

FULL-LENGTH ARTICLES

Face Ourselves: Striving for Antiracism in a Non-Profit

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Advancing racial equity in workplaces requires ongoing and structural change. Organizations invested in this work need to view equity not as a checkbox, but as a continuous process of examination and change to organizational culture (Winters, 2020). In 2014, The Leadership Academy, a national education non-profit, began their journey to becoming an antiracist workplace. Through participatory action research methods, we focused on dismantling inequities and building empowerment, being iterative, and spurring staff's greater awareness and action.

Our journey has been undergirded by core elements of participatory research. We anchored ourselves in a commitment to supporting varying interests, perspectives, and styles of communication and participation. Here, we share what we produced and the practices we used, supported by lessons learned across our journey. We changed strategic plans, policies, and guiding values to be overtly antiracist, and we did so by supporting the voices and experiences of staff of color and spurring more involvement and accountability among white staff. These practices included affinity spaces, balancing small workgroups with whole-group discussions, and asynchronous work options. External facilitators were instrumental in helping us disrupt the structures and processes embedded in our organization; they held a mirror so we would truly face ourselves. We learned critical lessons about transparency, change management, flexibility, and relationships.

Our antiracism journey at The Leadership Academy will never be done. Our dedicated, participant-led efforts yielded substantial shifts. We are eager to continue learning and pursuing deeper antiracist practices.

Introduction

About one-fifth of American workers say that in the last five years, they have been treated unfairly in the workplace due to their race or ethnicity (SHRM, 2001). In the nonprofit sector specifically, employees of color consistently report exclusionary organizational cultures, inequitable hiring and advancement procedures, and experiences with microaggressions (Lubin & Goldstein, 2022). Studies have shown that even organizations with strong commitments to equity and diversity are no less likely to discriminate (Brown, 2017; Livingston, 2020).

Advancing racial equity in the workplace requires ongoing and structural change. Providing diversity trainings, hosting book studies, or producing equity statements are unlikely to produce a sustained impact in the absence of actively examining and dismantling the organizational systems and structures that perpetuate inequity and oppression (Anderson, 2021). Organizations invested in this work need to view equity not as a checkbox, but as a continuous process of examination and change to organizational culture (Winters, 2020).

The Leadership Academy's definition of an antiracist organization stems from Crossroads Ministry's Continuum on Becoming an Anti-Racist Multicultural Organization, which states that a fully inclusive organization has the following characteristics:

- Future vision of an institution and wider community that has overcome systemic racism and all other forms of oppression.
- Institution's life reflects full participation and shared power with diverse racial, cultural and economic groups in determining its mission, structure, constituency, policies and practices
- Members across all identity groups are full participants in decisions that shape the institution, and inclusion of diverse cultures, lifestyles, and interest
- A sense of restored community and mutual caring
- Allies with others in combating all forms of social oppression
- Actively works in larger communities (regional, national, global) to eliminate all forms of oppression and to create multicultural organizations.

Crossroads Ministry, Chicago, IL: Adapted from original concept by Bailey Jackson and Rita Hardiman, and further developed by Andrea Avazian and Ronice Branding; further adapted by Melia LaCour, PSESD.



Figure 1. A Definition of an Antiracist Organization

Advancing racial equity on a systemic level requires participation and engagement from everyone within the organization (Lewis, Modeste, and Johnson, 2023). Meaningful, lasting change happens with shared accountability and responsibility. At The Leadership Academy, we have been on an intentional journey over the last few years to become an antiracist workplace (see definition of an antiracist organization in [Figure 1](#)). Like many others, we looked to the research to inform our strategies. However, despite an overwhelming number of resources available for nonprofits seeking to implement racial equity initiatives, there is less guidance on the actual change-making process (Jezouit, 2021). This article attempts to illustrate our internal process, and how we are using participatory methods to dismantle inequitable practices and build empowerment. Here, we share the work we undertook to make significant improvements on our equity journey, the lessons learned, and the resulting outcomes.

Who We Are

Our Organization

The Leadership Academy recognizes that it is not easy being a leader—as an individual or an organization—dedicated to advancing equity. Our organization's genesis was as a “disruptor” organization: changing the status quo and bringing more women and people of color into the principalship. Today, we remain committed to developing leaders in education with the will and skill to accelerate learning for students who have been disproportionately failed by our nation's schools, specifically students of color, multilingual students, students with special needs, and those living in low-income communities. Our organization is focused on supporting education leaders

by using research-driven, time-tested, community-responsive methods for disrupting racist educational structures and propelling change—the kind of change that goes deep, holds steady, and raises achievement for all children. Since our founding in 2003, The Leadership Academy has supported nearly 14,000 school and district leaders who work in more than 430 school systems across 40 states and reach 11.5 million students.

Our small, increasingly diverse organization has 34 regularly scheduled full-time or nearly full-time staff and a small number of part-time or hourly employees. Back in 2015, approximately 36% of our staff identified as people of color, compared to 50% now. According to our most recent staff census, 31% identify as Black/African American/African, 13% as Latino(a)(x)/Hispanic, 6% as Asian/Asian American/Pacific Islander, and 3% as Native American/Indigenous Peoples or Alaskan Native. Approximately 75% of our staff identify as women and 7% identify as LGBTQIA+. While our staff is more diverse now than we were at the beginning of our equity journey, we have not improved our retention rates when it comes to staff of color. For example, over the last staff census period, three of the four (75%) salaried staff members who left the organization or shifted from salaried staff to hourly status were staff of color.

Our Positionality

Four individuals served as the main authors of this article; our reflections on and adjustments to the authorship composition mirror our organization's antiracism journey. Our initial authorship approach did not reflect an inclusive approach, and we have worked to become more inclusive over the course of writing this paper. We recognize our individual positions of hierarchy, race, gender, and other identity markers are woven into the story and lessons we are sharing here. The original four authors have different life pathways to this point:

- Mary Rice-Boothe: I am a Black, cisgender female who joined The Leadership Academy in 2015 as a national facilitator after being a participant in the third cohort of the organization's signature principal preparation program. I have been a part of the leadership cabinet since 2017 and assumed the Chief Equity Officer role when it was created in 2018 and continue to lead our internal equity initiatives under my new title, Executive Director, Curriculum Development and Equity. I have experienced harm within the organization which I attribute to being a Black female; however, my current positional power provides me a privilege that impacts my view of others' organizational experience.
- Marianna Fischer: I am a white, cisgender, middle-class female who joined The Leadership Academy in early 2019, leading the research and evaluation team. Since starting at The Leadership Academy, I have notably increased my personal and professional focus on racial

equity and anti-racist workplaces. Early in my time with the organization, I led some of the data collection described in this paper as a member of the Promise 54 DEI Collective cohort.

- Nikki Nagler: I am a white, cisgender female who joined the research team at The Leadership Academy in 2016. My personal racial equity journey truly began upon joining The Leadership Academy. Throughout the years, I have participated in various equity committees and workgroups, from our equity leadership team to our organizational competencies and values workgroups. Currently, I co-lead the design and facilitation of one of our white affinity groups.
- Michelle Jarney: I am a white, cisgender, straight, middle-class Jewish woman who joined The Leadership Academy in 2004, a year after its inception. My personal equity journey is entwined with the organization's. Over my twenty years at The Leadership Academy, I have held a variety of roles moving from administrative support to program design and I now supervise and support a variety of internal teams including Human Resources and Talent Management. As such, I have been directly involved in much of the work described in this paper. I joined the leadership cabinet in 2015 and have both positional power and the power that stems from longstanding personal relationships with colleagues.

As we neared the original submission deadline for this manuscript, we recognized our collective approach to this work as four authors also shaped the lessons we are sharing here and perpetuated white supremacy culture (the overt and covert valuing of the ideas, beliefs, and actions of white people as better than those of people of color; Okun, 2021).

Upon reflection, we prioritized hierarchy and longevity within the organization in creating the authorship team, which led to three of the four authors being white. We understand that this team does not fully reflect or honor all perspectives within our organization. In efforts to meet the proposal timeline (sense of urgency) and protect others from being overburdened by additional work streams (paternalism), we moved forward as a team that invariably has biased perspectives and blind spots (Jones & Okun, 2001). Originally, we integrated voices and perspectives of colleagues through interviews and surveys, which we recognize is helpful but not comprehensive. In our writing process, we also became mindful of our tendencies towards perfectionism and prioritizing the written word. The irony is not lost on us that, in writing a manuscript on antiracism, we were upholding many white supremacy tendencies that continue to be familiar patterns in our organization and personal orientations.

After reflecting on our biases, we intentionally sought more inclusive processes during the revision period. For one, we circulated our manuscript draft to staff and requested feedback and reflections in aural or written form.

Also, we sought coaching from one of our external partners who pushed our reflections and next steps. Furthermore, during a recent all-staff meeting, staff were involved in a collective revision process, targeting key content areas of revision. Lastly, to reflect the collective contributions of staff, we requested permission from the journal editors to list “The Leadership Academy Staff” as a fifth author. This is unconventional for journals but is in line with participatory research approaches and efforts towards equity. This process has been its own lens through which we can see where we have room to continue to grow on our antiracist journey.

Why Participatory Action Research for Organizational Equity Change?

Racial inequity (when two or more racial groups are not standing on approximately equal footing) is a systemic problem, reinforced by overlapping systems and structures that seek to preserve the current power structure (Kendi, 2019; Scally et al., 2020). Like participatory action research (PAR), advancing racial equity requires a process of inquiry and action that is participatory, iterative, and seeks to build individuals’ capacity to be active participants in meaningful decision-making (Cornish et al., 2023; Kindon et al., 2007; MacDonald, 2012). Those participating in the work of advancing racial equity must be viewed not as subjects or informants, but as active collaborators who feel empowered to make decisions (Saxton, 2005). This calls for relationship building, mutual trust, common understanding, and collaborative action (Cornish et al., 2023).

Our Equity Journey

In 2014, a convergence began to happen within The Leadership Academy. Externally, our district partners were looking for a stronger focus on equity. Internally, there was a group of majority staff of color who realized that, to respond to our partners, we needed to work on ourselves as an organization. This push externally and internally propelled us to begin our internal antiracist journey.

Our organization partnered with Courageous Conversation, a consulting firm that combines training, coaching, and consulting to help organizations engage in conversations about race that will lead to systemic change. They facilitated Beyond Diversity training for all staff, a two-day seminar focused on tools to discuss unconscious bias, systemic racism, and other issues related to race. Courageous Conversation also provided guidance in building our equity leadership team, a group of staff from all departments and at all levels of the organizational hierarchy. Having a team that represented all aspects of the organization created the space for those most impacted by organizational inequities to be part of developing the plan to address them (Brown, 2017). This team championed much of the early work of the organization, including developing a definition of equity and an internal theory of action. In the process of meeting these outcomes, novel relationships were built within and across the team that were not otherwise being created.

About two years into our journey, staff training was still limited to All Staff meetings held four times a year. A senior staff member had “equity” as part of their title, but their main priority was still working externally with our district partners. This initial structure gave limited space for the change process (Hill & Curry-Stevens, 2016; Lewis et al., 2023). Staff members’ personal beliefs and mindsets were not routinely pushed outside of dedicated professional development. Staff continued to report that conversations on power and privilege were few across the organization. “I’m not sure we have those conversations [about power and privilege]. I think culturally, for those of us that may have been part of the organization longer, I think power and peoples’ roles still play a big role in their own or how they tend to manage their duties,” stated one staff member.

In 2018, The Leadership Academy had a chief executive officer transition and restructured, including the creation of a chief equity officer position. These significant leadership shifts brought a sharpened focus and the needed resolve to take and support bold action in service of becoming a more equitable organization. Shortly afterward, we joined Promise54’s DEI Accelerator Program. Promise54 is a non-profit organization that brings together education organizations interested in improving their diversity, equity, and inclusion strategy. The cohort-based model includes coaching and cohort-based learning. Also, through the partnership, we had the opportunity to gather pre- and post-survey data on staff perceptions connected to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

In January/February 2020, 91% of staff completed Promise54’s baseline survey of our practices. This was used as a formative assessment, springboarding internal DEI initiatives. Simultaneously, the organization was creating a five-year organizational strategic plan (2020–2025) (See [Figure 2: Strategic Plan Logic Model for DEI Goals](#)). Initially, the strategic plan did not include any internal drivers (or strategic priorities); but in recognizing the value of public learning, two additional drivers were added, including one focused on becoming an antiracist organization with its own set of outcomes and accountability which stemmed from the staff perception surveys.

The convergence of the work coming from the DEI accelerator program with the strategic plan created a shift in time, money, and people. The strategic plan led to a variety of internal and external partnerships beyond Courageous Conversation. The equity leadership team continued to evolve until it was dismantled when all staff members saw individual responsibility within the plan. A partnership also began between the equity office and the department of human resources. Through a partnership with CoLeague Partners, a consulting firm that partners with organizations in need of talent systems and structures, new initiatives within human resources were created, including a focus on equitable hiring practices, equity goals as part of the performance management structure, staff policies, and compensation. Staff helped identify areas for continuous improvement through feedback collected via the Promise54 survey, listening tours, and informal check-ins. Our latest partner,

Figure 2: Strategic Plan Logic Model for DEI Goals

Inputs	Activities/Strategies	Short-Term Outcomes (1-2 years)	Long-Term Outcomes (3-5 years)
<p>Responsible staff with clearly defined roles & responsibilities</p> <p>Designated time for staff collaboration</p> <p>Staff & leadership buy-in</p> <p>Organizational commitment to prioritize equity</p> <p>Resources:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Leadership Academy's Equity Leadership Dispositions Dismantling Racism: A Workbook for Social Change Groups (Jones & Okun) Remote DEI Toolkit Me & White Supremacy (Saad) How to Be an Anti-Racist (Kendi) Race Talk (Wing Sue) Courageous Conversations (Singleton) <p>Internal Data:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Equity Leadership Team surveys Promise 54 survey data Employee/HR data <p>Partnerships:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promise54 DEI Accelerator Program DEI Remote Collective 	<p>Define what an equitable organization is for The Leadership Academy (including what it means to be "an inclusive space")</p> <p>Develop set of organizational core values that focus on creating an equitable organization for all staff members and that serve as "antidotes" to characteristics of white supremacy culture</p> <p>Build the capacity of staff to assume the ways of being (how to enact new values, competencies, etc.)</p> <p>Create a set of refined organizational competencies that are in service of our definition of an equitable organization</p> <p>Create a safe process for identifying, reporting and actively following-up on issues of micro-aggressions, discrimination, bias, oppressive interracial dynamics, etc. (tie into performance evaluation)</p> <p>Create a clear and transparent career lattice that aligns with compensation</p> <p>Brainstorm new ways to recognize, appreciate, and support staff members</p> <p>Revisit the exit interview process</p> <p>Create onboarding resources to orient new staff to our commitment to dismantling white supremacy culture and creating an inclusive work environment</p> <p>Identify characteristics of white supremacy culture and name how they show up in the organization</p> <p>Engage staff in dialogue and learning around the characteristics of white supremacy culture and what they look like in action within the organization</p> <p>Create a process to review, reflect on, and revise these new processes and the continuous work of dismantling WSC across the organization</p>	<p>Staff can name and demonstrate a shared understanding of The Leadership Academy's:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Definition of an equitable organization Organizational competencies Organizational values Process for identifying, reporting, and actively following up on issues of micro-aggressions, discrimination, bias, oppressive interracial dynamics, etc. Career lattice <p>Increased staff capacity to name and address microaggressions and oppressive interracial dynamics in the workplace</p> <p>Decreased number of staff report that they have personally witnessed or been on the receiving end of micro-aggressions, bias, etc.</p> <p>Staff report feeling compensation systems are implemented fairly</p> <p>Staff report that career advancement is equally accessible for all staff</p> <p>Increased staff capacity to name when white supremacy culture is showing up</p> <p>New policies and procedures are created in service of our commitment to dismantling white supremacy culture in the workplace</p> <p>Increased retention of ABILPOC staff</p> <p>Managers receive support on how to supervise to org values and competencies</p> <p>Managers have the skills and time to integrate feedback processes in their conversations with direct reports</p>	<p>Staff report an environment of trust between all levels, divisions, and roles within the organization</p> <p>Staff (particularly ABILPOC staff) report an inclusive environment that decenters white supremacy culture and acknowledges the intersections of identity</p> <p>Equitable allocation of personnel, time, and resources to show appreciation to staff</p> <p>Staff are recognized for their work through acts of appreciation and opportunities for social interactions</p> <p>Managers have the skills and time to provide support and practice self-care themselves</p> <p>Each staff member is supported in their pursuit of work-life balance and in exercising the power of 'no'</p> <p>DEI efforts become embedded in the culture of the organization and are not seen as an isolated effort</p> <p>The process for identifying, reporting, and actively following up on issues of micro-aggressions, discrimination, bias, oppressive interracial dynamics, etc. is no longer needed as staff are not experiencing these in the workplace</p> <p>Increased retention of ABILPOC staff</p> <p>Feedback processes and protocols are established in formal and informal conversations and meetings</p> <p>A culture of healthy conflict is supported</p>
	<p>All managers engage in ongoing learning to create conditions for feedback</p> <p>All staff engage in affinity groups</p> <p>Policy review/audit to ensure alignment to core values</p> <p>Engagement in groups/coalitions to build learning and share experiences (remote DEI collective/Promise54 Accelerator program)</p> <p>Hire equity fellows and consultants to support implementation of goals</p>		

Figure 2. Strategic Plan Logic Model for DEI Goals

F.A.C.E. Race Consulting LLC, a consulting firm that provides workshops and counseling to organizations looking for support in their anti-racist journey, has supported us in building our communication skills with each other and in continuing to work on ourselves.

What We Did

As our organization focused on becoming a more antiracist organization and making meaningful changes, we prioritized a participatory, data-driven, and iterative process (Cornish et al., 2023; Gazmuri et al., 2010). We knew that to truly, systemically address racial inequity, we needed to make changes at every level of the system, including changes to policies, practices, and routines (Abercrombie et al., 2015; Hill & Curry-Stevens, 2016; Scally et al., 2020). These efforts led us to create the following products and processes, described here with the hope that readers will gain ideas for structures and strategies for their own antiracism work. In the subsequent section, we share lessons learned from enacting these structures and strategies.

What We Produced

Equity-Focused Strategic Plan

Our five-year strategic plan is focused on our north star of developing and supporting education leaders on the school, system, and state levels, empowering them to transform their leadership in ways that accelerate learning for every student. To do that *externally* with clients, we needed *internal* strength and equity, thus our strategic focus to “actualize our vision of an equitable organization.” Through various workshopping methods, members of our staff of color affinity group developed the following DEI goals to actualize that strategic focus:

- Goal 1: Develop a set of organizational core values that focus on creating an equitable organization for all staff members
- Goal 2: Articulate clear and transparent expectations for what it means to be a staff member within an equitable organization
- Goal 3: Identify and actively dismantle characteristics of white supremacy culture within the organization
- Goal 4: Retain our staff members who are Asian, Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and people of color

Logic Model

With our four DEI goals articulated, we crafted a clear plan for moving forward. Structured in the format of a logic model, the plan specifies anticipated inputs, activities, project outputs, and short- (1–2 years) and long-term (3–5 years) outcomes (See [Figure 2](#)). Research supports embedding racial equity solutions in the overall fabric of the organization instead of assigning them as a special project (Hill & Curry-Stevens, 2016). We have found that our logic model fosters transparency, accountability, and shared ownership of our



Figure 3. Core Values

everyday efforts to decenter white supremacy culture and to create an inclusive environment for every staff member especially our Asian, Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and people of color. More detailed work plans and benchmarks for measuring progress have come from this logic model.

Organizational Values

Research supports the need for organizations to make collective accountability for anti-racism and inclusion a core value (Winters, 2020). Our first strategic goal was to develop organizational core values that focused on creating an equitable organization for all staff members. These values were intended to serve as “antidotes” to characteristics of white supremacy culture. We began by having our cabinet (senior leaders) pilot an approach for generating a set of values and then engaged the entire staff in a similar process over the course of several meetings. Each cabinet member reflected on a series of prompts (e.g., How do you define value?; What do you value most about us as an organization?; What unspoken values have contributed to or hindered our success to date?). Then, staff brainstormed a set of initial values based on those collective reflections and fleshed them out using additional prompts (e.g., What would this value look like in action?; How might it be misinterpreted?; How might it reinforce white dominant culture?). Finally, a small group further refined the values using all-staff meetings and surveys to elicit feedback and input. When they were finished, the values (See [Figure 3: Core Values](#)) were released and operationalized within our policies and practices.

Staff Competencies

Through our second goal, we sought to articulate clear and transparent expectations for what it means to be a staff member within an equitable organization. To that end, a small workgroup comprised of a cross-section of staff developed a set of organizational competencies (the skills, behaviors, and attributes related to successful job performance) aligned with our strategic plan. Starting from a years-old rubric with nearly 40 competencies, this working group undertook the challenge of updating and refining the list. They ultimately landed on a new set of 17 streamlined competencies. In addition to recasting the competencies themselves, the group made sure to add examples of how white supremacy culture could show up in relationship to each competency and offered possible antidotes to support equitable and inclusive practice. These competencies are now used in multiple ways, including talent management processes (e.g., supporting growth, assessing performance, and informing recruitment and hiring).

Policies

We know systems change involves altering underlying structures and supporting mechanisms such as policies, routines, relationships, resources, power structures, and values that give rise to patterns of behavior (Abercrombie et al., 2015). To that end, we engaged in an equity audit of our employee manual and prioritized the revision and creation of policies to meet the holistic needs of our employees. For example, staff created a flexible work time policy that allows team members to balance personal and professional responsibilities. We also developed a new paid parental leave policy which offers 12 weeks of paid leave per year at 100% pay for the arrival of a new child for birth parents, adoptive parents, and foster parents.

Research also supports: 1) establishing accountability structures; 2) making a cultural shift from cultural blindness toward racial equity; and 3) initiating policy reforms with an attention to creating and advocating for policies that are more relevant (Hill & Curry-Stevens, 2016). Therefore, in addition to expanding our leave policies and other accommodations, we created culturally affirming guidance around appearance and dress that supports all staff in representing their personal style and religious or cultural norms. For example, the policy explicitly encourages employees to wear clothing, hair, and facial hair styles consistent with their cultural, ethnic or racial heritage, identity, or personal style.

Compensation, Retention, and Promotion Plans

The fourth goal of our antiracism-focused strategy emphasizes retaining our staff members who are Asian, Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and people of color. Thus far, we have revised our recruitment, hiring, and onboarding processes to support the creation of an inclusive environment for every staff member, especially our staff of color, and to ensure new staff members experience a successful entrance and transition into their Leadership Academy roles.

Figure 4: Total Rewards Philosophy

For The Leadership Academy to achieve our mission we know we need to attract and retain staff with experience in the communities we serve and continued strong performance, and we do. We work to create a culture where great people thrive at work. We believe our total rewards should be clear and transparent so that our team understands the structure, feels it is equitable, and reflects the value that we place on our staff and their well-being. We define Total Rewards as encompassing monetary compensation, benefits, retirement match, work life sustainability (e.g., annual office closure period for respite, generous PTO benefits and holidays, opportunities to work flexibly and remotely), professional development, and positive work culture. We encourage our team members to lead, be part of, and learn with a community of mission-aligned colleagues, as well as learn from external best practices and be part of the advancement and innovation in school leader space.

Our Total Rewards Program for The Leadership Academy staff supports our talent strategy by offering a program built on the following key principles:

Equity	Given variation in roles and responsibilities, we use a consistent set of factors and processes to make total compensation decisions for each staff member
Clarity	We regularly provide transparent information so that staff understand what drives individual total compensation, what changes to their compensation (if any) they can expect, and what role managers and cabinet play in executing the compensation process
Sustainability	We are fiscally responsible stewards of our resources by considering long-term budgetary impact of each total rewards decision and other budgetary priorities



Figure 4. Total Rewards Philosophy

Additionally, we continue to work on clarifying our processes connected to promotion and compensation. Prior to beginning this work, a staff member of nearly two decades stated “I don’t have an understanding of [the promotion process]. I’ll be brutally honest [...] what I’ve witnessed is that it just depends on who’s your manager, who’s your manager’s manager. So, there is no clear path of ‘this is what’s going to lead me to have a promotion or a raise.’” Therefore, we have created clearer and more transparent practices regarding promotion and compensation, engaged in an external compensation study, and created a Total Rewards Philosophy (See [Figure 4](#)), refreshed and shared salary bands and job descriptions with staff to foster greater coherence and parity, and adjusted salaries to ensure staff are paid competitively for their work. On top of this, we have leaned into finding new ways to recognize and celebrate our staff and promote deepened relationships within and across teams.

Practices We Used

In addition to what we produced (e.g., policies, list of values, etc.) much of what we did can be described by *how* we did it. The remaining elements of this section are focused on the *how*—processes and strategies we used to engage as a staff and deepen our antiracist work, including creating the outputs mentioned above.

Dedicated Whole-Staff Discussion Time

Participatory action research emphasizes authentic engagement and participation of all actors in the system (Sparre, 2020). We strategically dedicated time during staff meetings for all staff to engage in work related to our antiracism journey in an effort to combat potential resistance. Staff were given space to react and ask questions which is important because when

racism and inequity are at the center of change, there may be a particular resistance to wanting to engage (Petty & Leach, 2020). For example, during our quarterly all-staff gatherings or our more frequent “internal learning days,” we devoted time to analyzing and promoting a shared understanding of the Promise 54 DEI survey data results; envisioning the organizational culture we want to create as part of the strategic planning process; reviewing policy drafts; and engaging in restorative circles to process and repair harm. One way we attempted to lessen the impact of hierarchy in these meetings was by allocating significant time toward relationship building. We also attempted to mitigate the sense of urgency intrinsic to white supremacy culture by making mid-course connections and amending agendas to add more time for staff to discuss their perspectives. Staff shared their lived experiences at The Leadership Academy regarding race, power, and oppression, and attempted to identify some of the root causes of those experiences. They then worked collaboratively to suggest ways to move the organization forward.

Racial and Role-Alike Affinity Groups

A foundational strategy used time and again was gathering staff in affinity groups, as they provide a structure for building relationships along with self-awareness (Michael et al., 2009). Affinity spaces were race-alike or role-alike groupings of staff that focused on shared experiences or perspectives when exploring difficult topics. The racial affinity spaces were roughly broken into a dichotomy of “people of color” and “white” given our staff size and demographic composition. These groups explored racial dynamics with colleagues who likely had more shared life experiences and perspectives. For example, the white affinity group began by leveraging the *Me and White Supremacy* workbook by Layla F. Saad to examine biases and accountability patterns. The staff of color affinity group began as an unfiltered, unstructured space for connection and reflection. Both groups were created to make space for the needs specific to their pathways.

The role-alike affinity groups organized staff by their professional role in the organization, creating spaces to discuss hierarchy and experiences from a shared organizational level or functional approach. For example, all project managers met on a regular basis, as did all supervisors who were not part of the organization’s cabinet. These groups helped to surface shared challenges that might otherwise have been overlooked. For example, one need that emerged was greater accountability and clarity around the expectations for supervisors at every level of the organization including the cabinet.

In the affinity groups (as well as in peer coaching, supervisor training, staff meetings, and other venues), staff engaged in the hard work of reflecting on personal biases, identifying blind spots, exploring how white supremacy is perpetuated within the organization, and practicing new ways of being and acting. Some of the sessions were led internally while other sessions were facilitated by our external partners: F.A.C.E Race Consulting was used for racial affinity groups, and CoLeague Partners was used for some role-alike

sessions. Staff have described these spaces as “impactful,” “essential and necessary,” and “one of the very few places in the organization where I feel seen and heard.”

External Facilitation

As an organization, we serve as an external facilitator to school districts and leaders across the country. While we are capable of coaching others in this realm, we need our own coaches to support us and provide the space and perspective to reflect and see ourselves in a different light (Sue, 2015). Over the years, we have worked with Courageous Conversation, Promise54, F.A.C.E. Race Consulting, and CoLeague Partners, among others. It can be problematic to work with outside organizations who do not know all the nuances of an organization to support a challenging journey. However, we purposefully chose organizations that apply a “partnership” approach to their work. They each took the time to get to know us individually and collectively and we were able to establish open communication and feedback loops to adjust when necessary to meet the needs of the moment. This approach also allowed staff members to trust the expertise and direction that our facilitators were pursuing.

The external facilitators served as a mirror, reflecting to us our ingrained patterns and schemas that we had not seen on our own. Furthermore, as individuals in white dominant cultures are often enculturated to not acknowledge internal and institutional patterns of white supremacy culture, our partner external facilitators were wise to the patterns and detours of white supremacy culture and were able to push us in new ways, building our skills to challenge the culture of silence and the effects of hierarchy (Jones & Okun, 2001). For example, our partners mediated several conversations between cabinet and staff to support the exchange of feedback and create a safe space for staff to share how they had, or were currently, experiencing harm within the organization. As articulated by one of our colleagues: “They have done great work in building the space for us as a group to learn and grow—gently pushing us along the way. They’ve really created the space for us to deeply engage—and even engage in ways that we hadn’t expected. These sessions are reliable experiences in which we pour into ourselves and really think about things differently.”

Working Groups

In addition to affinity groups and the external facilitator, deeper engagement was also fostered by ensuring staff had the opportunity to form small voluntary working groups. These groups led the work on discreet initiatives such as developing the organization’s values and competencies, revamping hiring processes, establishing a process to address and respond to microaggressions, revising performance management systems, and others. The working group structure supported collaboration from individuals across the organization and gave participating staff opportunities to lead the changes in which they were

most invested. Each working group functioned somewhat differently as their pacing and process were determined by group members' preferences and work styles.

What We Learned

Lesson 1: Resources are Critical to Antiracism Work

Shifting an organizational culture to a new level requires an intentional and purposeful commitment to the process. Resource allocation in the areas of time, money, and people are necessary and foundational for the shift to occur and take root (Hill & Curry-Stevens, 2016). As a lean non-profit, we needed a dedicated funding stream for our recent work. After a few years of partnership with Courageous Conversation and the building of an internal theory of action, we were able to tell a strong story to philanthropic foundations of where we had been and where we still needed to go to meet our desired outcomes. This targeted storytelling garnered dedicated financial resources for us to invest in outside support (e.g., external facilitators and partners), dedicate more internal staff time to our outcomes (e.g., time away from billable client work), and build the capacity of internal staff (e.g., attendance at outside conferences).

- *Recommendation:* Invest financial funds in antiracism efforts and dedicate resources to cover staff time and outside resources, such as external facilitators.

Lesson 2: Identities, Experiences, and Schemas must be Understood and Processed

Our organization was created with the foundation of white dominant culture frameworks and many individuals were on staff for years before we started on our antiracist journey. The majority white, female staff had not had their privilege challenged as an organizational initiative. Other staff members with minoritized identities had assimilated to remain in the organization. Partnering with Courageous Conversation, we were asked to interrogate the internalized set of scripts we grew up with. We also examined the experiences within the organizations that were tightly connected to race and positionality. More recent racial affinity spaces also provided a structure for individuals to identify the behaviors getting in the way of implementing our organizational strategies.

Because of these experiences, staff members now tend to lead reflections by acknowledging which aspects of their intersectionality provides privilege without prompting. Although there is grace in recognizing that everyone is on their own individual journey, there is also understanding that self-awareness is necessary to not only understand the goal but also to be part of achieving the goal.

- *Recommendation:* Build time and processes that support staff to reflect and address their identities, prior experiences, and internalized schemas.

Lesson 3: Building Relationships and Emotional Safety requires Dedicated Focus

As an organization that supports school and school system leaders, we understood that we needed to create the psychological safety necessary for all staff to fully engage in the risk-taking, feedback, and productive conflict the work would require. But we overestimated the extent to which our staff felt safe to give feedback and to vocally disagree with our senior leadership. To an extent, this still holds true. For example, in our most recent staff survey (October 2023), 100% of the cabinet but only 73% of staff agreed with the statement, “We are free and can be open to express our ideas, opinions, and beliefs.”

In recent years, as we shifted to remote work, we lost consistent and informal opportunities for connection. Thus, we began to protect time for relationship building and created intentional opportunities to foster social and low-stakes engagement across roles and positionality. Significant portions of our all-staff meetings are devoted to community building through games, reflective discussions, casual learning opportunities, and unstructured conversations. Our onboarding process now has more time for new staff to build relationships across the organization. Staff have time to reach out to one another for virtual coffee breaks, check-ins, and happy hours. We also incorporated relationship building and connection in our standard meeting agendas by starting off with check-ins and concluding with opportunities to share positive and negative feedback, as well as any instances where participants may have been harmed or experienced a “pinch.” Unsurprisingly, as this work took root, the importance we ascribed to relationship building was reflected in and reinforced by the values created by our staff (see [Figure 3](#) above), particularly the values of thrive/be better together; leverage diversity; and make space for joy.

- *Recommendation:* Do not assume relationship building is happening organically, especially in hybrid or remote environments; rather, create intentional opportunities for staff to connect as humans and as colleagues.

Lesson 4: Transparency Fosters Trust, Realistic Expectations, and Meaningful Input

As in PAR, our staff benefits from having a shared understanding of the work we are collectively embarking upon (Cornish et al., 2023; Lubin & Goldstein, 2022). Sharing data, whether from equity assessments, listening tours, or staff surveys, helps provide a shared understanding of the issues at hand, create an impetus for deep organizational change, raise expectations inside and outside the organization that improvement efforts are forthcoming, and create organizational accountability (Hill & Curry-Stevens, 2016). To generate authentic engagement and buy-in from our staff, they need to feel empowered to interrogate the current state, define the needed shifts, and contribute to bringing about those shifts. To that end, we regularly collect and transparently share data for group analysis and interpretation. We share

the results from Promise 54's DEI survey and discuss the clear differences in staff perception based on racial identity and hierarchy. Said one staff member after sharing our first round (2020) of Promise 54 DEI results: "To me, the perception data showed that cabinet is like, 'Wow, we spend a lot of time on this [equity work]. We are addressing this. We have plans for this.' But staff didn't know about those plans or isn't updated on what might be in conversation, in the works."

We continue to benchmark against our initial Promise54 survey and dig further into emerging patterns and trends by conducting listening tours with both present and former staff. The results of the listening tours are shared with staff for collective analysis and meaning-making. Beyond survey data, we recently made other relevant data transparent to staff for the first time, including salary bands, hiring ranges, and percentages of staff at the midpoint of their salary range, along with the findings of an equity audit of our organizational policies. The transparency modeled in sharing all new data not only supports collective understanding but also contributes to a growing sense of trust in the process (Lubin & Goldstein, 2022). This was further enhanced by transparency about the limits of this work so as not to create unrealistic expectations, such as being clear we were not aiming for a completely flat (non-hierarchical) organization and had budgetary limitations that restricted the time we could devote to these efforts.

- *Recommendation:* Share data, expectations, and drafts regularly across all staff; make essential time for staff to make meaning, ask questions, and provide input.

Lesson 5: External Facilitators Hold Up a Mirror Through Which We See Ourselves More Clearly

The work to become antiracist requires substantial reflection to uncover biases (Fong-Olivares, 2018). The periods of greatest progress on our antiracism journey have always been accompanied by an external facilitator. Outside facilitators allowed all staff to participate equally and created the conditions for collective learning. Time and again, the external partners push and lead us through deeper reflections. They provided the space and perspective for us to reflect and see ourselves in a different light, relieve our staff of the need to facilitate peers, and surface patterns we were unable or unwilling to see. The licensed psychologists from F.A.C.E. Race Consulting led racial affinity groups for more than a year, pushing individual staff members to examine how they are showing up for their colleagues within and outside of their racial affinity group. Restorative circles were also facilitated as a whole staff group after instances of harm. Through their sessions, F.A.C.E. Race Consulting modeled different approaches to uncover root issues of inequity and created an atmosphere for all staff to enter the discussion and be fully present. Additionally, middle managers worked with CoLeague Partners to

explore the adaptive nature of supervising and capacity building, including connecting these managers to our new organizational competencies and core values.

- *Recommendation:* Engage external parties to lead conversations about internal dynamics, thereby encouraging deeper reflection and examination of blind spots and systems.

Lesson 6: Affinity Groups Foster Relationships and Self-Awareness

Affinity spaces, particularly racial affinity spaces, generate opportunities to build trust, momentum, shared meaning, and to dig deeper into new data or ideas. Affinity groups have demonstrated benefits for staff of color by facilitating opportunities to be validated and heard, often resulting in greater retention and employee satisfaction (Bethea, 2020; Great Schools Partnership, 2020; Lubin & Goldstein, 2022). For white individuals, affinity spaces help build accountability and awareness of patterns of harm (Michael et al., 2009). While we sometimes held discussions as a whole staff (mixed race, mixed role), the affinity groupings supported more intimate conversations in which staff could engage in a focused and deep manner.

The affinity groups at The Leadership Academy have included a mix of departments within the organization; although there are designated point people, they do not hold any authority over the direction of the group. As mentioned previously, several affinity groups were facilitated by external partners who created environments for deep reflection and connection.

- *Recommendation:* Create opportunities for staff to connect with fellow staff who share meaningful identity markers (e.g., race, gender, position, etc.) to foster deeper connections and meaningful explorations of ideas and data.

Lesson 7: Small, Intentional Work Groups were Opportunities for Personalized Contributions

Voluntary working groups served to encourage participation and galvanize action because they empowered staff to focus on the issues in which they were most interested. However, we learned that these organically formed groups did not include representatives from all departments and often lacked diversity in terms of the racial identity, gender, and experience level of participating staff. To that end, members of the working groups realized that collective ownership of the work would require intentional outreach and engagement with teams and individuals who did not self-select into their groups. For example, when no members from the operations department elected to participate in the competency working group, members of that working group attended the operations department team meeting and subsequently met individually with team members to elicit their input and feedback.

- *Recommendation:* Craft opportunities for staff to engage in small work groups, including specifically inviting staff into certain groups or processes to cultivate input.

Lesson 8: A Mix of Synchronous and Asynchronous Work Increases Opportunity for Contribution

When input or feedback was necessary to move a project to the next phase, staff were given opportunities for synchronous and asynchronous work. The synchronous times, or live meetings, allowed staff to build community and develop shared meaning while working in concert with each other. During asynchronous opportunities did not require staff to be engaged at the same time. With such activities, they could edit a policy draft or add comments to reflection questions in a document at their discretion. The asynchronicity allowed for independent thinking and processing time, supported people to work in ways that best suited them, and increased transparency. For example, when drafts of new policies were issued in an open-source manner, staff made edits, asked questions, and added feedback that they were able to see incorporated into a final draft in real-time. In this sense, the blend of synchronous and asynchronous activities leveraged technology to provide multiple methods for engagement.

- *Recommendation:* Construct opportunities for staff to communicate, contribute, and engage in a blend of scheduled and unscheduled time to support staff's various communication preferences.

Lesson 9: Flexibility Allows the Work to Move Forward

As a lean organization, ensuring authentic participation meant centering the needs and readiness of our staff above rigid timelines. We needed time to iterate, refine, and learn together in service of continuous improvement. We also recognized a need to take a flexible approach to planning and scheduling this work, given the many competing demands on staff's time. One way we navigated this was to leverage organic opportunities to move work forward. For example, we initially created a theory of action built around an anticipated sequence for our DEI action plan and assumed we would first develop a set of organizational values that would inform subsequent steps. However, several staff members were already invested in creating a set of organizational competencies. To capitalize on their momentum, we pivoted and embraced a more fluid process in which multiple streams of work could take place concurrently. As a result, two separate working groups convened and continued to work simultaneously on developing both the values and competencies. Each group created intentional opportunities to crosswalk the two emerging bodies of work, creating coherence and addressing inconsistencies along the way.

Another vein of flexibility came from differentiating. We believed everyone had to be involved in the anti-racism journey, yet also recognized some staff needed more scaffolding than others. To support all paces, we created additional sessions and discussion opportunities. Throughout, we held high expectations for all but allowed for a variety of approaches to reaching milestones.

- *Recommendation:* Resist the tendency towards “one right way” and allow for unexpected approaches and timelines.

Lesson 10: Piloting Lowers the Stakes and Makes Work Stronger

Change is neither simple nor straightforward, and unlikely to happen in a linear fashion (brown, 2017; Gazmuri et al., 2010; Graetz & Smith, 2010). Like the participatory action research process, change is iterative and open-ended (Cornish et al., 2023; Price & Chahal, 2006). While the work we were engaged in to become a more equitable organization was (and remains) vitally important, it is possible that the perception of this work as “high stakes” initially exacerbated our tendencies toward perfectionism, hampered our productivity, and needlessly delayed our ability to reap the benefit of our efforts. To counter this, we found that piloting the work we produced helped to lessen the pressure and afforded us the time and distance we needed to surface and address any alignment or coherence issues. For example, the nearly finished list of organizational values contained two values that, while similar, were different in their nuance and intent. Some staff found one of the values redundant and wanted to eliminate it, while others felt it was significant and wanted it to remain. As a result, the release of the values document was delayed while the working group attempted to achieve consensus among the staff. Ultimately, the group decided to put the complete list of values, including the value in question, into use for one year. If, at the end of the year, staff felt that the value in question was indeed redundant, it would be eliminated. A similar process was used to further reduce and finalize the competencies. We found that releasing bodies of work before deeming them “final” supported continuous improvement, improved transparency, and promoted collective accountability, while allowing us to utilize these long-awaited resources.

- *Recommendation:* Release products in draft state to allow staff to respond to, shape, and use before finalizing.

Lesson 11: Embracing Accountability is Critical

When DEI initiatives fail, people of color often bear the burden of that failure (Jezouit, 2021), a lesson we learned early in our journey. Even as staff across the organization became more deeply committed to our internal antiracist work, a high turnover of staff of color, reports of microaggressions in the workplace, and a culture of silence continued. In a recent listening tour, for example, staff reported witnessing microaggressions and racial bias in the organization: “I’ve witnessed mostly a slew of microaggressions.” After building a shared understanding that the organization would prioritize this work, we needed mechanisms to hold us all accountable.

We helped build collective accountability by codifying our antiracism commitment in our strategic plan, core values, and organizational competencies. We now have benchmarks by which to measure our progress and hold ourselves accountable. Disaggregating benchmark data reduced blind spots stemming from differing experiences related to position or identity. For

example, in our most recent survey, 100% of cabinet members, but only 70% of staff, agreed with the statement “Our compensation systems are transparent and implemented fairly.” Similarly, 100% of cabinet, but only 53% of staff, agreed with the statement, “I see a defined link between performance and opportunities for advancement.”

Accountability does not intend to blame or shame, but rather to create a sense of collective responsibility (Anderson, 2021). Staff were given opportunities to build their personal accountability in racial affinity spaces. External facilitators helped push that thinking even further, asking staff to engage in these conversations even more authentically. Staff were asked to set annual goals aligned to the DEI goals in our strategic plan, helping staff to see how their work fits within the larger effort. We created a protocol for addressing (micro, macro) aggressions, but we must continually advocate for the full use of that protocol so that our values are lived and experienced by all staff and staff feel accountable to mitigating aggressions.

- *Recommendation:* Prioritize and practice accountability in formal and informal structures so that staff have multiple connections to advancing themselves and the organization in the antiracist journey.

Lesson 12: Setbacks are Part of the Process

The process of becoming an antiracist organization is not linear and is full of setbacks. Throughout our journey, there were times when mistakes were made and repairs were needed to keep moving forward. However, each setback required a re-examination of our processes and mindsets, leading to learning and growth. These mistakes often happened when urgency took precedence over anything else.

This most often occurs when we are attempting to engage in a collaborative process, but the structure or timing were not aligned to purpose. We have had multiple staff meetings where feelings of frustration and/or disappointment are shared because the conversation was too quick for true collaborative meaning- and decision-making to occur. Staff left those meetings feeling like their opinions did not really matter and there was not a deep commitment to collaboration. As a result, additional time was needed to repair the harm done and to re-engage staff in a follow-up conversation.

Another setback was ensuring we had multiple perspectives before acting. Our organization is set up in a hierarchical structure; therefore, information often flows from the top down. This structure has lent itself to creating a culture of silence that is difficult to penetrate. Not all staff members are comfortable speaking up in meetings and conversations, especially when the full staff is present. This culture of silence can allow dissatisfaction to permeate and then, when the organization’s leadership makes a decision, it the voice of a few versus the voice of the majority. When dissatisfaction is shared, a re-examination of the decision must be made and corrected if possible.

Setbacks also occur when we do not examine processes for effectiveness. Our affinity groups have been an important part of our journey; however, not every group functions at the same level nor has the same level of impact for participants. A process should not be continued solely because it is established and a small number of people are committed to it. Being able to examine our practice and push ourselves to go deeper and be flexible was critical for us to continue to learn from setbacks.

- *Recommendation:* View setbacks as part of the process and take the time to reflect on how they happened and what lessons can be learned as a result.

Lesson 13: Wins Need to be Acknowledged Along the Way

The work towards antiracism can be personally taxing and heavy. Such work also rarely feels complete, as there is always work to be done to shape cultures and systems that are constantly being influenced by new staff, human tendencies, and sociopolitical influences. When faced with daunting, never-ending work, we might be tempted to give up. A critical antidote to stalled progress is the practice of acknowledging wins—small and large. Acknowledge the progress of each milestone reached, such as a completed policy draft or survey findings that demonstrate improvement. The celebrations can be modest but should be timely and public. The recognition of progress often refuels staff's stamina. We found that acknowledgements bolster staff's commitment to the ongoing work, deepen individual relationships, and strengthen the organizational growth as a committed collective. We used a variety of practices to recognize wins that generally involved one of the following strategies:

- Schedule time to take a step back from daily work to see the progress, referencing how far you have come since the starting point.
- Have a concrete way to document and monitor individual and group progress through annual performance assessments and benchmarking against goals; reference these during reflection periods and cycles of improvement.
- Engage in regular conversation with peers and peer organizations who are engaged in similar work. The validation and examination of similarities and differences can be grounding and serve as a helpful lens through which you can understand progress.
- Similarly, engage in regular conversations among staff and keep a pulse on organizational tone and momentum. The “water cooler” conversations can be a chance to understand staff moods and notice when acknowledgements are most needed.
- Create space and time for staff to publicly acknowledge progress and shifts; allow people time to process and communicate their experiences of change.

- Ensure leaders have a safe place to process small leadership wins, even before changes are experienced by staff more broadly; their stamina is important to lead the work to set larger changes in motion.
- *Recommendation:* Purposefully and regularly acknowledge progress and wins among staff to invigorate commitment and fuel stamina for antiracism work.

Next Steps

Subsequent canvassing of staff with the Promise54 DEI survey has indicated progress in our antiracism journey, although there is still much work to be done. Some key areas of improvement include that, in October 2023, 100% percent of staff agreed with the statement, “Our organization has an explicit commitment to equity” as compared to 38% on our baseline survey in early 2020. Similarly, 87% agreed on the latest survey that “Our organization recognizes and eliminates exclusion” as compared to 26% on the baseline survey.

We continue to see some of the largest discrepancies between cabinet and staff perceptions connected to career advancement. We also continue to see notable differences in staff experiences along gender and racial lines. For example, 92% of white staff agreed with the statement, “There are the same opportunities for advancement for all racial and ethnic identities” compared to only 53% agreement among staff of color. Additionally, 100% of staff who identify as male agreed with the statement, “We frequently discuss power and privilege” compared to agreement from 71% of staff who identify as female. The consistent surveying of staff has allowed us to recognize areas of growth, and areas needing further attention.

Explicitly, we want to work on the following:

- Keep the lessons learned front and center so that we stay in the space of action and progress.
- Continue to break down the walls between staff and cabinet.
- Maintain a strong sense of community and team despite the challenges presented by an increasingly remote context.
- Further develop a culture of feedback, creating the conditions for healthy and productive resolutions to disagreements and conflict.
- Build out our talent systems.
- Deepen the implementation of restorative practices to further learning, healing, and accountability when harm has been done.

Conclusion

Over the past few years, we have learned that dedicated, focused effort can result in cultural and systemic shifts to our organization. We have achieved several of the goals we articulated in our strategic plan—creating guiding values and a set of competencies and policies that clarify the expectations we hold ourselves to as an equitable organization. However, we have yet to move the needle on improving our retention of staff of color. Even through the process of writing this paper, we saw how the characteristics of white dominant culture that we are striving to break down can become our default when the pressure of time and deadlines are perceived as more important than inclusion.

Our journey has been undergirded by core elements of participatory research. We anchored ourselves in a commitment to supporting varying interests, perspectives, and styles of communicating and participating. The affinity spaces and asynchronous work were an expression of that commitment. We also recognized that the institutional structures and infrastructures that have gotten us where we are, in fact, needed to be disrupted to move toward greater anti-racism; external facilitators were the leverage we needed to truly face our own structures and processes. Trust and relationships were central throughout, and were prioritized in smaller workgroups, affinity spaces, and processes for interacting. We will honor the progress we made and continue moving forward in our antiracism journey.

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