they could address their feelings of sadness or fear (in other words, seek support or grieve their loss) without jeopardizing programs for white women or people of color. They've identified some creative options:

- Remind other white men that the **"good old days"**, in terms of work, were really not so **"good"**;
- Start a white male support group, with a clear charter that the agenda is to bring people together,
- That we want to learn about diversity;
- We need more social interaction with minority groups;
- Improve our interpersonal communication skills within work groups;
- Establish internships for us to go into professional minority environments;
- Talk to management about being sad or scared;
- Have a minority mentor to discuss how to deal with a changing environment;
- Have programs on issues for white men, like our health;
- Attend communication workshops so that we team how to talk about feelings;
- Get counseling so that these issues are not taken as personal failures - we need ways to deal with what's not controllable; and
- Find places to talk openly about our feelings.

I believe that identifying our fear and sadness will allow white men to see different strategies for coping with our feelings about Affirmative Action. Unfortunately, vulnerability isn't particularly valued in this culture among white men, so it is unlikely that we will be encouraged to talk about sadness or fear. But, if we don't start understanding all our feelings about Affirmative Action, and strategizing ways to deal with our sadness and fear, then we will never make peace with the inevitable: a workplace where we are sharing power and resources with people who may see the world very differently from the way we do.

When the Topic is Race: White Male Denial

The comments are all too familiar: **"Why do we have to keep talking about race? It will only divide us." "I didn't own slaves-how long am I going to have to pay the price for what someone did centuries ago?" "I had to work hard for what I have-these people want something for nothing." "White men are now the minority! When will we get special programs?"** In diversity programs that directly address race, facilitators often get an earful of white male resistance. It would be easy to dismiss these white men, and their white male colleagues who silently support them, as bigots. I prefer to believe that they are grossly misinformed about our nation's progress when it comes to racial justice, and consequently, in denial about the ways that racism continues to benefit white men and hurt people of color.

As a facilitator of diversity workshops, it's my job to understand these white men; as a fellow white male, I try to use other white mens' experiences as an **opportunity to learn** more about myself. In the following pages, I want to offer a variety of explanations for the feelings and thoughts of the white men we meet in diversity workshops. In addition, I'm going to offer some options throughout the text for how workshop facilitators might work with these white men in confronting and breaking through each aspect of their denial.

In their resistance to programs that address racial inequality', I believe that many white men

- fail to recognize that discrimination continues to exist in both overt and subtle forms in spite of major legislation outlawing discrimination;
- fail to recognize that they have always, and continue to, reap substantial benefits from being white and male;
- believe that the United States is a meritocracy, where success is based on individual achievement and all have an equal opportunity to succeed;
- fail to realize that people of color may need to do **"extra work"** to succeed, where doing an **"ordinary job"** may be sufficient for white men to succeed;
- exaggerate the impact of government intervention by equating Affirmative Action with quotas;
- believe that objective, non-race-based standards for hiring and promoting are the norm;
- believe that unqualified people of color are routinely hired and promoted simply because of their race;
- scapegoat people of color for the failures and shortcomings of capitalism;
- believe that they are entitled to certain jobs;

I'm choosing to focus on racism because I see a high level of denial among white men about the extent of racism. This is not to suggest that white men, in general, acknowledge sexism, anti-semitism, homophobia, and other forms of oppression. In addition, many of my comments about white men's lack of understanding of the dynamics of racism could be applied to white women, but I've chosen to focus on white men, primarily because we are the principal stake holders in most workplaces in the United States. And I'm going to use both the first and third person voices to refer to White men as a way to recognize the pervasiveness of denial; I believe that no White man, including myself, immune.

- exaggerate the influence of people of color and minimize the **"whiteness"** of the United States; and
- they are assisted in their denial by political, media, and corporate support for their perception that they are the victims of **"reverse racism."**
- are unable to recognize their feelings of sadness and fear as they experience a more diverse world, their feelings of anger at the injustice of racism, or their feelings of excitement about the benefits of diversity.

<u>A failure to recognize that discrimination continues to exist in spite of major legislation outlawing discrimination.</u>

Most White men acknowledge that the genocide of Native people or the enslavement of African people were hideous chapters in American history. We like to think that all of that ugliness is behind us. But when we're given information about less extreme forms of racism that exist today, in the United States, we manage to slip into denial. I've been with groups of White men as we've watched the video **"True Colors,"** in which a hidden camera documents the experiences of two young, college educated men, with similar qualifications and dress, as they go out to test for racial discrimination in St. Louis, Missouri. The only difference is race: **one is Black**, the **other White**. A few White men express their shock when they see overt discrimination in ordinary interactions-the Black man is followed in stores, quoted a higher price by a car salesman, patronized by job counselors about being lazy, and told that vacant apartments are not available-as if we had no idea that racism is alive and well. Other **White men** watching the video seem to have no emotional reaction, as if it doesn't matter to them; some insist that the discrimination they've just seen has not occurred. It's stunning to me the number of times that White men have said, **"they made that up" or "the same thing could happen to a White man" or "it must be because of the way he was dressed."**

When people of color try to tell us about their experience with racism, we often stop listening or discount their interpretation of events, as if they were crazy and we knew **"the truth."** Let's suppose that a co-worker tells us about white men who repeatedly question her qualifications, who won't talk to or sit with her, or who constantly refuse to believe the facts that she's presenting. When we hear about these incidents, we often jump to the conclusion that we are being personally attacked as bigots and angrily defend ourselves. In our defensiveness, we miss the point that she was talking about systemic issues, not accusing us of anything. If we don't take it personally, we sometimes come to the defense of the organization, blame her for being too sensitive, or problem solve about how she can avoid such treatment in the future. Unfortunately, many White men don't have daily, intimate contact with people who are experiencing discrimination and so we don't even hear about it.

Options

Facilitators need to emphasize the fact that all of us grow up with misinformation, or no information, about various forms of oppression. In general, white men lack information about the history of racism in the United States and the extent of more subtle forms of racism now. Not blaming white men for what they weren't taught and don't know is a critical ground rule.

To be able to take in new information about racism, white men may need to practice two communication skills in particular. listening for understanding and validating others' perceptions. The first requires the ability to suspend judgment and ask questions for information, as if one was simply curious about a phenomenon; the second requires the listener to communicate his belief that the other person's thoughts and feelings about their experience is accurate for them. Because the content of these conversations is often about emotions, white men may need to be

fluent in the language of feelings if they are to understand why people feel the way they do. In other words, it makes sense to be angry about racism; trying to tell a person of color that they shouldn't be angry will generally stop the conversation.

One other process that may be particularly helpful for keeping white men in a learning mode about racism is an explanation of the different levels at which racism occurs. In the example above, I suggested that white men feel personally attacked when told about systemic racism; they don't seem to separate interpersonal racism from institutional racism. An explanation of each, with a reminder of the difference when they get defensive, may help them get the information they need without becoming defensive.

<u>A failure to recognize that white men have always. and continue to, reap substantial benefits from being white and male.</u>

The debate over the legitimacy of race-conscious remedies has focused almost exclusively on the extent to which **"minorities"** should be compensated for past discrimination. Some say that the bill is long overdue; some say that the bill is paid and **"minorities"** should not get further compensation; and some say that the bill has been overpaid and that White men are due some compensation. For some White men, the debate is more narrowly focused: how long will White men have to pay for the sins of slavery?

Framed in this way, the issue seems absurd to many white men. We didn't own slaves and most (but not all) of our relatives didn't own slaves. That may be true. But what's also true is that there is a long and deep history of quotas and preferences favoring white men; in fact, for most of the history of the United States, the sign outside most workplaces has been, **"white men only need apply."** It could easily be said that there has been **"affirmative action"** in education and employment for white men in this country for at least 300 years. This includes colleges that set rigid quotas limiting or preventing the admission of Jews, women, and people of color, thereby accepting some white men who otherwise wouldn't be admitted if it weren't for the lower standards artificially created by keeping out so many applicants; children of alumni (**"legacies"**) being admitted to prestigious schools with substantially lower qualifications than those entering students whose parents were not alumni; restrictive social clubs and sports facilities where white men **"networked"** for jobs, long before the term was a cliché; veterans who received additional points on civil service exams; and nepotism that got white men in the door or on the fast track, allowing them to skirt the competitive process that other applicants had to follow--assuming, of course, that the others even got in the door to apply.

Options
First of all, it's critical to acknowledge that members of all of the groups on the "non-target" side of oppression (men, whites, middle class, heterosexuals, Christian, able-bodied, etc.) have a hard time recognizing their privilege. For most people, membership in a non-target group is experienced as simply **"normal,"** not as a package of unearned and undeserved goodies that are somehow **"extras."** In fact, many non-targets would be hard pressed to even describe their non-target status in terms of a cultural identity; some non-targets don't even identify with the non-target group, claiming that they are simply **"Americans."**

Facilitators might begin by asking white men to identify the privileges they don't have. For example, I would start this discussion by asking white men to identify those groups in which they have been, or are currently, the **"targets"** of oppression: for example, older workers, raised poor or working class, and high school educated or lower. In each case, I'd ask them to first describe their experience of oppression and then discuss the privileges held by younger workers, the middle class, or those with higher education. This may free up their emotional energy to look at the experience of being white and male.

<u>A belief that the United States is a meritocracy: success is based on individual achievement.</u>

While it is true that some Americans have succeeded against all odds and that the United States is a more egalitarian society than many other countries, it has never been true that this is strictly a meritocracy: a system in which individual achievement determines success. Success has always been based on race, as well as ethnicity, class, gender, and religious beliefs. The Founding Fathers and their successors explicitly used race to determine who was eligible to participate in the economic and political life of this country. Even with the passage of amendments to the Constitution and anti-discrimination legislation and Executive Orders, there were, and continue to be, preferences in hiring and appointments based on race, creed, sex, age, and national origin, plus family name, and class status.

Ironically, most men can tell poignant stories about the damage of ethnic, age, gender, and class-based preferences as their own parents and grandparents struggled to find work in the United States: **"No Irish need apply;"** older, more experienced workers being "**put out to pasture**" so that the company could get some **"young blood;"** women factory workers being told to go back into the kitchen at the end of WW II because returning male veterans needed jobs. And yet we White men hold on to the belief that there has always been equal opportunity when it comes to jobs. My father always told me, **"Anyone can succeed in America if they just work hard."**

Options

Again, exploring target group experiences may help white men recognize that the system is not fair. I've heard very moving stories from white men when I've taken the time to ask them, and listen to, their personal and family histories regarding ethnic, age. class, religious, and gender based preferences.

<u>Failing to realize that people of color may need to do **"extra work"** to succeed, where doing an **"ordinary"** job may be sufficient for white men to succeed.</u>

Some white men work very hard, giving everything they have, in stressful and dangerous jobs, to take care of their families; some white men put in a good day's work, provide for their families, and still have time to be with the guys; some men have abandoned their families. The same can be said about men of color and female heads of household, regardless of race. What is different is the amount of work it takes to reach a comparable level of success. People of color often have the sense that they have to do **"twice as much to go half as far."** And, work is made harder simply by the daily experience of racism.

Even more disturbing is the historical legacy of free or underpaid labor provided by people of color, white men who are angry that the recipients of affirmative action are **"getting something for nothing"** often ignore the ways in which the United States, under capitalism, was built on the backs of slave and indentured labor and is currently being maintained on the backs of underpaid labor. In effect, white people benefit from both past and current patterns of racism. This point is dramatically brought home to me whenever I stay at a hotel: the service staff is largely composed of recent immigrants, often women of color, working for low wages and little or no benefits. Seeing the success of white men as dependent on the underpaid work of people of color gives new meaning to the question of who deserves what.

Options

Some white men may feel that they have been exploited as workers; I'd encourage them to talk about that experience as way to legitimize the reality of exploitation under capitalism. Union members could be asked about the broader history of labor exploitation in the United States and the political positions historically taken by unions as both anti-racist and racist organizations. Not all of the rank and file may be aware of this contradictory history; facilitators may need to do some

of their own research, and be prepared to challenge any of their own denial about the class divisions maintained through the use of underpaid labor.

<u>An exaggeration of the impact of government intervention by equating Affirmative Action with quotas.</u>

Affirmative action is a complex set of policies that is often described (or lambasted) as if it were simply a system of mandatory quotas. To reduce affirmative action to a system of mandatory quotas is a gross distortion; in fact, the courts have reaffirmed on numerous occasions that Affirmative Actions policies are not quotas and cannot, in their implementation, discriminate against the majority. Of course, there are examples of bad Affirmative Action programs as well as good programs poorly implemented. The existence of such programs, however, is no excuse for misrepresenting the intent of the law.

When affirmative action gets reduced in the public dialogue to quotas, white men end up thinking that **"they don't have a chance."** White men are still getting hired and promoted in organizations that have the most aggressive affirmative action policies. The strictest court-ordered hiring programs set up a one-to-one match: one person of color must be hired for every white person hired. (These rare cases of mandated quotas have typically been established in police and fire departments that failed to comply with voluntary desegregation plans and then court-ordered mandates to integrate.) So even where there are quotas, it simply means that the competition for available jobs increases, not that white men will be totally shut out of jobs.

Options
Even though each organization's **AA/EEO** policies are accessible, and possibly given to employees regularly, it doesn't mean that they are read. It would be helpful in a workshop setting to carefully review the policies and have participants use them to decide what might and might not be acceptable and lawful workplace practices. Contrasting AA/EEO with the diversity program is also critical; the two are regularly confused in the eyes of employees. Finally, some white men believe, correctly, that implementation of AA/EEO may differ from policy: there are managers who erroneously say that they have a quota to fill as a way to save face with unsuccessful applicants; there are managers who get pressured by their supervisors to hire people of color regardless of qualifications. We need to entertain the possibility that these abuses are real, and then help white male employees separate questions of policy from poor management

<u>A Belief that objective, non-race-based standards for hiring and promoting are the norm.</u>

Hiring is seldom objective: it is a very subjective process. We've all been in situations where someone got the job because of who they know, not simply their abilities. Even with the right contacts to get in the door, job candidates are often explicitly evaluated on how they will **"fit in"** and **"get along"** with their future team members; sometimes, this is the major criteria for selecting the one person out of several who all have essentially equal qualifications on paper. If the workplace is dominated by white men (and most of the higher paying and more desirable jobs are dominated by white men) then, all things equal, it is likely that another white male will be seen as more compatible than a person of color or a woman. In fact, employers may prefer to hire white men as a way to avoid having to **"walk on eggshells"** (avoiding race-based conflict) in the company of people of color.

Options
Ask white men to discuss situations in which a white male with **"connections"** was hired over more qualified applicants. Or, ask them to describe the processes they've used to identify job openings and the criteria used to select applicants. Public and honest discussions with managers

on the criteria they use for hiring and promoting will also help to shatter the myth that hiring is an objective process. Finally, it would be useful to discuss all the reasons why a manager might not hire a qualified person of color to join a majority white workplace.

<u>A Belief that unqualified people of color are routinely hired and promoted simply because of their race and Gender.</u>

Affirmative action was never designed to be a program to hire **"unqualified"** people; it was designed to get women and people of color in the door to compete with white men, when white men would (and still do) find ways to lock the door on anyone but white men like themselves. And while there are certainly cases where an unqualified person of color or woman was hired or promoted, I believe that it is race and gender-based prejudice that leads white men to routinely question the qualifications of people of color. Why is it that we don't routinely wonder about a white guy's qualifications? Why is it that we always wonder, and comment on, the qualifications of the woman or person of color who got a job previously held by a white man? Can it be anything other than deeply held beliefs about who is qualified?

Unfortunately, these beliefs are reinforced every time a white man is told by an employer or supervisor, **"the only reason you didn't get the job is because you're a white man."** In many cases, this is a lie that serves only to bolster the ego of the unsuccessful applicant and perpetuate our belief that we are the competent, qualified ones.

A colleague of mine, Gerald Jackson, recently suggested that most people are, in fact, initially **"unqualified"** to do the jobs they are hired to do. It makes sense: generally, people are hired or promoted based on their potential to do a job they don't yet know how to do. My colleague concluded that people of color should have the same opportunity as white men to be **"unqualified"** when hired.

Options

Accounting for one's prejudices requires a good deal of psychological safety. Safety can be provided, over time, by managers, facilitators, and co-workers. The problem is that most employees believe that biased comments in the workplace will get them in trouble; they fail to distinguish between comments that are designed to hurt others, comments made in jest but hurtful nonetheless, and comments made in the spirit of self-reflection and learning. Facilitators can encourage managers to assure their supervisees that they will not be punished for engaging in a learning process, however awkward. I've literally asked supervisors to say, publicly, that they will not use supervisees' comments, made in a workshop setting, against them in future evaluations.

I've also had success using scenarios in which employees discuss the impact of having a new supervisor who's a person of color. I ask them to speculate about the thoughts and feelings of the new supervisor as they approach the team, any biases team members could conceivably have about this new supervisor, and suggestions for what team members might do to build a good relationship with the new supervisor. Beginning with scenarios that involve age (a substantially older or younger person), physical ability (someone with a visual impairment or back problem) or language (a white European with a heavy, unfamiliar accent) will help prepare supervisors for discussing a hypothetical situation involving a more emotionally charged issue like race.

<u>Scapegoating people of color for the failures of capitalism.</u>

When white men blame **"minorities"** for a lack of job opportunities, they are picking the wrong fight. The real enemy is the corporate mentality that downsizes, sends jobs overseas, breaks unions, outsources, and prefers technology to people, all in the name of the bottom line. Too frequently, when the corporation makes a profit, shareholders gain and workers lose. Under capitalism, some unemployment is desirable; under capitalism, exploitation is expected. It's easier to blame **"minorities"** than the CEO and board; it's difficult to criticize capitalism when you've always believed that America is the land of opportunity (**for white men**).

When they encourage scapegoating, white male talk show hosts and right-wing politicians and spokespeople keep us from seeing the real enemy. Their agenda is certainly not truth-seeking: the reactionary talk show host encourages white male backlash for his financial gain; the politician manipulates white male anxiety for his re-election. When working class, older men, gay, or disabled men allow themselves to be deceived in this way, they are supporting a system that will scapegoat them when the opportunity arises.

Options

It's critical to have a frank discussion about the real reasons for layoffs and the loss of jobs in manufacturing and middle management, as well as the growing wage disparity between top management and hourly workers. If the organization is willing to provide it, it would be helpful to examine numerical data about layoffs broken out by race; over the past few decades, seniority has generally been the major criteria for determining who goes and who stays. Even though white men may be scared of losing their jobs, they know that they have seniority. That said, it's critical to empathize with white men's fear of job loss, regardless of the reason for layoffs. Working is still the most important source of self-esteem for most white men; losing one's job can be emotionally devastating.

<u>A belief that white men are entitled to certain jobs.</u>

For some white men, the scapegoating of people of color for the failures of capitalism is made easier by an underlying belief that only white men should have certain jobs. While consulting to a major US corporation undergoing downsizing, I repeatedly heard comments like these: **"My father and grandfather worked here their whole lives, I've put in 25 years in this plant, and now they're taking my job and giving it to some Mexicans."** This leads to me to speculate that underneath white male anger is fear of competing with people of color. It's one thing to compete with other white men and lose; but to compete with people who you've always been told are **"less than"** strikes at the heart of white men's sense of (racial) self-worth.

Options

Depending on the context, I've talked about my own feelings about being seen as **"less than"** when working with colleagues of color. My experience is that many white men are painfully aware of this dynamic but probably feel too afraid to talk about it publicly. (Remember that it may also be painful for people of color to hear this said directly, even if they already know that white men have this attitude.) Simply mentioning the fear of competition across race may be enough at this stage; it is unlikely that the fear will dissipate unless white men have a strong sense of their own self-worth, a secure job, and successful work-related contact with people of color.

The fear that people of color are **"taking over."**

For most whites, their daily experience is one of being the majority, often living and working in racially segregated environments where there are few, if any, people of color. If one looks at all the places where white men are **"in control,"** it seems obvious that people of color aren't even close to **"taking over"**: white men are 82.5% of the wealthiest Americans, 77% of Congress, 92% of state governors, 70% of tenured college faculty, 90% of daily newspaper editors, and 77% of television news directors. In most workplaces, the vast majority of white men report to another white man.

This fear of non-white people taking over may be a matter of perception. Widely quoted **"Workforce 2000"** statistics citing the decline of white men in the U.S. workforce by the turn of the century may have been taken more seriously than the authors anticipated; although most white men work in settings where they are the overwhelming majority, they may believe that their majority status is going to change in their lifetime. That is highly unlikely. According to the **Bureau of Labor Statistics**, the racial shifts among white collar workers from 1975 to 1994 are real but meager: the percentage of white workers dropped from 92.3% to 89.7°/a over twenty years, a change of less than 3%. Coupled with the evidence that racial segregation in residential areas is actually higher than it was two or three decades ago, most adult white men have a good chance of living out their lives in the company of other white people.

Options
Ask white men to look at their neighborhoods, places of worship, social activities, and work environment. How many white men are there? How many, and what types, of people of color are there? Where do they have contact with people of color? Where do they see people of color **"taking over?"** If the data is available, ask them to analyze employment data for their organization so that they can see the extent to which white men dominate the workplace.

Political, media, and corporate support for white male perceptions that they are the victims of **"reverse racism."**

Although Blacks are seen as **"whiners"** and the expression of rage by people of color is seen as pathological, White male complaints that **"affirmative action has gone too far"** receive political, media, and corporate support. The Congressional elections of 1994 provide a case in point of political support: Republicans, and some Democrats, campaigned on positions which essentially legitimized white male beliefs that U.S. citizens of color and immigrants, both legal and undocumented, are **"the problem."** Politically, it meant that the expression of white male rage would be seen as rational and reasonable.

An example of media support is the February 13, 1995, issue of *US News and World Report*, which asks in bold letters on its cover, **"Does Affirmative Action Mean NO WHITE MEN NEED APPLY?"** In the lead article, an illustration shows women and people of color climbing ladders to success and leaving a white man behind, while the authors state, **"Affirmative action poses a conflict between two cherished American principles: the belief that all Americans deserve equal opportunities and the idea that hard work and merit, not race or religion or gender or birthright, should determine who prospers and who doesn't."** The illustration may be a reflection of white male paranoia but hardly represents reality; in their comments, the authors have clearly bought into the myth of meritocracy.

Corporate support for White male anger is evident when white men are not confronted for making comments concerning the qualifications of an **"affirmative action hire;"** from the perspective of the **"affirmative action hire,"** this comment is inflammatory and creates a hostile work environment where colleagues are not respected. Another example can be seen in the trend to de-emphasize race and racism in corporate diversity training in favor of a more inclusive definition

of diversity, one which includes age, class background, educational level, sexual orientation, physical ability, religious or spiritual beliefs, and even personality and work style. At one level, I absolutely support this approach: it allows white men to see the ways in which they have been legitimately targeted for oppression, thereby opening a window for their understanding of how other groups get targeted; it provides some recognition, and relief, for white mens' legitimate feelings about being targeted; and it includes in the diversity framework many groups that also face substantial discrimination.

But I often feel as if there is a second agenda that might be described as **"We don't want to alienate the white men by talking about race and gender too much, so we'll find ways make diversity more palatable to white men."** Corporate leaders know that they need the expertise and productivity of their white male employees and so may be reluctant to **"push"** race and gender.

Options

As facilitators of diversity workshops, we're asked to present a program that reflects the desires of management. We may need to confront those responsible for setting the agenda of diversity programs if we believe that they are colluding with angry white men by not taking racism seriously; we may need to encourage these same leaders to take clear, public positions against racism. On the other hand, we need to make sure that we're not colluding with same angry white men by failing to address racism out of our fear that the discussion will be difficult or that we will be unpopular for raising such a contentious issue. Ultimately, diversity training needs to take a **"both/and"** approach: treating as legitimate the concerns of white men in target groups while nudging them to recognize their white male privilege and the extent of racism.

White men's inability to recognize feelings of sadness or fear as they experience a more diverse world, their feelings of anger at the injustice of racism, or their feelings of excitement about the benefits of diversity.

Listening to some white men talk about diversity might lead me to conclude that men are only capable of feeling angry. Yet it seems likely that white men might also feel scared, or even a sense of loss, as they work with people of color, women, people with disabilities, and other **"diverse"** peoples. Why do white men seem so **"out of touch"** with their feelings? Why do some white men express their anger at affirmative action but not their sadness at the legacy of racial injustice in the United States?

People often use the word **"feelings"** to describe thoughts as well as emotions. But psychologically, all feelings really fall into four basic categories, or families of feelings: joy, anger, sadness, and fear. Furthermore, most of us grow up learning, and then believing, that certain feelings are **"good"** and others are **"bad."** White men are generally encouraged by significant adults to feel mad (**"stand up and fight like a man!"**) and chastised if they feel sad (**"get on with your life"**) or scared (**"don't be a sissy!"**) This socialization can be so powerful for some adult men that they no longer recognize feelings of sadness or fear, hence the popular perception that men are **"out of touch with their feelings,"** or at least the feelings we usually associate with being vulnerable. The result is that white men may, in times of change, when they would otherwise seek support or find a place to grieve a loss, substitute the more familiar feeling of anger for their fear or sadness.

Some degree of **"emotional literacy"** may be critical if white men are to come to terms with affirmative action. Duncan Spelman, in his article **"White Men and Managing Diversity,"** in *The Diversity Factor* (Spring, 1993) suggests that **"...white men must connect to diversity issues on an emotional level. For the data about racism and sexism to have impact, we must hear the emotions of the people who are the victims of those terrors. We cannot forget the feelings and analyze the phenomena only logically and intellectually. Similarly, if we are to explore our personal baggage about race and gender, we must be able to know what we are feeling."**

Unfortunately, in most work places in the United States, there is little value placed on emotional literacy, so it is unlikely that white men will be able to have substantive conversations about their sadness or their fear without assistance and a sense of permission that feelings are legitimate and acceptable.

Options

In workshops for white men, I've received enthusiastic responses when I've presented basic information about feelings and explained the process of feelings substitution. It's as if I've Given white men a new language to describe their experiences. To help them apply this concept, I ask them, **"If white men weren't feeling angry about programs to support diversity in the workplace, but were truly feeling scared or sad, what might they be scared of or sad about?"** Their responses are revealing:

- not knowing how to operate in a diverse environment
- reporting to a woman or person of color
- offending someone
- loss of familiar environment
- potential loss of jobs, promotions, compensation, opportunities
- dealing with someone we don't understand
- loss of status and self-esteem
- white male culture might be deemed worthless
- my ignorance and prejudice will be found out
- I might not be smart enough to compete with other groups
- more difficult to make friends in a diverse environment
- appearing vulnerable

I then ask them to brainstorm some ways that they could address their feelings of sadness or fear (in other words, seek support or grieve their loss) without jeopardizing programs for white women or people of color. They've identified some creative options:

- remind other white men that the "good old days," in terms of work, were really not so "good"
- start a white male support group, with a clear charter that the agenda is to bring people together, that we want to learn about diversity
- we need more social interaction with minority groups
- improve our interpersonal communication skills within work groups
- establish internships for us to go into professional minority environments
- talk to management about being sad or scared
- have a minority mentor to discuss how to deal with a changing environment
- have programs on issues for white men, like our health
- attend communication workshops so that we learn how to talk about feelings
- get counseling so that these issues are not taken as personal failures-we need ways to deal with what's not controllable
- find places to talk openly about our feelings

Taking a Long-Term View of Change
Many white men have radically changed their perspective and behaviors when it comes to gender; some have made similarly radical changes when it comes to race. In truth, most white men have adjusted, to some extent, to the changing cultural norms, social expectations, and laws concerning the treatment of people of color in work environments. It may be generations before white men fully appreciate the contributions of people of color and see the benefits of living and working in a multicultural society. But diversity consultants can at least focus on the progress that white men are making, reminding themselves that white men have a long history of denying the impact of racism, and assuming that, with support, white men will continue to understand the ways in which racism hurts all of us.

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