

**SHARING THE LESSONS LEARNED:**  
*REFLECTIONS ON SIX YEARS OF ANTI-RACISM  
WORK*

**DISMANTLING RACISM PROJECT  
WESTERN STATES CENTER  
MARCH 2005**

BY DAVID ROGERS AND MOIRA BOWMAN

## Introduction

---

Western States Center formally developed an independent Dismantling Racism (DR) Project in 1998 after two years of collaborative work with the Exchange Project of the Peace Development Fund. In 1997, the Exchange Project stopped doing DR training in the West, creating a gap in access to those workshops. Western States Center stepped up to fill that gap as we believe that building a shared language and analysis of race and racism is important work in our eight-state region of Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, Nevada, Utah and Alaska.

Our DR Project was shaped by the Center's analysis of the ways race and racism were specifically playing out in our region. Communities of color in the region are demographically small, often isolated and lack the organizing infrastructure historically found in many other parts of the county. Additionally, our region has historically been home to violent white supremacists and right-wing ideologues. At the time we launched the DR Project, the right wing had dismantled affirmative action in Washington and passed English-Only laws in Alaska and Utah.

In the context of these potent assaults, far too many predominantly white, self-identified progressive organizations were taking a back seat. Currently, the demographic realities of this region demand that predominantly white progressive organizations have a commitment to, and strategies for, weighing in on racial justice fights if we hope to win. As a result, the Center thought it imperative to develop programming designed to strengthen both anti-racist analysis and anti-racist organizing among progressive organizations.

It has now been six years since the launch of the DR Project. Through this work we have seen inspiring successes and challenging pitfalls. The Project has taken many forms and, like Western States Center as an organization, our DR work has evolved over that period. In 2004 we engaged in an evaluative process designed to cull the lessons we have learned and determine the Center's on-going priorities and role in moving a racial justice agenda in the West. Based on this assessment, this document shares our thoughts on the value and utility of anti-racist organizational work and education as well as the critical questions our work has raised.

As we enter 2005, the Center will be phasing the DR Project out as a stand alone, publicly accessible training project, although the tools and resources we have gathered and developed will continue to be available. This shift is the result of a broad strategic plan that clarifies the Center's role in supporting racial justice organizing in the region.

At the same time that the Center launched the DR Project, we were also developing an overarching racial justice program called Research and Action for Change and Equity (our RACE Program.) The RACE Program's defining goals are to increase the breadth and depth of racial justice organizing in the region and to help build power and capacity for organizations rooted in communities of color.

Over the past few years we have re-tooled the DR project to better support those goals. However, as the DR Project's public recognition increased, so too did requests for support, especially among a range of institutions who were outside of the Center's core constituency. With limited capacity, and the critical need to support infrastructure building and multi-racial

people of color organizing, we are choosing to focus RACE program resources in ways that more directly and strategically support the organizing and base building work of people of color organizations.

The Center is not making this shift whimsically. Rather, it is the culmination of our evaluation, our experience and analysis of what strategies will best serve to strengthen racial justice organizing in the region. In addition, this shift does not mean that the Center will no longer utilize the effective DR resources and tools that we have gathered and developed during the past six years. Rather, our capacity is being developed in all of the Center's field staff so that these tools and resources can be integrated into all of our field-work as necessary and relevant.

Finally, we remain committed to making our DR training materials available free of charge via our website, so that people and groups whom we cannot work with directly can still benefit from the tools and methodologies we have found most successful.

## **Success and Challenges: Lessons Learned**

---

The following set of lessons reflects both the successes that the DR Project has experienced and the challenges we have faced. Much of our evaluation is based on learnings shared with us by the many organizations with whom we have worked during the past six years. We are deeply grateful for their insights.

### **1. Anti-racism education and organizational development are tools for building a shared language, analysis and organizational transformation.**

Anti-racism training has become increasingly popular throughout non-profit and governmental sectors in our region. Yet, in most areas in the region resources directed toward anti-racist training have not translated into concrete racial justice organizing or wins. Over the years, as demand for DR training from the Center increased, the Project began asking, "Why?" We came to the conclusion that anti-racism training was gaining a reputation that mistakenly viewed it as an end in itself rather than as a set of tools. Based on our experiences, we believe that engaging in anti-racist training, political education, and organizational development work can:

- build a shared language, if not a shared analysis, among staff, board, and members that is helpful in creating more constructive political conversations and strategic decision-making;
- support and develop staff and leaders by providing tools and resources that will strengthen their organizing;
- create a cultural shift within organizations and communities where the consistent naming and framing of racism unmask the often obscured nature of structural racism; and

- develop a shared assessment of how racism and other oppressions are affecting the work of the organization and create a set of shared priorities for organizational transformation.

Anti-racist organizational transformation can result in:

- making the organization more welcoming to people of color in order to develop or expand a multi-racial base;
- modifying the organization's structure in order to be more accountable to communities of color and share leadership with people of color more equitably;
- developing more of a shared analysis and language within the organization so it can effectively frame racism in its external program work and take on more explicit racial justice campaigns;
- helping primarily white organizations figure out how to develop more meaningful alliances with communities of color to advance racial justice; and
- developing stronger relationships among diverse members of color, blunting racial wedges.

When used as a tool, a DR training process and subsequent focus on anti-racist organizational development can transform an organization and result in shifting the allocation of the organization's resources to benefit people of color and advance racial justice efforts more directly.

Western States Center itself is an example: Through the leadership of a strong board/staff people of color caucus, the Center engaged in a DR process beginning in 1998. As a result of that process, the Center has developed internal policies, practices and procedures that ensure leadership of people of color at the staff and board level. These internal transformations have brought a significant shift to the strategic priorities of the Center including the establishment of the RACE program itself and the integration of racial justice goals in to all programs at the Center.

## **2. Building a progressive movement requires both anti-racist analysis and organizing**

Although an anti-racist analysis may help underscore the need to build power for communities of color in an accountable way, it does not provide a strategic framework for building that power or moving effective racial justice organizing. Although it is crucial to engage people in anti-racist political education and organizational development, it is equally important to build a base of people most affected by the issues we are working on; engage in leadership development; and developing a power analysis that strategically informs effective organizing. That balance is essential.

We have experienced the greatest success in achieving that balance when working with multi-issue organizations with a clear approach to social change. Oregon Action (OA), a statewide membership based economic and social justice organization, is a good example.

OA sought to strengthen their internal anti-racist policies and practices as an integral part of their organizing. Grounded in a belief that good organizing necessitates meaningful leadership from people of color as well as an anti-racist organizational culture, OA was in the process of transforming one chapter of their organization from being predominantly white to being multi-racial.

The organization had a solid history of grassroots community organizing, leadership development and policy wins. The DR Project provided training for the statewide board and staff on Building Alliances Across Race. This training uses an organizing scenario as the basis for building language and analysis around race and racism as it relates to an organization's commitment to addressing structural racism.

The training helped set the context for the board as they developed and passed a number of policies and practices around organizational leadership and campaign selection. Following this initial training, the DR project strategically developed and inserted various dismantling racism trainings and tools over the course of, and in response to, the particular challenges of a healthcare campaign carried out by OA's Portland Chapter.

Our approach allowed the organization to contextualize the dismantling racism work in an overarching framework of economic justice and strategies for building power. Members gained the experience of building a language and analysis around race and racism and immediately applied this analytical work in concrete organizing campaigns. Based on the success of a dismantling racism approach grounded in a particular organizing context, OA is now engaged in a similar process in their Rogue Valley Chapter.

OA has not always used an explicit anti-racist analysis and thus can further illustrate how critical the balance is between organizing strategy and anti-racist analysis. We can see the effects of building an anti-racist language and analysis through political education by comparing OA's work on one issue, public financing of elections, in two different time periods. In the late '90's Oregon Action was working on public financing of elections at the statewide level as part of a coalition effort to win a statewide ballot measure in 2000. Western States Center was also part of the coalition. Although OA made some minor efforts to note the impact of money in politics on communities of color, they were not actively using anti-racist language and analysis, which resulted in a "good government" frame. OA was not alone in this missed opportunity to address institutionalized racism. Both OA's work and the initiative campaign as a whole failed to organize a broad constituency of people, and specifically failed to mobilize communities of color. Even if the initiative had passed, communities of color would not have been positioned to access the new system in a short time frame.

Fast forward to 2005: using a frame of "access, accountability and participation" grounded in an anti-racist analysis, OA is a leading partner in moving a similar public financing proposal at the city level in Portland. The frame has changed and the constituency they are mobilizing (a multi-racial low-income base) has broadened dramatically. The expected win will change the balance of power in a deep way because their base will not only have changed policy but will be positioned to take advantage of a more equitable playing field.

### **3. Anti-racism is a necessary but insufficient analytical framework for building a movement.**

Western States Center is committed to building a strong and vibrant progressive movement in the West. We believe that in order to realize our movement building vision, progressive groups must confront racism not only in society but also within our organizations. Without doing so, history tells us that communities of color get short-changed and oppressed. At the same time, anti-racist analysis or ideology is not sufficient to drive movement-building work.

Anti-racist work often lacks an analysis of the intersections with other forms of oppression. Yet, in our experience, ignoring that relationship or identifying racism as *the* root cause of injustice comes at great cost. In fact, our region is a particularly good case study for the need to build integrated analyses and strategies.

Over a decade of campaigning in our states by the Christian right against "special rights" (i.e. civil rights protections) for lesbian/gay/bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) people helped soften the ground for efforts to mainstream racist agendas by using the same frame to forward anti-affirmative action and anti-immigrant agendas. In order to respond to these attacks, organizations required analytical tools and frameworks designed to investigate the relationship between racism and homophobia or other oppressions. In Oregon, this type of multi-oppression approach led organizations like CAUSA (a statewide Latino immigrant rights organization) and Rural Organizing Project (a statewide organization with strong LGBT membership) to forge a long-term strategic alliance. We are concerned that some anti-racism training models do not promote, and in some instances discourage, investigating the intersections of oppressions.

On the organizational level, groups that rely exclusively on an anti-racist analysis get trapped into using a framework that doesn't reflect the complicated nature of reality and organizing. Organizational members and leaders have multiple identities and experiences and thus need analytical tools that address their whole selves and the complex problems they are trying to solve. Anti-racist analysis is not necessarily designed to explore either the intersection of racism with other forms of oppression or the ways in which racism impacts various communities of color differently.

In our experience we have seen reliance on a fairly simplistic anti-racist analysis lead to conflict both within and between organizations as members and leaders struggle to make sense of their own experience using inadequate tools. In the case of one organization the DR Project worked with, such a conflict arose. With *both sides* using their "anti-racist" analysis, the organization imploded. The resulting split drained resources, energy and momentum from a campaign that had potential to achieve concrete racial justice wins. This split was divisive in the progressive community, was extremely painful for the organizational members and ultimately led to a net loss of resources directed toward racial justice organizing.

#### **4. There is no cookie cutter approach to dismantling racism or anti-racist organizational development.**

Western States Center believes that meaningful organizational change should be rooted in a solid analysis of institutional racism and the dynamics of power and privilege. However, the language and methodology used to articulate that analysis and develop organizational change goals needs to be adapted to the specific demographics and background of the communities and organizations. The DR Project has been most successful when we adjust our methodology to account for different learning styles, life experiences, worldviews and literacy levels as we:

- develop a shared language and analysis of institutional racism, power, privilege and the connections to other oppressions;
- develop a shared assessment of the problematic ways racism is affecting the organization; and
- develop collective priorities for the challenges the group should address first.

Beyond the need for multiple methodologies, the DR Project has also learned to challenge assumptions about the ultimate goals of organizational change work. When the Center first got involved in dismantling racism work, there was an assumption that one of the key end goals for most anti-racist organizational development processes was the transformation of an organization from being predominantly white to being meaningfully multi-racial. The following success story demonstrates that we needed to challenge that assumption given the demographic reality of our region.

The DR Project began working with United Vision for Idaho and Idaho Women's Network, two broad-based progressive coalitions based in Boise, in 1999. The goal of our work was to develop a strong and shared race analysis within the organizations. An implicit goal was to help these primarily white organizations become multi-racial. Our strategy included DR trainings for board, staff, and members in order to build a shared analysis while also developing a leadership committee to focus on anti-racist organizational development. As the work unfolded, the DR Project began to question the utility of encouraging these groups to become significantly multi-racial.

Many places in our region have so few people of color that the goal of making existing white organizations legitimately multi-racial is incredibly difficult if not counter-productive. In those places, strong, independent organizations of color are most needed. When organizations are competing for the time and energy of a limited number of leaders of color, those leaders often get burnt out and/or tokenized. In some cases, trying to diversify a primarily white organization may create additional barriers to the building and strengthening of organizations of color.

Therefore, in this specific context, the DR project shifted our priorities to helping UVI and IWN identify how to build strong and accountable alliances with communities and organizations of color rather than subsuming them. This change in focus led these organizations to join a Latino led effort to pass minimum wage legislation for farmworkers, a clear racial justice campaign. Latino organizations had been trying for years to pass a minimum wage law but had not had success. With new partners *who were not looking to lead or take over the organizing*, the campaign successfully passed the legislation in an incredibly conservative state.

Both coalitions, who do have some members of color, continue to focus their racial justice efforts at supporting people of color led campaigns and groups, and have been helpful in supporting emerging efforts such as Idaho Latino Vote. Idaho Latino Vote has been building the capacity for the growing Latino community to exercise electoral power through the auspices of the Idaho Hispanic Caucus.

As this story shows, some organizations need to accept that their role is not to become multi-racial, but rather to figure out how they can become anti-racist, white organizations. Thus, groups are using DR work to transform the organization, not racially, but in ways that allow them to support communities of color accountably and build alliances with organizations and communities of color that move a racial justice agenda. Some of the challenges in this approach are developing structures of accountability to communities of color and minimizing the possibility of the group abandoning their commitment to anti-racism if there is no internal power base of people of color to push it.

## **5. Anti-racism work is not an end unto itself.**

The exposure and recognition of anti-racism work around the country has dramatically increased over the past 10 years, and with good reason. The work can be valuable and has helped achieve some important movement successes. However, as noted above, with greater recognition, more groups are getting into the work in ways that are not strategic and that lead to common pitfalls. In an effort to avoid these pitfalls, the DR Project has encouraged groups on the front end to explicitly explore their goals for engaging in anti-racist work.

Intentional political education and organizational development processes designed to transform an organization are neither short-term, nor easy. Sometimes groups can get caught up in an introspective process where they spend an intense amount of time exploring the internal workings of their organization: their structure, organizational culture, etc. That can be important, but what else are they doing? It is critical to place the work in the context of what an organization is ultimately trying to accomplish in the world.

We hope that every organization engaged in anti-racist work can answer the question: How will your organization's engagement in an anti-racist process help communities of color and how will it strengthen your organization if successful? We have found that not having clear goals can lead to frustration, a prolonged process, and, frankly, a waste of resources.

The DR Project has found that lack of clarity about goals is frequently compounded by a dogmatic approach to the work. This dogma can translate into a sense that the ultimate objective is about embracing a "solid" anti-racist identity within the organization. We have seen anti-racism work become more about passing a litmus test than about tangible objectives that advance the mission of the organization and a racial justice agenda. Anti-racist work should not be a vanity project. Rather, anti-racism work should clearly benefit people and communities of color, and strengthen organizing towards racial justice.

## Conclusion

---

The DR Project and the organizations with whom we have worked have made valuable contributions to moving a racial justice agenda in our region. Together, we have increased the number of predominantly white organizations that are weighing in on racial justice struggles. This outcome is directly related to the anti-racism education and organizational development work they have done. Additionally, we have supported predominantly white organizations as they transformed to multi-racial organizations. The tools and resources gathered and developed through the project have been widely shared in the region and will continue to be available as the Project itself shifts.

The lessons the Center has learned through the DR Project have transformed the Center's overall training and technical assistance work with social change groups as many of these lessons have broad implications for the relationship of political education to organizing. We will be sharing these lessons widely with organizations who plan to continue doing this type of anti-racism work. We will also share them with anti-racism trainers and racial justice organizers in the hope that they will strengthen support for dismantling racism work within the context of racial justice organizing.

Ultimately, the Center grounds our work in the knowledge that organizing the people most affected by issues to build power and implement solutions is critical to movement-building. As an intermediary institution, one of our roles is helping organizations build the skills and infrastructure to do that organizing. At this point in our history, the Center's contribution to racial justice organizing is to increase our resources directed toward the organizing of people of color-led groups while using our experiences and tools for anti-racist political education and organization development as needed. We expect the next six years to reveal a new and equally helpful set of lessons to be learned.

# Dismantling Racism materials, tools, and curriculum available through Western States Center

---

## Curriculum

**DR 101:** Our 1 or 2 day workshop is a combination of many of the curriculum pieces outlined below. A typical agenda would include: Race in the Region, Introducing a Multi-Oppression Analysis, History of the Construction of Race and Racism, Institutionalized Oppression, Cultural Racism, Anti-Racist Organizational Development and Race Caucus.

**Race in the Region:** As the need for the RACE program was conceptualized, the Center developed an analysis of how race and racism have played out in the politics of the West. This thinking can be found throughout our fundraising and communications materials. The DR Project found this 10-15 minute rap to be critical as an introductory piece to many of our workshops and trainings. It can be shortened or lengthened depending on time constraints and requires continuous updating as new developments in the region unfold. It includes demographic information, an analysis of the use of racism by the conservative right, and the impact of race and racism on electoral politics in the West.

**Introducing a Multi-Oppression Analysis:** This curriculum is designed to build a shared analysis of oppression theory, define various forms of oppression, and show oppressions as interconnected and reinforcing. The DR Project has often used this curriculum as part of a two day dismantling racism workshop for individuals or for organizations. When we do so, this 60-90 minute curriculum is one of the first pieces of the workshop as it helps establish shared language and theory. Clearly this curriculum could also serve workshops specifically addressing sexism, homophobia or other oppressions. This curriculum can be also used on its own in a short workshop. An article by Suzanne Pharr on building a multi-oppression analysis and approach to organizing is included in the DR Resource Book as are some useful definitions and terms. This curriculum was not created by the Center, but is drawn for the training experiences of staff in many other contexts. Different versions of this type of curriculum exist around the country and are equally as useful.

**Building Alliances Across Race:** This curriculum is designed to explore the barriers to building alliances while providing tools to help build successful collaborations. The workshop is highly participatory, easily adapted to explore a variety of contexts, and focuses specifically on realistic organizing and organizational situations. The DR project has developed scenarios that can be read aloud as well as role plays. The original curriculum includes an introduction of race in the region, an organizing scenario that depicts challenges that arise from structural racism, small group analysis and problem solving and a set of principles for building alliances across race.

**A History: the construction of race and racism** This strong analysis building piece was originally developed by the Dismantling Racism training arm of the Peace Development Fund. David Rogers expanded and strengthened the curriculum including developing a set of handouts that are included in the DR Resource Book and a power point presentation. This curriculum is a

45-60 minute lecture that the DR Project includes in all its one or two day trainings. It not only provides a history of the construction of race but builds an understanding of the terms white, people of color, and anti-racist allies as organizing terms.

**Challenging Racist Moments** This curriculum is designed to minimize the barriers faced by individuals and organizations in challenging racist moments by providing choices and models for how to respond. This curriculum was expanded for a workshop at CSTI 2001. It can easily be modified to address other types of oppression. Although the focus of the training is individual skill development for addressing individual expressions of racism or other oppressions (and therefore not necessarily a focus of many of our trainings), this is a critical skill set that organizers and leaders need to develop.

## Tools

**Dismantling Racism Resource Book** The Resource Book is a collection of articles, training materials and tools that the DR Project has collected or created. It has sections on building a language and analysis, individual transformation, anti-racist organizational development and racial justice organizing. It is a resource that is often requested by the organizations the Center works closely with and by organizations across the country.

**Anti-Racist Organizational Development Assessment (AROD)** We use an assessment tool developed by *changeworks*. It is a consistent element of our DR 101 trainings and has been used by the Center in its own AROD planning. The tool is useful in that it outlines various aspects of organizational structure, process and culture and then suggests four categories of development including: The All White Club, The Token or Affirmative Action Organization, The Multi-Cultural Organization and the Anti-Racist Organization. While the assessment is designed for grassroots membership organizations, it is flexible enough to use with most of the organizations the Center engages with. The tool is in the DR Resource Book.

**Moving Racial Justice Organizing** This is a curriculum, writings and a set of tools that can be found in the DR Resource Book. Writings and tools include: Organizational Assessment of Readiness to Move Racial Justice Organizing, Criteria for Picking a Racial Justice Issues, Critical Questions for Holding Elected Leaders Accountable, and Naming and Framing Racial Justice Issues.

## Video Resources

**Video Library** The DR Project has about 15 videos that it makes available for individuals and groups to loan through the Center's website. We consistently get requests for loans from our region and around the country.