Alliance Building and Accountability

AWARE-LA recognizes that anti-racism efforts undertaken by white people should be enacted 1) within a framework that recognizes the need to be accountable to people of color and 2) in a way that supports alliance building with people of color. We believe our consciousness-raising efforts also fit into this category of work.

We believe anyone planning to create white anti-racist culture building groups modeled after AWARE-LA's Saturday Dialogue structure will grapple with a host of complicated questions related to accountability. As our various documents intend to make clear, the work of consciousness-raising and base building among white people is not intended to bypass the cultivation of accountable relationships with people of color. On the contrary, they are intended to facilitate better and more accountable relationships.

What appears below is a book chapter, original published by Crandall, Dostie, & Douglass Books.

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This chapter was created out of a concern that AWARE-LA needed to be accountable as an organization and our subsequent investigation into what would allow us to create trust-filled, sustainable, and effective accountable relationships.

While the chapter continues to accurately reflect our approach to accountability, it does not reflect the more current solidarity partnerships we have created in light of the Movement for Black Lives, the current political climate, etc. For this reason, we offer this update at the outset.

AWARE-LA currently includes multiple workgroups, one of which is the White People 4 Black Lives (WP4BL) subgroup (the LA chapter of SURJ). Through WP4BL, there has been extensive solidarity partnership building. This effort took shape throughout 2015 in response to #BlackLivesMatter, and it continues with multiple committees working in multiple ways, bringing together approximately 60 individuals to its monthly general meetings, and involving many other subcommittees that move work forward.

WP4BL is committed to the principles outlined in the chapter that appears below. And, as the text makes clear, white people cannot demand trust from people of color. It must be earned. Therefore, the story of how WP4BL developed an effective and ongoing alliance with BLM-LA is a long one. In short, it began with the same kind of one-sided accountability model described in the chapter that all-too-often leads to break downs in anti-racist efforts. Yet, with dedication and work, these groups have come to trust one another and function far more like the Transformative Alliance Building described below than we originally thought possible.

We continue to learn lessons through our accountable relationships with people of color. We continue to be challenged. And we continue to value this Transformative Alliance Building model for the guidance, inspiration, and courage it provides.

Powerful Partnerships: Transformative Alliance Building
by
Shelly Tochluk and Cameron Levin, AWARE-LA/RJA

Introduction

We offer this chapter in hope that our experience can benefit others dedicated to participating in effective multiracial alliances for social, economic, environmental, and racial justice. For clarity, we state our intentions upfront: *The purpose of this chapter is to 1) share with readers, especially white anti-racists, the way a common approach to accountability inhibits our development of a white antiracist identity and derails social justice efforts and 2) outline a vision for how we can participate in the formation of more productive, stronger multi-racial alliances.* We would also like to mention that although this paper critiques the pattern of accountability with which we are most familiar, we in no way mean to suggest that general principles of accountability should be abandoned. We recognize that some people have been successfully creating healthy alliances that have accomplished important justice work within the context of accountability for years. Unfortunately, our collective experience leads us to believe these are the exceptions rather than the rule. Because of this, we find it necessary to offer a critique of relationships wherein white people narrowly focus on one-sided accountability to people of color and then describe a different approach leading toward what we call Transformative Alliance Building.

Who are we? AWARE-LA and RJA

AWARE-LA (Alliance of White Anti-Racists Everywhere-Los Angeles) is an all-volunteer group of white people working to combat racism within our selves, communities, and the world. The leadership team of AWARE-LA includes eight members, each with 5-10 years or more experience working to understand and dismantle racism, white privilege, and white supremacy. AWARE-LA recognizes the need to maintain close relationships with people of color and build multi-racial alliances. For that reason, the group initiated

the development of a multi-racial, Racial Justice Alliance (RJA) that includes AWARE-LA members and people of color from various social justice networks in the Los Angeles area.

How does this chapter reflect a multi-racial, collaborative effort?

Two members of AWARE-LA's leadership team took responsibility for conducting interviews and writing this chapter. The primary author spoke with three white AWARE-LA members and three people of color from the RJA, and then both authors engaged in cycles of questioning, writing, presenting, and editing to get feedback from the AWARE-LA leadership team, members of the multi-racial RJA team, and other people of color with whom they share a professional relationship. The three white people interviewed include co-author Cameron Levin, Jason David, and Susan Goldberg. The three people of color include Salina Gray, Diane Burbie, and Hamid Khan. The authors intentionally chose three women and three men to participate as well as three people of color with diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds and experiences. The development of the model that emerged from the findings of the interviews has progressed through cycles of review in a multi-racial context, as is evidenced by the historical timeline presented below.

Why are we contributing to this book?

AWARE-LA began building alliances with people of color after its first year of existence, in 2005. This first effort involved creating a multi-racial group intended to produce a one-day racial justice dialogue in Los Angeles. This group did not sustain itself and disbanded after less than one year. Following the 2006 White Privilege Conference, the leadership team of AWARE-LA agreed that it was time to build a *Racial Justice Accountability Board* (RJAB) to serve as a mechanism of accountability to people of color and a space to begin developing its formal, multi-racial work. However, as people of color attended initial dialogues, many were uncomfortable with the approach to accountability to which AWARE-LA members were accustomed. These people of color bristled at the idea of being an approving body and named problems with the use of one-sided accountability guidelines. Many spoke of the dehumanization they had seen it engender, destructive effects on relationships, and perpetuation of oppressive systems. They argued that we needed to build our alliance on equal footing, with *all* parties being accountable for confronting their privileges and acting as honestly and humanely with each other as possible. This, they said, is a more viable path toward productive alliances for social justice.

The RJA members called on the AWARE-LA leadership to take responsibility for holding *themselves* accountable for their own process and expressed dissatisfaction with the idea that people of color should carry the burden of monitoring white people's anti-racism work within the white community. Essentially, the people of color said they trust AWARE-LA's ability to work with white people and if the sole purpose of the RJAB was to hold AWARE-LA accountable, then they wanted nothing to do with it. (*Note: We acknowledge that a group of people of color collectively vocalizing their trust in a group*

of white people doing anti-racism work with other white people is rare. But, this is the relationship AWARE-LA and the members of RJA have with one another.)

Hearing from these people of color, AWARE-LA realized that in our context in Los Angeles, the accountability model within which many white anti-racists are trained (one where one-sided accountability to people of color remains the overriding focus) was creating real barriers for us to do the work we collectively wanted to do. The AWARE-LA leadership team returned to the multi-racial group proposing to work toward "Accountable Alliance Building." Again, the people of color questioned our approach. After much discussion we understood that if white people's primary emphasis is on one-sided accountability to people of color, we will continue creating superficial relationships that lack deeply honest, meaningful dialogue.

This experience prompted us all (AWARE-LA and RJA) to look more closely at the dynamics existing within what we experience as the social justice movement's most prevalent form of accountability relationship. We now see that although many traditional principles of accountability ought to be retained as part of a trust-building process, multi-racial alliances will be stronger when they involve healthy relationships that invite each party to bring their full, honest selves to the table. With full recognition that there may be people who already create healthy, productive alliances in their own communities, we found it necessary to formally describe the development of this type of alliance relationship for ourselves. We call our model Transformative Alliance Building.

This approach, still in draft form, was originally unveiled in a workshop at the 2007 White Privilege Conference. AWARE-LA invited an early reviewer of this chapter, Jorge Zeballos, a regular presenter and co-facilitator of the people of color caucus at WPC, to be part of a dialogue whereby we would offer the model up for consideration. As Jorge was not a member of RJA during the interview and internal dialogue stage, he took on the role of critical observer within the facilitation team. Feedback from the conference workshop was then used to refine the model and make necessary changes to better convey our essential findings.

Over the summer of that year, RJA decided that our approach should be presented anew at the following year's conference, but that this time the offering would come from a multi-racial team of AWARE-LA and RJA members in order to better represent our localized context. Over that next year, a team of four engaged in constructive dialogue to further modify and refine our model and we then presented a new version at the 2008 White Privilege Conference. RJA later held a day-long workshop for continuing and new members in October 2008 where we presented the model and considered how we can continue to refine the model and move the work forward. Twenty-eight individuals participated in the workshop; 21 people of color and 7 AWARE-LA leadership members.

This chapter incorporates all feedback offered up through the October 2008 workshop. We hope that readers will recognize that we make no judgments or suggestions regarding how or why the patterns we identify have come into existence. We seek only to highlight what we have experienced and how we hope to move forward.

Principles of Accountability

It is important to re-state, we are not advocating that accountability guidelines be abandoned. The white people involved in this are *not* trying to get out of their responsibility to self-reflect and develop skills. In fact, we believe accountability guidelines are extremely valuable because white people's lack of sensitivity to race issues makes it essential that white people develop the ability to engage in relationships non-oppressively. We also believe that people of color should retain authority over naming what is racism and we recognize that trust between people of color and white people must continually be re-affirmed early in the relationship. Although we do not believe white people should be cast out and treated inhumanely when they make racist mistakes, we do recognize that people of color may understandably pull back trust when this occurs and the responsibility falls on the white people involved to help rebuild that trust. For these reasons, accountability principles give directions for growth and are extremely useful tools.

On the other hand, the context in which many white anti-racists attempt to *live out* accountability statements can be destructive to relationships and social justice work. What we would like to highlight is that *principles of accountability are successfully enacted within ongoing relationships founded on mutual respect.* Without functional, healthy relationships, attempts to hold oneself to accountability guidelines can turn those very principles into static standards of behavior that can breed serious problems within real-life situations. For example, white anti-racists might have two respected colleagues of color asking for opposing actions simultaneously. In those situations, to whom is the white person more accountable? When is there room to question requests made by a person of color?

Unfortunately, we have seen a pattern time and time again where the ultimate goal of working toward social justice becomes lost and, instead, attention becomes singularly focused on questions of accountability. When entire relationships begin to center around this question, we find that they also tend to reinforce patterns that derive from our social conditioning within a society based in white supremacy. The shallow dialogue perpetuated by this narrow focus thwarts our efforts at building long-lasting relationships and, as a result, our justice efforts falter. With that said, we would like to offer a more complete explanation of the problems we have encountered.

When One-sided Accountability is the Sole Focus

There are many problems bred from relationships in which one-sided accountability becomes the focus. What we present here are four threads of criticisms that emerged through our interview dialogues. In totality, they argue that these relationships unwittingly perpetuate our society's structures and create dysfunctional relationships that involve 1) inauthentic communication, 2) unhealthy white anti-racist people, 3) inherent inequality, and 4) ineffective collaborative practices. Although these four issues do not represent an exhaustive list, we believe they are significant enough to warrant

serious questioning of the productivity of relationships wherein one-sided accountability is the overriding focus, displacing the real goal – working for social justice. We ask readers to open their hearts and minds to imagine to what degree their relationships and practices might involve some of the problematic dynamics we have experienced.

Inauthentic Communication

A primary barrier to developing productive alliance relationships is inauthentic communication. Because white anti-racists often interpret "living out accountability guidelines" as meaning that white people's attitudes and behaviors shall *always* be free of unconscious racism or enactments of privilege, white people can avoid saying anything that might reveal a lack of understanding. This translates into white people regularly holding back their thoughts and feelings within conversations – both with people of color *and* other white anti-racists.

When Susan spoke of what constitutes an unhealthy accountability environment, she said it is signaled by a sense that *"there is never room to mess up"* when engaged in relationships. She describes a destructive pattern that emerges when white people cannot break free from the internalized sense that they are constantly "*walking on eggshells*" or "*pins and needles*" saying:

> "*I think unhealthy accountability has to do with this constant need to prove yourself by saying always the right thing and doing the right thing, even when those actions or words are not genuine. So, having a sense of being watched or almost a sense that the mistake is being waited on…whether it's waiting for your own self to mess up, or waiting for other people to mess up.*"

Essential to highlight is that this felt sense among many whites that a mistake is being waited on *may or may not* be supported by interactions with the people of color in their lives. Oftentimes, it is another white anti-racist who is waiting to pounce on another white person when an error occurs. Sometimes, the silencing is so profound that no verbal mistake can be made, and therefore the fear reflects only that individual's internalized anxiety. The essential point is that when white people feel that they must refrain from sharing their honest thoughts, the resulting inauthentic sharing is readily apparent to people of color and damages the potential for developing deep relationships.

Fundamentally, the sense that a "*mistake is being waited on*" often has a negative effect on the level of trust felt within relationships. Susan describes how white people's efforts to avoid mistakes in order to be seen as trustworthy can, in fact, end up eroding the very trust we seek to build.

> "*There's an assumption of the mistake and it's that 'if you don't act in certain ways and say certain things, then I can't trust you.' Yes, people's behavior and language is important. And yet, it ends up being twisted because then you are never being genuine. So how are you ever going to really have a relationship?*

So, it's a set up. It comes from a place of trying to connect, but it ends up being an unfortunate set up because you can't honestly connect because you're never honestly being who you are."

This lack of honest connection is disastrous for our common work of ending racism and white supremacy because these relationships are constantly on the brink of failure. Although we recognize that trust requires continuous work, we suggest that we need to consciously separate what it means to be accountable and trustworthy from what it means to make errors. If we do not do this, too many white anti-racists will continue to fear exposing their lack of understanding and therefore remain guarded and inauthentic.

Diane sums up the critique of inauthentic relationships that lack a foundation of 1) open communication, 2) deep dialogue, and 3) the acceptance that mistakes will occur with this statement:

"*The list of* [accountability] *principles is like mom and apple pie. There's nothing wrong with the principles. But, it's not the principles that are broken; it's the relationship. It's the fact that you believe that we're going to do real changing stuff with superficial relationships with each other, and that ain't gonna happen.*"

Essentially, what we have found is that moving beyond superficial, and therefore fragile, relationships depends upon an approach to accountability that allows everyone to make mistakes, grow, and be challenged to further develop non-oppressive relational practices. Ultimately, all of us have been raised within intertwining systems of oppression. The degree to which each of us takes up responsibility for investigating how they have affected us and remaining accountable to non-oppressive principles is what will help us build deep relationships that allow for each person to be fully human and also retain a focus on social justice work.

Unhealthy White Anti-racist People

Within groups trying to disrupt systematic white supremacy, accountability can often mean that feelings, experiences, and perspectives of people of color should carry more weight than those of white people. This dynamic usually includes some underlying premises, such as the belief among *both* white people *and* people of color that 1) white people are inherently untrustworthy, 2) all white people will always be part of the problem, 3) white people are only legitimate allies deserving humane treatment if their anti-racist practice is flawless, and 4) white people should always defer to people of color. We acknowledge there may be many historical reasons for these beliefs to arise as well as internal psychological processes that reinforce them. However, whether they are overtly stated or subtly implied, when whites and/or people of color act in ways that promote these beliefs it encourages white people to feel more insecure, guilty, and worthless, and to avoid developing a healthy racial identity. Each of these results leads to particular problems.

A main issue is that if white people feel that they are essentially lesser partners in the fight against racism, they are not prompted to create a healthy, productive white anti-racist identity for themselves. Intending to actively work *against* the dominant white supremacist culture, many white anti-racists try to distinguish themselves from what are considered the norms of whiteness. Unfortunately, when white people lack a sense of wholeness and distance themselves from all things white, they often fall into troubling forms of cultural appropriation as they seek acceptance and validation from people of color. They often run toward the cultures of people of color they have learned to follow and this approval-seeking dynamic reinforces the sense that white people are too unstable and unhealthy to be trusted.

Salina recognizes the lack of healing involved and comments that one-sided accountability reinforces an unhealthy form of "*deference.*" She states that she is uncomfortable with what comes with relationships wherein white people try to find personal validation by conforming to the wishes of people of color:

> *"I'm very uncomfortable when people walk on the proverbial pins and needles around me and do things because they feel that it's what I expect or want them to do. So, for me, I'd be more comfortable hanging out with an avowed racist than a bunch of mainstream whites who claim to be down, because claiming to be down often means to be culturally assimilated. Often, it's them using language that they feel will make me comfortable, it's doing and having interests they feel will allow me to accept them as a black person instead of a white person.*"

Clearly, the cultural assimilation that makes Salina uncomfortable is not an expected outcome of accountability principles. What we want to highlight, however, is that when white people worry solely about being accountable in a way that promotes a simplistic form of deference, they often ignore the development of a healthy racial identity that is part of their personal healing.

Yet, white people frequently feel validated when distancing themselves from anything considered white. Cameron offers how he experienced this dynamic:

> "*The whole idea when working with communities of color is that you should hide or minimize your whiteness. You want to be as thin and small as possible as a white person. You want to be as accepted and embraced as everything but for that. So, the greatest compliment is, 'You're not really white. You're black. Or you have black bones. Or you have a black heart.'*"

White people distancing themselves from their whiteness often goes hand in hand with the belief that they are less valuable human beings. Cameron speaks of the long road he has taken to find a way out of this way of seeing that essentially required him to deny his value:

> *"Working in many organizations run by people of color with majority staff of color, I internalized that my humanity was of less value because I was white. Therefore*

I could be treated without concern for my humanity and the message was…that is the way it should be."

This is a long-standing pattern in which many people within anti-racism circles, both white and people of color, have played a role. Whiteness, and all things associated with it are often considered of little to no value. Then, viewing whiteness as a something of a curse, large numbers of white people turn away from anything associated with their home communities. This reaction is hardly surprising.

Another feature of this pattern includes the continued presence of extreme guilt within white people. Salina puts guilt at the top of the list of problems with this way of approaching relationship building:

> "*Accountability, when I think about it, is about white guilt, the notion of superiority or inferiority, this idea of answering to someone. It makes me think of a lot of contrition, certainly inequity and inequality. I think of contrition, parent-child relationship, and hierarchy. And hierarchy is inherently problematic when you talk about humans. I think that there's still a lack of healing when you talk about accountability. There's a wholeness of the individual that I think is missing.*"

We would like to highlight the point that we readily hear how white guilt renders white people ineffective allies and frustrates people of color. Yet, people rarely openly state that the focus on one-sided accountability can actually *support the continuation of white guilt* and that this guilt is a serious barrier to white people finding the kind of healing needed to do effective ally work.

Jason speaks of his experience wherein accountability structures depended on white guilt to encourage white people to continually defer to people of color.

> "*From the perspective where an accountable relationship is based in this idea that white people can only be accountable when coming from 'I will only follow the leadership of person of color.' 'I'm only doing good work if I get a stamp of approval from people of color.'… I just feel like it just requires a lot of guilt on the part of a white person or a white-led organization, either guilt or this having no sense of identity kind of place. It really requires that in order to make that work.*"

So far, we have seen that white people perceiving themselves to be less-than-equal relationship partners can support white people in 1) maintaining an unhealthy sense of self, 2) distancing themselves from their whiteness, and 3) seeking validation from people of color. Additionally, however, the absence of a clear racial identity in relationship to anti-racism work leads to even more problems.

The lack of a healthy white racial identity also reduces white people' interest in thorough self-inquiry. One common result is that they cut themselves off from any learning that might come from their experience. Not only do white people stop themselves from fully

seeing how the white supremacist culture continues to live within them, but they also deny learning that could prove helpful to collaborative partnerships.

Diane is especially disheartened by what she sees when white people feel the need to stand separate from everything related to white culture:

> "*I think it's detrimental to both sides….I don't think white people are motivated or encouraged to participate and offer insight. They might not even believe they have anything to offer to the process, and it's not true at all…Part of this is, 'I need to stand apart from my white culture, my white affiliation, and be allied to you.' Well, I don't want you to do that. I want you to be able to reach into your experience from your white culture, and me reach into my experience from my black culture and do our collective thinking.*"

Of course, dominant white culture should be critiqued, interrogated, and transformed. Anti-racism efforts require this. But, as long as white people reactively run away from all things associated with the white community, they remain less capable of mining the possibly helpful learning they have inculcated through their varied experiences.

Additionally, the premise that white people are inherently untrustworthy often translates into white people believing spending time in white caucus spaces reinforces racism. This can limit white people' ability to facilitate their own self-inquiry. Diane expresses her concern this way:

> "*I think the aggregate awareness of white people has been slowed because it's been led by people of color. I think it is an absolute oxymoron to say that understanding one's own culture is critical to racial relations and let me have someone outside your race tell you about your own culture, which has been far too long the model and the time spent.*"

An important issue is that if white people believe that "being accountable" means they should turn *only* to people of color for guidance, white people will continue to avoid responsibility for organizing within the white community in order to move other white people forward. While true that much about racism and white privilege can be learned through the leadership of people of color, self-examined white people are able to speak to the experience of being white. When white people have a healthy sense of self through having clearly investigated that experience, they can then speak about it with other white people and further their growth.

Ultimately, we believe the form of accountability most of the collaborators on this chapter were acculturated into, and the sense of worthlessness it supports in white people, encourages white people to run away from the very relationships that most need transformation. Only when white people find a strong internal grounding in a healthy sense of self will they effectively develop and maintain transformative relationships with the larger white community that can expand movements for justice.

Inherent Inequality

We recognize disrupting white supremacy necessarily involves challenging the dominant, white power structure. However, when white people reactively enter relationships characterized by a power reversal that puts people of color in a superior position over white people, the problems inherent in any intentionally hierarchical system are bound to arise. Systems of dominance we have been acculturated into, such as white supremacy, patriarchy, etc., are reflected in one-sided accountable relationships because one group continues to have power over another group. It may be understandable that many believe an initial power reversal is an important step on the road toward dismantling the white supremacist system. However, we believe relationships built upon this uneven foundation lead toward feelings of dehumanization and differential worth and therefore do not help us create the non-oppressive relationships necessary to create a non-oppressive society.

Further, relationships based on inherent inequity foster dysfunctional relational patterns. First, white people tend to act in patronizing ways toward people of color. Paraphrasing a lengthy explanation, Hamid describes how when white people feel they need to constantly ask, "*what do you need*?" it is as though the person of color cannot take care of him or herself. Jason describes building relationships within this context and the questions that arose within him during times when racism emerged in a room:

> "*Especially as a white person, how do I come in? Because that is what I should be doing, taking responsibility for all of racism that is causing this pain in this moment. So I've got to make things better. I've got to come in and rescue and caretake…so then I act out of a place that feels really ungrounded and uncomfortable.*"

Ultimately, discomfort is felt on both sides and this dynamic demeans everyone in the process.

A second dysfunctional characteristic commonly experienced in relationships based in inequity involves the belief that one group cannot be trusted to do effective work without oversight by the other group. When we believe white anti-racists are *incapable* of holding themselves accountable for their own development this means that people of color *must* monitor white people's progress. This can be problematic because it 1) requires people of color to spend their time attending to white people instead of working in their own communities, 2) continues a long historical pattern of white people being served while people of color's energies are depleted, and 3) sets up a dynamic of one group "overseeing" another, as opposed to "working in relationship with" in order to provide feedback.

Certainly, many people of color remain willing to provide mentorship to white people who require help seeing issues of race and white privilege. But, we suggest that these mentorship relationships are strongest when built on a foundation of mutual partnership, respect, and equality. Not only that, we believe white people can and should be

encouraged to imagine they can become sufficiently skilled so they can begin to hold themselves accountable and provide leadership within the white community.

Ineffective Collaborative Practices

A final theme that emerged involves the development of ineffective collaborative practices that limit the social justice movement as a whole. Of primary importance is that an approach based in inherent inequity reduces the likelihood that we will fully access and utilize the skills brought to the table by various members of the lesser-valued group. Diane speaks extensively on this subject:

> *"Here's the problem. The whole accountability dynamic doesn't invite the best thinking of the collective. It simply advocates blind support of the most affected. And I think that the most affected bring in a hugely important perspective to the equation. And I think great partnerships of examined white people do too. And those two added together, that's what gets positive change. But, that seldom happens."*

A key idea here is the acknowledgement that those who have suffered most from racism have an enormous amount to contribute. The knowledge and experience gained from having lived through oppressive circumstances and situations cannot be underestimated.

The trouble is that if white people who have done a lot of internal work *and* have developed a sophisticated analysis of systemic racism are expected to offer unquestioned support, we lose the possibility of co-creating more effective approaches and practices. Essentially, if we believe white people *cannot* contribute to the knowledge base because of their racial positioning, we lose whatever valuable ideas might come from a more equitable and honest sharing.

Finally, distrust is reinforced when the "*blind support for the most affected*" dynamic plays out in situations where white people become advocates and allies without becoming full partners in an initiative. According to Diane, in the end, minor battles might be won when isolated tasks are accomplished, but the larger justice effort does not move forward. This happens because the structure of one-sided accountability does not ask people to resolve the inner psychic issues that affect all of us raised within a culture of white supremacy. Our unresolved issues then continue to negatively impact our ability to form partnerships wherein we can look beyond a single task and concentrate on the type of long-term, sustainable effort that requires honest, real, deep relationships. On a large scale, the problematic aspects highlighted within the four themes just discussed are disastrous for the racial, social, economic, and environmental justice movements.

A Different Direction: A Path toward Transformative Alliances

The AWARE-LA members who have been part of the creation of this model have spent many years internalizing accountability principles and building anti-racist practices. They are clear that the principles asking white people to become cognizant of the privilege and racism infused within their thoughts, emotional reactions, and behaviors are essential. They also hold as invaluable those principles that help develop 1) non-oppressive communication skills and 2) equitable relationships with people of color.

Yet, AWARE-LA is also clear that it has been a struggle to expand their thinking outside of the "accountability to people of color" box in order to claim the following: *Relationships intended to serve a racial/social/economic justice agenda will be stronger and more productive if they are founded from their beginnings in an approach that values each individual's essential humanity, offers mutual respect, and holds open the possibility for trust to be achieved.* Perhaps most radical is the contention that white people who are at the beginning stages of racial awareness should consider themselves, and be considered, legitimate allies. In keeping with this approach, new white anti-racists should also be treated with respect and consideration.

Although recognizing that some people have already been building healthy, functional cross-race relationships for years, these may represent a small minority within social justice circles. We also must acknowledge that for many people who have never experienced relationships with white people that inspire a sense of trust and/or hope, our approach will likely feel overly optimistic. For this reason, it may be helpful to see our offering as a future ideal, something to be worked toward, even if it feels out of reach at this time. We would now like to present our framework for the direction we, AWARE-LA and RJA, intend to take as we move forward.

The Transformative Alliance Building Model

We offer our Transformative Alliance Building model as an alternative to relationships focusing on one-sided accountability structures. We start by admitting that this approach asks many of us to forge a new path. We know building relationships where the highest value is placed on creating equitable, sustainable relationships that can work to uphold our common goal of advancing movements for justice is something we will need to navigate together. Here is a basic outline of the model from which we are working:

- The immediate goal is to build transformative alliances between anti-racist white people and people of color.
- To build these alliances successfully, we need to create healthy and productive relationships.
- In order to build these relationships, white people must take responsibility for how we are socialized to act out white supremacy culture and white privilege. (White people are called to create a new way of being in relationship. This is where accountability principles remain important. But, the overriding understanding is that only when anti-racist white people and people of color work towards genuine relationships can both groups be free to create transformative alliances.)

- Transformative alliances are the vehicles that allow us to create effective movements for racial, social, economic, and environmental justice (the ultimate goal).

We believe that this model will be instrumental in our ability to actually make good on the intentions we set for ourselves.

Where do we begin?

To be sure, developing healthy relationships takes time and effort. We recognize this process will neither be easy, nor assured. Part of starting off in the right direction, however, involves white people helping to foster relationships with people of color by being anti-racist allies. This is done through engagement in the following:

- Anti-racist actions
- Consciousness raising
- Learning about social justice and the history of the white supremacist system in the United States
- Honest/constructive dialogue
- Demonstrating growth over time

When white people develop these practices, opportunities are created for people of color to build trust with anti-racist white people. Not surprisingly, many of these features come straight out of the accountability principles that we find essential.

When we talked with our AWARE-LA colleagues about what it looked like for them to take up these guidelines during their beginning stages, their statements reflect the learning of essential skills. Jason explains:

> "*I'm being constantly vigilant in my honesty, in my self-reflection, in my willingness to take risks, in asking for dialogue around times when I am having conflict in relationship, or feeling like there's my own internalized racism playing out.*"

Jason's recognition that developing the characteristics of an ally is anchored in a self-reflective process is also mirrored within Cameron's experience. But, Cameron highlights the importance of approaching the work non-defensively and with an honest intent to experience change. To Cameron this means:

> "*the ability to be engaged about issues of race and racism and having the skills and the capacities to really take in what's being said and not react from a defensive place, to take the information that's being shared and be able to integrate it into my way of being in my practice. It's not enough to just say, 'Thank you. I appreciate what you're saying.' But I also have to be reflective in the practice that comes from that hearing. So, for me, it is really the ability to non-defensively listen to what's being said, to be able to have a constructive*

engagement with how I'm being challenged and then to be able to turn around and integrate that information and have it lead to new practices."

"The most basic skill is not to get defensive. That's really hard to learn to do, but to really hear what somebody's saying, to not try to apologize too quick. Like 'I'm sorry, I didn't mean it that way.' But, it's not about me. I had to learn that me telling them 'I'm sorry' is to make me feel better."

The skills Jason and Cameron speak of take time to develop and depend on the ability to engage in relationships with people who have 1) a more advanced understanding of how racism and white privilege manifest, and 2) the time, energy, and openness to engage in this ongoing dialogue process.

We would like to highlight that the difference between the form of accountability we critiqued and the Transformative Alliance Building model is that *our approach explicitly suggests that white people deserve respect and consideration even while initially working to develop skills*. One of the guiding understandings is that white anti-racist people who are committed will undoubtedly make racist mistakes or act out white privilege and that they must be 100% accountable for this behavior. At the same time, white anti-racist people still need to be treated considerately as allies who are invested in, and working for, justice and not as untrustworthy white people.

As trust builds and mutual work develops, people of color should be able to ask their white allies to do the following:

- Step up and stay engaged
- Speak their truth
- Trust themselves to interact without being deferential
- Be invested in self-examination/consciousness-raising
- Engage other white people on their anti-racism

This information about what people of color should expect from their white allies was included early in our process. But, as RJA took a more active role in constructing our framework, they prompted the addition of information regarding what white anti-racists should be able to ask of allies of color. This has prompted us to include the following. Allies of color who wish to create productive relationships with their white allies offer:

- Patience
- Recognition that white people and people of color need, and are able, to come together
- Investment in self-examination/consciousness-raising
- Willingness to see white people as more than simply their racial placement
- Belief that white anti-racists ability to add value

The addition of this information took a transformative process in and of itself. Our original response was to ask our RJA members what they felt we, the white allies, could

ask of them. It was not until they assured us that it was our role to courageously name what we needed that we recognized the depth of our own sense of having a lesser voice. For us, the process we have moved through has been truly inspiration and growth inducing, opening new avenues for theoretical consideration, relationship development, and mutual work.

Where does this lead?

With commitments to develop our knowledge, skills, and anti-racist practices, white people can better participate in creating a foundation for functional, continuing relationships. The intentions for each person entering these relationships would include:

- Building trust as friends and allies.
- Entering into alliance on an equal footing by honoring one another's humanity.
- Providing leadership alongside one another (not over).
- Remaining accountable (individually and collectively) for how we act out our various privileges.
- Being responsible for what it means for each of us to live under a white supremacist system and culture.

The key words associated with our intentions for transformative alliances include: mutuality, partnership, sustainability, united front, common purpose, collaboration, and respect.

What would alliance relationships look like?

Through our interview and collaborative processes, we developed some initial descriptions of what alliance relationships would entail. Important are the following characteristics. People of color and anti-racist white people would…
- Have sustainable and meaningful relationships based on mutual trust and respect.
- Be invested in working out problems when they arise.
- Find productive solutions that are strengthened by our collaboration and collective effort.
- Be committed to having one another's back through thick and thin.

This last point is perhaps the most challenging. A key difference within this approach versus the common pattern of one-sided accountability relationships is that white anti-racist people in alliances would be able to expect support from people of color when the situation warrants. Cameron states that:

> *"The biggest thing you can ask a person of color to do is stand up for white anti-racist people. That's the ultimate thing to do. I think when a person of color is willing to risk that, that's a true alliance."*

As partners in alliance relationships, each individual's full humanity would be considered and honored, regardless of race.

In addition to these four main characteristics, the interviewees also commented on elements that would be expected to be present within alliance relationships. For Salina, alliance relationships would allow people to honestly relate without one person needing to continually try to please the other. She speaks of appreciating white people who are "*unapologetically white*," meaning those who are comfortable with whom they are as long as they are working against white supremacy. This, then, allows balance to emerge:

> "*When I think of alliance, first off I think of equality. I think of two whole individuals, or entities. I think of mutual respect, mutual appreciation. I think of more of a give and take. I think of balance. I think of more just and even flow between the two and I think of unity of purpose, unity of thought, unity of work.*"

Diane builds on the idea of mutually, but highlights how this type of relationship also involves conscious decision-making regarding who will be a good partner:

> "*It is when you are willing to fully give, and that's a very discerned decision and I think, for me at least, it's a mutually invested commitment to be self-examined and then to be in partnership.*"

This is an essential point. We recognize that not all cross-race relationships can be alliances. Alliances will only occur when *both* parties are 1) fully dedicated to self-examination, 2) are willing to confront the privileges they receive, and 3) feel inspired to commit to the individual or group.

Some additional features include the ability to be in honest dialogue, feeling that respect is mutual, and being given the benefit of the doubt that intentions are positive. Here is what Susan said specifically about what makes an alliance relationship:

> "*It looks like being engaged and committed to each other in our lives within and outside of our social justice work together. The relationship isn't superficial. It is being interested in the whole story of each other's lives. In this kind of real relationship, when issues come up that need to be addressed, the relationship is there to support you and the challenge is one that helps you grow and continue learning. When an issue arises that makes someone uncomfortable it would be talked about immediately with the understanding that we will always be trying our best and that we are always trying to be supportive and filled with consciousness. This kind of relationship would honor the fact that those of us who are engaged in this work are motivated by genuine caring and a deep desire to make the world a better place. So, when attention is brought to a mistake, either conscious or unconscious, this type of relationship allows me to immediately work on shifting the problem areas.*"

Susan's comments reflect a radical difference between the approaches. Whereas in the form of accountability we were acculturated into white people's mistakes are often used to justify exclusion or harsh treatment, alliance relationships recognize that mistakes are bound to happen and are not taken as indicators of the white person's lack of investment.

But, what allows us to build relationships where this is possible? We next consider the different requirements necessary for alliance relationships to occur.

What is required to build an alliance relationship?

Several elements are required for creating and sustaining alliance relationships. First, there needs to be an emphasis on long-term commitment, seeing beyond the single issue of race when considering the effects of oppression, and both sides engaging in personal healing work. Salina speaks extensively about how each member of an alliance needs to do self-examining work to heal from the experience of living within a white supremacist system:

> *"For an alliance to be an alliance, and to be an effective alliance, you really have to have individuals or entities that have really done the proverbial work. If you're talking about race, I think you have to have individuals who have really gone deep within and addressed and worked out the issues and challenges of growing up in a society such as ours, where white supremacy is the overarching design. Both sides. I think the whites need to do the work. What does it mean to be white growing up in a system of white supremacy? And what does it mean to be black growing up in the system? And not only what does it mean, but how has it affected me in my life and my interactions in my relationships? And what do I need to do to move beyond the confines of white supremacy? And only once you've done that and committed to doing work to heal yourself, because whites need the healing, and blacks need the healing, then you can form an alliance…Each of us should be held to the same standards."*

What we notice within Salina's statement is the idea that alliances cannot truly form until the work of healing and self-examination is engaged. We see this model as an approach to building *transformative* alliances and we believe that unless both parties are open to being transformed, a healthy dynamic will not emerge.

Diane discusses why it is so important for us all to do the work of examining deeply our own experiences and finding peace within it:

> "*I think the end of this is mutuality because I don't think the self-examining is different for whites than it is for people of color. It's just exactly the same. I think it is the notion of coming to terms with the fact that I am more than myself. I am part of a culture and a culture that I don't always define, but it informs and influences who I am and how I think and then secondly, to find my peace within that, to find my peace within the elements of my culture that I take pride in and I*

hold up and I acknowledge and I look to and I pass on to another generation and also to acknowledge the parts of my culture that I didn't craft but are real."

This idea of finding a certain kind of resolution regarding who we are within our culture and what kind of change we want to work toward in the world is essential if each partner is going to stand solidly side by side during moments of difficulty.

Three additional requirements for building alliances include understanding that 1) building trust still depends upon a significant investment of time, 2) people are bound to make mistakes if we have been recipients of certain privileges our whole lives, and 3) over time we should be able to question moments when our partner's actions appear be based in an oppressive system. Susan explains this most clearly:

> "*So there is a sense of mutual respect around our needs. Again, I think it depends on the relationship whether or not I can expect* [allies] *to be accountable for their own growth. If it's somebody that I've known for a long time then there is the assumption that there is that accountability around a whole variety of issues, including sexism, homophobia.…it's okay to struggle. In fact, it's good to struggle, especially when you're doing the best that you can to be a conscious, whole, loving person in the world and to not do harm. We are going to make mistakes. So, what we're looking for in that is to really be able to talk to each other mutually and inspire each other's continued growth."*

In sum, we hope that alliance relationships will be increasingly possible. We also know the challenges we face. Collectively, we have a lot to learn and a lot from which to heal. For many people, the idea of mutuality will feel premature, especially for those who have had no prior experience that validates or reinforces the idea that white people can ever be sufficiently skilled to warrant trust. For this reason, we find it important to address why we feel working to build this type of relationship is so important.

What are the benefits of alliance relationships?

The success of our efforts for justice will be radically improved when we have sustainable, long-term, functional relationships. Diane speaks about how unequal accountability structures prompt short-term collaborations, but she then clarifies why we must strive to build long-term alliances among self-examined people who each hold themselves accountable to being in relationships non-oppressively:

> "*I think you can better serve the world when you are accountable to those principles, and those principles are applied to self-examination. Then you show up in the world differently. You show up for white people differently. You show up for people of color differently. That's when you become a change agent in the world. And I say it's to be determined because I don't think we've unleashed even a fraction of the power of what we could do if we could ever get past the constructs that prevent us from working in partnership and joining other thinking."*

From our experience, this is one of the most inspirational aspects, the idea that when we combine 1) individuals who have each done the requisite self-examination with 2) a healthier relationship dynamic, that we will tap into a deep well of power and intentionality that, so far, has all-too-commonly remained mired in dysfunctional relationships.

How can white anti-racists increase their ability to build transformative alliance relationships?

AWARE-LA believes its model of Radical White Identity can help white people become more effective allies. The approach recognizes white anti-racists need a healthy, productive, and explicit white identity that involves investigating their roots, history, privilege, and organizing potential. Since space constraints limit our ability to fully explain the model here, we will simply offer some key benefits we see in building this type of identity. First, we find that with the solid sense of self this model offers, white people move away from an insecure, guilt-ridden, validity-seeking form of anti-racism work. This allows white people to have deeper and more balanced dialogues with people of color because they understand their dedication to their work comes out of their own self-inquiry and interest. Second, white people feel increasingly confident about their ability to engage in anti-racism work with the wider white community.

Most basically, AWARE-LA members learn to see themselves as valuable, invested contributors to the wider effort to dismantle white supremacy. Cameron speaks of how this model has affected him:

> *"I think that what's so critical is that once you have that internal sense of self based on being a white anti racist, then you're able to negotiate a problematic role from a much healthier place. I don't feel responsible for the history of the white supremacy system but I do feel accountable to its results and how I benefit from the system. I recognize how my privilege protects me from seeing these realities. I think we don't want to stop feeling guilt or shame ever. That's not the goal.…But it's not something I'm held by and guided by.…I have a foundation within myself as a white anti racist. The bottom line for me is that I have a stake in ending the white supremacist system. I'm part of the fight for justice."*

Finally, this secure foundation is essential to white people' ability to effect the most change possible. It keeps them energized, motivates them to push themselves, and helps them build stronger multi-racial alliances that can propel the movements for justice forward. It is this effect on white people' anti-racist practice we find most meaningful.

What if people do not want to create alliance relationships?

Not all relationships between white people and people of color can be alliances in the way we discuss. The problematic dynamics described within our critique of one-sided accountability relationships will remain a common pattern for a long time because many

white people *and* people of color will likely continue to support an unequal, hierarchical approach and/or operate out of unresolved internalized belief systems. For example, there are plenty of white people who adamantly refuse to believe that their voices are valuable or that they can become sufficiently skilled to warrant trust from people of color.

That said, what happens when the people with whom we are collaborating are interested in a relationship based solely on one-sided accountability guidelines? First, we will have to make a choice whether or not to commit to these relationships. If we do, one helpful recognition to accept is that skepticism is understandable and due to our country's history. For example, some people of color might have zero interest in collaborating with white people due to a history rife with disappointment and injury caused by white people and society. Others may be willing to engage in collaborative work, but they may have learned to offer trust very slowly. On the other hand, some white people are so filled with self-hatred they cannot see themselves as worthy of equal standing. In other words, we must remember each of us is an individual with differing approaches.

What this means is that we will likely struggle to remain true to our deepest beliefs when in circumstances that seem to betray our sense of equity and humanity. For example, white people may sometimes need to follow the rules of one-sided accountability even when it goes against a deeply felt sense of truth, knowing that trust may never come. This might involve taking a position of deference even when a sense of personal experience suggests the situation is dysfunctional. For people of color, this could mean engaging with white people who remain needy and deferential. With enough time and investment, work and effort, mistrust and dehumanization might give way to more equitable alliance relationships. In the meantime, we imagine we each will continue to struggle, setting our sights on creating healthy relationships and admitting when we fail.

Conclusion

Given the myriad problems with one-sided accountability relationships, including their tendency toward inauthentic communication, unhealthy white anti-racist people, inherent inequality, and ineffective collaborative practices, we need to forge a new path. We present Transformative Alliance Building as an invitation to join us in attempting to create relationships where the highest value is placed on mutual respect, partnership, equity, and the preservation of each individual's full humanity. We do this knowing we remain responsible for continuing our individual growth processes. But, we believe only when the foundations of our relationships find anchor in the values of alliance will we avoid the dead ends that come with a singular focus on accountability.