

DEEP LISTENING: Laying the Foundation for an Anti-Racist Workforce Development Strategy



Why:

Racism exists in various forms in workforce development, in recruiting practices and in the ways in which our social services sector operates; these things are products of a colonial and white supremacist culture and history. Taking the time and intention to create anti-racist policies and practice is, therefore, an imperative in any workforce development strategy that seeks equity outcomes.

In the Connected Community Approach, anti-racism falls into the key Prioritizing Power Sharing and Equity, however, in order to be successful and sustainable, it is important to take an anti-racism lens to all the keys. In laying the foundation for an anti-racism approach to place-based workforce development, two of the keys that come into play: Building on Everyone's Strengths and Learning Together.

Building on Everyone's Strengths:

Designing a whole system approach to anti-racism, starts with the premise that people are experts of their own context. Therefore, a good place to start is with deep listening.

Learning Together:

Our purpose is listening to gain perspective empathy: really learning about individuals' experiences with the systems around them, what motivates them and their power to make change. In workforce development we seek to learn about many things including:

- a job seeker's experience of race and racism as it relates to job search and retention
- what a safe, anti-racist job search/ employment environment might feel like for Black, Indigenous people or people of colour
- where employment organizations, service providers and trainers are in their own anti-racism learning journeys
- who has already designed approaches and tools that are working that others in the community can build on
- where employers are in their own anti-racism learning journeys
- what hiring and employee engagement processes businesses, organizations and institutions have put in place to try and reduce/eliminate bias and discrimination in their systems

Who:

If you are engaged in a whole community/ Connected Community approach to workforce development, it is important to listen to people in all parts of the ecosystem: job seekers, trainers, service providers, unions, employers etc. Racism harms everyone. It is important to understand the jobseeker experience to ground everyone in the barriers that racism creates in people preparing for, securing employment and thriving in their work. It is important to understand that those trying to help jobseekers are themselves steeped in systems founded on racist ideas. And, it is important to understand what employers are doing to address racism in the workplace.

How:

You can think of this foundational, deep listening phase as **a reality check**: a way for players in the ecosystem to understand each other's realities in order to find context specific solutions.

Talking about racism and systemic issues in our work may be uncomfortable topics. These issues can't simply be addressed in one conversation. So it's important to engage in the process with openness, curiosity, and a commitment to understanding.

Creating a safe space:

Topics of race and racism get to the core of the gross injustices and inequities in our society. These are difficult topics and best addressed once there has been trust established. While the questions below are intended to help get you started in discussions that will lead to co-creation, they should not be the first conversations you have with people.

Make sure that you have invested in creating the safest space you can before you begin. A safer space is a supportive, non-threatening environment where all participants can feel comfortable to express themselves and share experiences without fear of discrimination or reprisal. We use the word safer to acknowledge that safety is relative: not everyone feels safe under the same conditions. By acknowledging the experiences of each person in the room, we hope to create as safe an environment as possible. [This resource can help you design safer spaces in meaningful ways for your context.](#) ↗

Engaging in deep listening:

Deep listening should use questions only as prompts where needed: it is not about extracting information from people but rather a way to reflect together. The process needs to be meaningful to the people in the group and context specific. People will express themselves in various and different ways. Be careful not to correct or make people's comments more palatable to a mainstream audience. This is about listening to understand. Deep listening is an important skill when doing anything in community...and especially when addressing issues of race and racism. [This infographic can be used as a touchpoint](#) ↗; it can help you to ground yourself in good listening practice.

Asking the right questions:

Asking the right questions means reflecting on who you are asking and their context. There are no universal right questions, below though are some sample questions you can adopt and adapt to your own situation.

Sample questions:

Asking directly about individual experiences

- How do you see race and racism show up in your work (jobsearch)
- How has racism impacted your ability to reach your goals?
- What has worked well for you with regards to addressing racism (in your work/your organization/your institution/your job search)
- What has worked less well, why?
- What is your organization (institution) doing to address racism in your context?

Ask people to reflect on possible solutions:

- What can I do?
- What can others do?
- Who are my allies, how do I connect with them?
- What am I still curious or skeptical about?

Exploring where people are in their learning journey about race and racism?

- What are you curious about
- What do you want to learn?
- What questions come up for you?
- What gaps and challenges come to mind?
- What's already being done? What can be built on?

Remember that whatever questions you ask, people will need to know what you are doing with the information. In the East Scarborough Works experience, each discussion ended with:

"We talked about all that went well and all that was challenging in local workforce development, and we zeroed in on racism within this reflection. This has generated a lot of knowledge that we will share with others at the symposium, but importantly, this knowledge will lead to action, it is foundational to moving East Scarborough Works forward using an anti-racist lens -so thank you for your time, your honesty and your insights."

The above questions are designed to help you get started: they are the beginning, not the end of the road to truly understanding how racism is playing out in your ecosystem. Especially when working with residents, but also with people in organizations, trust is critical.