

MEMBER FEATURE  
STORY

# How White People Handle Diversity Training in the

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their own  
shortcomings,  
white employees  
often shut down  
the dialogue—or  
frame themselves  
as victims



Robin DiAngelo [Follow](#)

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**A**s a former professor and current facilitator and consultant, I am in a position to give white people feedback on how their unintentional racism is manifesting itself. In this position, I have observed countless enactments of white fragility. One of the most common is outrage: “How dare you suggest that I could have said or done something racist!” Although these are unpleasant moments for me, they are



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color they hire don't stay. They want to know what they are doing that is unsupportive to people of color.

At this point in my career, I rarely encounter the kind of open hostility that I was met with in my early days as a facilitator. I attribute this change to the years of experience behind my pedagogy. Of course, I am also white, which makes other white people much more receptive to the message. I am often amazed at what I can say to groups of primarily white people. I can describe our culture as white supremacist and say things like, "All white people are invested in and collude with the system of racism," without my fellow white people running from the room or reeling from trauma. Naturally, I don't walk in and lead with those statements; I strategically guide people to a shared understanding of what I mean by those claims. Still, white people tend to be more receptive to my presentation as long as it remains abstract. The moment I name some racially problematic dynamic or action happening in the room *in the moment*—for example, "Sharon, may I give you some feedback? While I understand it wasn't intentional, your response to Jason's story invalidates his experience as a black man"—white fragility erupts. Sharon defensively explains that she was misunderstood and then angrily withdraws, while others run in to defend her by reexplaining "what she really meant." The point of the feedback is now lost, and hours must be spent repairing this perceived breach. And, of course, no one appears concerned about Jason. Shaking my head, I think to myself, "You asked me here to help you see your racism, but by god, I'd better not actually help



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these patterns are named or questioned, we have predictable responses. The responses begin with a set of unexamined assumptions, which, when questioned, trigger various emotions, which activate some expected behaviors. These behaviors are then justified by numerous claims. These responses, emotions, behaviors, and claims are illustrated in the following example of a recent eruption of white fragility.

I was co-leading a community workshop. Because an employer had not sponsored it, the participants had all voluntarily signed up and paid a fee to attend. For this reason, we could assume that they were open and interested in the content. I was working with a small group of white participants when a woman I will refer to as Eva stated that because she grew up in Germany, where she said there were no black people, she had learned nothing about race and held no racism. I pushed back on this claim by asking her to reflect on the messages she had received from her childhood about people who lived in Africa. Surely she was aware of Africa and had some impressions of the people there? Had she ever watched American films? If so, what impression did she get about African Americans? I also asked her to reflect on what she had absorbed from living in the U.S. for the last 23 years, whether she had any relationships with African Americans here, and if not, then why not.

We moved on, and I forgot about the interaction until Eva approached me after the workshop ended. She was furious and



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problematic racial messages about black people. She countered by telling me that she had never even seen a black person “before the American soldiers came.” And when they did come, “all the German women thought them so beautiful that they wanted to connect with them.” This was her evidence that she held no racism. With an internal sigh of defeat, I gave up at that point and repeated my apology. We parted ways, but her anger was unabated.

A few months later, one of my co-facilitators contacted Eva to tell her about an upcoming workshop. Eva was apparently still angry. She replied that she would never again attend a workshop led by me. Notice that I did not tell Eva that she was racist or that her story was racist. But what I did do was challenge her self-image as someone exempt from racism. Paradoxically, Eva’s anger that I did not take her claims at face value surfaced within the context of a volunteer workshop on racism, which she ostensibly attended to deepen her understanding of racism.

*White fragility functions as a form of bullying:  
“I am going to make it so miserable for you to  
confront me that you will simply back off.”*

Another example: I am coaching a small group of white employees on how racism manifests in their workplace. One member of the



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individual, Joan sees Karen as a white individual. Being interrupted and talked over by white people is not a unique experience for Joan, nor is it separate from the larger cultural context. Karen exclaims, “Forget it! I can’t say anything right, so I am going to stop talking!”

The episode highlights Karen’s white fragility. She is unable to see herself in racial terms. When she is pressed to do so, she refuses to engage further, positioning herself as the one being treated unfairly. In the post–civil rights era, we have been taught that racists are mean people who intentionally dislike others because of their race; a racist is consciously prejudiced and intends to be hurtful. Because this definition requires conscious intent, it exempts virtually all white people and functions beautifully to obscure and protect racism as a system in which we are all implicated. This definition also ensures that any suggestion of racially problematic behavior will trigger moral outrage and defense.

The large body of research on children and race demonstrates that children start to construct their ideas about race very early. Remarkably, a sense of white superiority and knowledge of racial power codes appear to develop as early as preschool. Professor of communications Judith Martin describes white children’s upbringing:

| *As in other Western nations, white children born in the United States*



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*understanding euro-Americans' historical responsibility for it and knowing virtually nothing about their contemporary roles in perpetuating it.*

Despite its ubiquity, white superiority is also unnamed and denied by most whites. If we become adults who explicitly oppose racism, as do many, we often organize our identity around a denial of our racially based privileges that reinforce racist disadvantage for others. What is particularly problematic about this contradiction is that white people's moral objection to racism increases their resistance to acknowledging complicity with it. In a white supremacist context, white identity largely rests on a foundation of (superficial) racial tolerance and acceptance. We whites who position ourselves as liberal often opt to protect what we perceive as our moral reputations, rather than recognize or change our participation in systems of inequity and domination.

One way that whites protect their positions when challenged on race is to invoke the discourse of self-defense. Through this discourse, whites characterize themselves as victimized, slammed, blamed, and attacked. Whites who describe the interactions this way are responding to the articulation of counternarratives alone; no physical violence has ever occurred in any interracial discussion or training that I am aware of. These self-defense claims work on multiple levels. They identify the speakers as morally superior while obscuring the true power of their social positions. The claims blame others with less social power for their discomfort and false-



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listen to the perspectives and experiences of people of color—they can demand that more social resources (such as time and attention) be channeled in their direction to help them cope with this mistreatment.

When I consult with organizations that want me to help them recruit and retain a more diverse workforce, I am consistently warned that past efforts to address the lack of diversity have resulted in trauma for white employees. This is literally the term used to describe the impact of a brief and isolated workshop: *trauma*. This trauma has required years of avoiding the topic altogether, and although the business leaders feel they are ready to begin again, I am cautioned to proceed slowly and be careful. Of course, this white racial trauma in response to equity efforts has also ensured that the organization has remained overwhelmingly white.

The language of violence that many whites use to describe anti-racist endeavors is not without significance, as it is another example of how white fragility distorts reality. By employing terms that connote physical abuse, whites tap into the classic story that people of color (particularly African Americans) are dangerous and violent. In so doing, whites distort the real direction of danger between whites and others. This history becomes profoundly minimized when whites claim they don't feel safe or are under attack when they find themselves in the rare situation of merely talking about race with people of color. The use of this language of



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A cogent example of white fragility occurred during a workplace anti-racism training I co-facilitated with an interracial team. One of the white participants left the session and went back to her desk, upset at receiving (what appeared to the training team as) sensitive and diplomatic feedback on how some of her statements had impacted several of the people of color in the room. At break, several other white participants approached me and my fellow trainers and reported that they had talked to the woman at her desk and that she was very upset that her statements had been challenged. (Of course, “challenged” was not how she phrased her concern. It was framed as her being “falsely accused” of having a racist impact.) Her friends wanted to alert us to the fact that she was in poor health and “might be having a heart attack.”

Upon questioning from us, they clarified that they meant this literally. These co-workers were sincere in their fear that the young woman might actually die as a result of the feedback. Of course, when news of the woman’s potentially fatal condition reached the rest of the participant group, all attention was immediately focused back onto her and away from engagement with the impact she had on the people of color. As professor of social work Rich Vodde states, “If privilege is defined as a legitimization of one’s entitlement to resources, it can also be defined as permission to escape or avoid any challenges to this entitlement.”

Let me be clear: While the capacity for white people to sustain challenges to our racial positions is limited — and, in this way,



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and attention is diverted away from a discussion of our racism, then we will cry (a strategy most commonly employed by white middle-class women). If we need to take umbrage and respond with righteous outrage, then we will take umbrage. If we need to argue, minimize, explain, play devil's advocate, pout, tune out, or withdraw to stop the challenge, then we will.

White fragility functions as a form of bullying: "I am going to make it so miserable for you to confront me—no matter how diplomatically you try to do so—that you will simply back off, give up, and never raise the issue again." White fragility keeps people of color in line and "in their place." In this way, it is a powerful form of white racial control. Social power is not fixed; it is constantly challenged and needs to be maintained.



In my workshops, I often ask people of color, "How often have you given white people feedback on our unaware yet inevitable racism? How often has that gone well for you?" Eye rolling, head shaking, and outright laughter follow, along with the consensus of *rarely, if ever*. I then ask, "What would it be like if you could simply give us feedback, have us graciously receive it, reflect, and work to change the behavior?" Recently, a man of color sighed and said, "It would be revolutionary." I ask my fellow whites to consider the profundity of that response. It would be *revolutionary* if we could receive, reflect, and work to change the behavior. On the one hand, the man's response points to how difficult and fragile we are. But on the other hand, it indicates how simple it can be to take

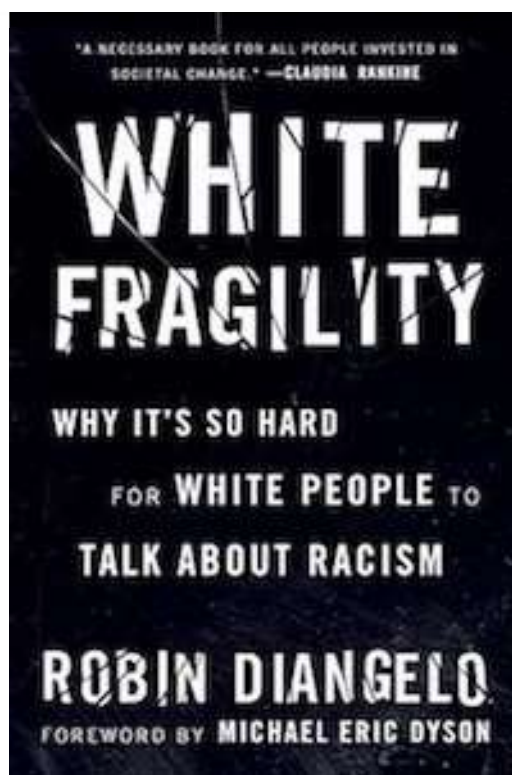


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