


20 Organizations, 3 Years: Insights on Organization-based Racial Equity Work

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For decades, nonprofit organizations in the United States have been grappling with the question of how to be both equitable and inclusive, although they have done so more pointedly and overtly within the last ten years. It has always been a fast-paced and rapidly changing world and yet, when it comes to the need to increase racial equity, not enough has changed and certainly not fast enough, despite increased efforts. If anything, it seems that, across the U.S., hard-won progress is often being reversed, such as with the Supreme Court's 2023 decision to repeal affirmative action, opposition to critical race theory, and the adoption of "inclusive language" laws in some states that even ban words like "inclusion." And, even now, we find ourselves witnessing and experiencing a political landscape that is actively attacking DEI through the dismantling of agencies and threats to eradicate federal funding focused on our most vulnerable communities. Within this greater context, the environmental learning field—like so many other sectors—has also been striving for racial equity— and where we find ourselves more than ever needing to commit to this work. While some increases have been made in racial diversity, many environmental learning organizations continue to struggle with creating equitable and inclusive work environments for people of color.¹

¹ Green 2.0 (2023). 2023 NGO & Foundation Report Card. Retrieved on November 25, 2024. <https://diversegreen.org/wp-content/uploads/green2.0-2023-report-card.pdf>



In 2017, the Lawrence Hall of Science and Justice Outside designed a cohort-based program aimed at supporting organizations to advance racial equity and inclusion, so that Professionals of Color among their staffs would experience a greater and perhaps even lasting sense of belonging both at their organizations and also across the environmental learning field. Five years ago, the COVID-19 pandemic abruptly sharpened Americans' awareness of the exacerbated impact of long-standing inequities experienced by so many communities that have been systematically, and therefore intentionally, marginalized. As a field, amidst the racial reckoning sweeping the country at the time, we, the authors, felt hopeful that racial equity would continue to gain irreversible momentum, that organizations would make meaningful progress, and that professionals who identify with marginalized identities would experience a still-greater sense of belonging in the workplace. While we continue to see the pendulum swing (thus shaping efforts around racial equity), we believe there is much still to be learned and done to improve racial equity in our field.

This paper shares our learnings and reflections from working with 20 organizations over three years, from 2021 to 2024. These insights come from research and evaluation data, as well as from our interactions with participants, and they also come from our experience leading this program over many years. Our reflections below on factors that support an organization's capacity to advance racial equity are by no means an exhaustive list. They are, however, essential factors both to keep in mind and, to the extent possible, around which to create intentional and strategic plans. Our reflections focus on three essential categories:

1. Addressing participants' fears through learning, shared values, and connection
2. Cultivating a sense of belonging through critical reflection, dialogue, and authentic community engagement
3. Bridging personal transformation and systemic change

This paper is intended for you if you are a practitioner in the environmental learning space, whether or not you have been on a personal or an organizational journey toward racial equity. We invite you to consider these reflections as learnings or reminders of the complexity of this work.



Background & Goals of 'Working Towards Racial Equity'


In 2019, the Lawrence Hall of Science, Justice Outside, and Informing Change received funding from the National Science Foundation (Award #2005829) to develop a capacity-building model that would support environmental learning organizations to center racial equity and justice in their work environments. This project responded to long-standing racial inequities that have disproportionately impacted Black, Indigenous, and Communities of Color. The design of the "Working Towards Racial Equity" (WTRE) program was guided by the idea of "people-centered systems change," which is based on the theory that to advance racial equity, organizations must attend to three areas of focus, as described in the Waters of System Change Framework²:

- Structural: policies, practices, and resource flows
- Relational: relationships, connections, and power dynamics, and
- Mental models that guide beliefs and ideologies of an organization

Leading with the premise that lasting organizational change requires individual shifts as well as organizational ones, WTRE engaged two cohorts, totaling about 180 professionals representing 20 organizations in professional learning and practices rooted in people-centered change. Each cohort of organizations engaged in WTRE programming for about two years. We grounded the need for racial equity in the historical context of racism in the environmental field and in American society at large. Participants actively applied their understanding to their own individual growth as well as to change within their own organization. They also worked to sustain that change through efforts in trust-building, community building, self-care, and personal reflection.

One element of this work included research and evaluation to deepen our understanding of both the participants' experiences and their organizations' racial equity efforts. The learnings and reflections described in this paper are informed by

² Kania, J., Kramer, M., & Senge, P. (2018). The water of systems change.
https://www.fsg.org/resource/water_of_systems_change/#resource-downloads




data collected for research and evaluation, as well as by direct experiences, staff interactions, and general observations gained during program implementation.

1. Addressing fears through learning, shared values, and connection

Centering racial equity requires an intentional focus on understanding how race/racism interacts with other systems of oppression, like sexism, misogyny, and classism.³ WTRE centered a frame of racial equity because of the ways in which race and racism often undergird the fabric of U.S. society and many of its institutions. As participants furthered their learning and exploration of race/racism in connection to their own organizational change efforts, we saw a number of barriers surface that were deeply rooted in these systems of oppression. And while we can provide a long list of barriers that were identified, perhaps what we found most notable was that these barriers all had their root in fear.

Fear looked different for different individuals and in different contexts. Some participants of the WTRE program expressed real fear for their safety (physical and emotional safety as well as job security), in some regions more than others, especially given the tense—even hostile—sociopolitical climate the country is experiencing. Others expressed fear of losing support from their community, such as donors, visitors, board members, employees, and volunteers. From our observations, many participants expressed fear of the unknown: the unknown mental, emotional, and even physical discomfort of exploring racism and our role within it; the unknown challenges of working on racial equity within one’s organization; the unanticipated difficult conversations that will almost certainly unfold. Some people expressed fear of supervisors or of supervisees, fear of both losing power and gaining power, as well as overall fear of change. People also expressed fear of saying or doing the wrong thing, of making things worse, of being misunderstood or misinterpreted, and of unintentionally causing harm. Fear overall was a powerful motivator for the actions

³ Intersectionality is a framework grounded in Black Feminism. To learn more, the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw is a great starting point: Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241–1299. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>




that people took, and it also seemed to be a powerful motivator for what actions people *didn't* take. A key takeaway is that for an organization to have the capacity to center racial equity, it needs to understand and overcome its fears.

Individuals and organizations that we interviewed employed several strategies to overcome their fears and strengthen their capacity to center racial equity, as follows.

Establishing a culture of learning is one way that organizations built their capacity to center racial equity. A culture of learning, in which leaders and staff alike can learn both to lead with curiosity and to celebrate questions from participants, supports the organization's capacity to receive input and feedback. Accepting feedback with humility and gratitude, rather than as signs of distrust or conflict, is an essential capacity for improving relationships, systems, and programs.

A number of WTRE participants shared that a critical part of establishing a culture of learning was first to establish that everyone in the organization needed to become aware of how institutional oppression was being reinforced implicitly and explicitly. Only then would they, as a team, be able to engage as learners, understand existing mental models, and then take intentional action to shift these models that inform their organizational culture. For some organizations, this meant dedicating staff meetings to having conversations about racial equity and inclusion, or starting book clubs to read volumes like Isabel Wilkerson's *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* to learn how race has shaped the United States, or even bringing in additional consultants to facilitate collective forums for learning.

Fostering a culture of learning to support all staff in deepening awareness of racial equity requires a delicate balance, while not placing the burden of responsibility for that education on the staff of color. Some Professionals of Color in fact may choose to take on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) roles, facilitate discussions, and even lead trainings. But more often than not Professionals of Color who did not sign up for DEI-related roles—and even those who do—experience harmful impacts when they are asked, for example, to speak on topics such as equity, justice, inclusion when they are not expecting to, especially when they are asked to talk on behalf of entire communities. Unintended as it may be, such impacts can lead to such professionals'



having feelings of isolation, “othering,” tokenization, even exhaustion, and additional undue emotional labor, all of which can have an impact on their sense of belonging to the organization. The good news, however, is that when a culture of learning is thoughtfully built, there is a potential to shift this burden away from Professionals of Color—thereby creating spaces where they can just *be*. One Professional of Color shared this:


“Participation in WTRE really helped me third point [sic] this work within my org. Someone on the WTRE team took the brunt of sharing what might be a controversial topic and then would facilitate a discussion and also create space for us to think together about the implications for our org. This took a lot of the pressure off of me and allowed me to be a participant rather than trying to lead my colleagues or bosses towards a new more nuanced conversation. Not having to do this work myself really helped to increase my sense of belonging because meetings stopped feeling so fraught and I felt like I could connect with my colleagues.”

Connecting individuals to their values, and also to shared values within their organizations, is another tool for combating fear while centering racial equity.

When individuals feel rooted in shared values, when their organizations’ decisions are aligned with such values, then people can respond to, share, and offer feedback with less fear. Connecting actions to an organization’s vision for racial equity, then correlating that vision to the organization’s mission, also supports individuals in knowing that their actions toward racial equity are important in all aspects of their work, rather than causing them to fear punitive consequences for not engaging in such actions. This integrated approach enables team members to think critically about racial equity in all aspects of their work, because they will know that it is done in service of their organization’s mission. One WTRE participant shared that their team found themselves:

“...asking about equity and inclusion within more conversations—for example, when the conversation is about evaluation, or decision-making, or curriculum—we remember more often now to ask ourselves how the thing we’re doing does or does not promote our goals of equity and inclusion.”

One particular challenge that WTRE participants reported was that they often found it easier to think about how racial equity connects to the work they do with communities than it is to attend to the internal organizational work environment in



meaningful ways. As some WTRE participants highlighted in their responses, this contributes to confusion or even dissonance around the organization's vision of racial equity—in other words, at the start of the WTRE workshop series most organizations could only articulate the value of racial equity for their external work, but not their internal work. It is therefore imperative for an organization to be explicit about how and why racial equity is “mission critical” in order to avoid that confusion. It can take a great deal of time to build that shared understanding. Even after two years, many WTRE organizations were still working towards a shared understanding about the relationship between racial equity and their mission. We also took away that not only does this work require a long time, but it also requires constant tending to, so that as people come to and go from an organization, that shared understanding is regularly revisited, updated, and maintained.

Cohort-based programming that connects organizations and people across the environmental learning field can also increase organizational capacity to center racial equity.

Being a part of cohort-based programs, such as WTRE, provides a supportive community that mitigates isolation and gives ample opportunity to practice engaging in equity-related conversations, to more deeply understand participants' fears, and to explore their roles and responsibilities in working towards racial equity. These types of communities of practice can offer powerful opportunities to practice standing up for one's commitment to racial equity. When opposition or criticism arises, practiced individuals have the capacity to respond with a people-centered approach rooted in confidence and clarity about the importance of equity and about staying connected to others' humanity as well. In the absence of this capacity-building approach, interactions that are equity related are more likely to be experienced from a place of fear and even as polarizing conflicts that have no solution in sight.

In the same way that organizations benefit from cohort-based support networks, Professionals of Color can benefit from participating in affinity spaces to deepen their sense of belonging within their organization and also to the broader field. Given that so many organizations in the environmental learning field are still predominantly composed of white employees, it is important to elevate the value of supporting

Professionals of Color so they can more fully participate in those affinity spaces that may be provided by regional networks or conferences.



2. Cultivating a sense of belonging through critical reflection, dialogue, and authentic community engagement

Exploring a sense of members' belonging within organizations has for decades been of interest to researchers trying to understand the extent to which they experience organizations as both equitable and inclusive. Our research found that overall, WTRE contributed to a greater sense of belonging,⁴ but findings also highlighted that the experiences of Professionals of Color were much more dynamic and nuanced. While there were moments when participating Professionals of Color truly felt a greater sense of belonging within their organization, there were also moments when they felt silenced and marginalized. Our study revealed that all WTRE participants, including Professionals of Color, reported an initial decrease in their sense of belonging, followed by reported growth at the end of the program.

When organizations engage in active reflection and dialogue, thus raising their consciousness about race and racial equity, it can cultivate a sense of belonging.

Our findings documented how doing the work of racial equity helped participants gain a greater consciousness of what it might look like, or feel like, to belong within their organization. For some staff, that meant grappling with how their whiteness, or even their proximity to whiteness, might result in the privilege of belonging. Other staff, particularly persons of color, might find themselves reimagining their notions of "belonging" to include their feelings of joy and even liberation, such that they can show up at work unapologetically as their authentic self.

Racial equity efforts require a deep and often challenging exploration of self as well as a re-evaluation of individuals' role within systemic change. It is not surprising then,

⁴ Romero, V. F., Collins, M. A., Young, A., Grindstaff, K., & Foreman, J. (2025). Working Towards Racial Equity: Systems Change through Individual Transformation. Lawrence Hall of Science, University of California, Berkeley.



that some individuals initially experienced a decreased sense of belonging. One thing that became clear from the study, however, was that people's understanding of their own sense of belonging changed over the course of their participation in the program. As several participants remarked:


"Initially, my feelings of belonging were held specifically within my small team and/or department. The structure of [the WTRE program] allowed me to be in a space with upper leadership, individuals I otherwise would likely not have had much interaction with. I felt I was able to share ideas and push back on ideas with individuals that inherently hold more power than I do within the org, and feel like my ideas were valued."

"I would say that prior to WTRE, I placed less value on personal belonging at work than I do now. I feel now that I have a right to feel belonging. Before I only felt I had a right to equality."

"I now think of belonging as a feeling that is experienced when a person is connected to a place that is important to them and they believe they are important to that place in return."

As participants became more aware of what "belonging" might actually be like and feel like, they were more likely to notice its absence. That experience of realizing the degree to which they did not feel they belonged turned out to be essential to subsequent efforts by them and their own teams to reimagine the conditions of their shared workplaces that would build and improve the sense of belonging, especially for Professionals of Color.

Another important takeaway about sense of belonging is that organizations can support individuals in experiencing it by creating opportunities for staff of color to travel to the Black and Brown communities they seek to engage. In our case study research, participants highlighted that reimaging how organizations engaged in authenticity and reciprocity with communities had a profound impact on how they saw themselves within the organization. For example, we observed one staff member gaining institutional support to work more deeply with the community in which he grew up. Over time, seeing the organization's investment of time and resources in that community cultivated a deep sense of belonging and affirmation for him.



Furthermore, his supervisor's support of this strategic outreach deepened the staff member's sense of belonging by elevating his leadership.

Each of these strategies to increase sense of belonging hinges on the establishment and maintenance of healthy, trust-based relationships. When we asked WTRE participants what advice, if any, they would like to share with others in the field, two of the most common responses were centered on the importance of *trust* and *relationships*. Several participants offered that it was important to “move at the speed of trust” both in relationship building and with implementation of racial equity strategies.

Specifically, participants considered the connection between interpersonal dynamics and organizations' efforts to advance equity. Some offered their opinion that people must “take time for relationship building before jumping into the work.” We agree that, in order to advance racial equity within organizations, the people who work there—those who bring organizations to life—must be able to engage in honest, sometimes even difficult, conversations with one another. They must, as one participant put it, “be willing to hear hard truths,” and as another shared, “must listen to hear, not just to respond.” This idea takes us to our final takeaway: the inextricable connection between personal and systemic transformation.

3. Bridging personal transformation and systemic change

Personal transformation work requires organizational support, and systemic change requires personal transformation. History has shown us time and again that changes in organizational policies do not automatically lead to changes in the beliefs, hearts, and minds of individuals. We continue to see, despite various policy changes, the power of deep-seated, divisive, and even harmful beliefs, both conscious and unconscious, such as the beliefs that sharing power actually means losing power, or that inclusion efforts result in “reverse exclusion.” Such unchanged mindsets often create a foundation for resistance (or, at best, disingenuous

compliance) to policy change. These mindsets undermine meaningful enactment of policies and typically prevent the achievement of lasting racial equity.




Individuals are the heartbeat of policies aimed at equity, inclusion, justice, and belonging. As such, individuals need to have the socio-emotional skills as well as the stamina necessary to engage in the difficult work of personal transformation with the goal of making systemic change. To be truly committed to racial equity, inclusion, responsible leadership, and healthy work environments, we must all engage in deep self-reflection, build self-awareness, nurture self-acceptance, and commit to personal accountability of the deepest kind. Without these actions, our stated commitments are lip service at best, and our policies will remain a distant north star.

We cannot expect that individuals will suddenly have the socio-emotional skills to engage in profound personal and interpersonal exploration. Nor can we expect individuals to suddenly find they have new skills as well as appropriate tools for effective, compassionate communication that supports building bridges between colleagues with various perspectives and closely held beliefs. These socio-emotional and communication skills must be intentionally developed. As one participant reflected,

“I believe that for us as individuals to embrace equity, inclusion, diversity, cultural relevance and social justice, we have to start with ourselves as individuals. We need to know ourselves, our culture, our biases, our belief systems, our values, the things that make us who we are. When we understand these things about ourselves, I believe only then are we able to begin the work of shifting patterns of thinking (internally and outwardly), shifting behaviors, practices, systems, etc. In short, if we don’t do the personal work, I don’t think we can be as effective in impacting change on a small or large scale within our families, workplaces, or community.”

Organizations participating in the Working Towards Racial Equity program were committed to bridging personal and systemic change by creating intentional spaces for personal reflection, partly by adjusting hiring practices to bring people into the organization who already hold equity work as a personal commitment, and partly by creating committees that instantiate personal transformation as part of the organizations’ culture. For example, one organization turned what it termed a “JEDI council” into a “committee of the whole,” thereby naming the goal that personal work



towards equity is every individual's responsibility. Another organization created an "idea committee" that was solely responsible for developing and sustaining a culture of learning within the organization.

A culture of learning is only as strong as its ability to lead to actual shifts in individual perceptions about one's role within systems of oppression, shifts in individual behaviors to advance racial equity, and shifts in individuals' personal desire to stay committed to this work. Systemic change requires personal transformation, because when we can embrace our full humanity, we can better challenge ourselves without self-judgment or fear and can then examine our true beliefs and ultimately hold multiple truths both in mind and in our practice. When this kind of socio-emotional stamina is present, then we can more easily stay connected to the humanity of those with whom we are in community, and together can advance systemic change that is rooted in authenticity as well as firm resolve.

It is clear, also, that this work can be fragile. One organization shared that through WTRE, certain individuals in its organization had overcome many years of hurt feelings and harm from interactions with a particular member of the leadership team. Over the two-year process, these individuals came to build trust with each other, and that trust spilled over across the entire team of people working toward racial equity. However, soon after they completed WTRE, the individual on the leadership team left the organization. Without other people on the leadership team who had taken on the mantle of personal transformation and commitment to equity, the organization shared that they felt as if they had gone backwards. This goes to suggest that, without making durable shifts to leadership structures and increasing commitment on the part of all the organization's leaders, the personal transformation work that had occurred had no lasting impact. It further indicates that doing personal transformation work without accomplishing systemic change fails to build sufficiently towards structural transformation, just as doing systemic work without personal commitment will not last.



Conclusion

Organizations can significantly support their capacity to advance racial equity by establishing a meaningful culture of learning—one that encourages deep self-reflection and reconnection to shared values; one that creates an understanding of the relationship between racial equity and an organization’s mission; and ultimately one that provides a supportive community of practice in which interpersonal skills can be strengthened and barriers rooted in fear can be managed with clarity and undeterred strategy. It’s therefore imperative for everyone within an organization—across roles and positions of power—to acknowledge that establishing a culture of learning is one way to develop a sense of belonging for its staff. It is also incumbent upon organizations to implement strategies for trust-building and relationship building across all levels of the organizational structure, while remembering that “one-size-fits-all” strategies do not work. Lastly, we urge organizations to embrace the inextricable link between individual work and organizational work towards racial equity, such that all individuals on a team are encouraged to develop people-centered approaches that help them navigate difficult moments with increased care and personal accountability. Through it all, it’s vital to keep in mind that the journey toward achieving collective equity will likely get harder before it gets easier, especially given how inextricably linked it is to individuals’ own journeys.

In closing, we at the Lawrence Hall of Science, Justice Outside, and Informing Change felt honored to be in community with those 20 organizations that were eager to commit to a long term, cohort-based racial equity program. We feel deeply grateful for their willingness to participate in research and evaluation efforts along the way, so that we, as well as other practitioners across the environmental learning field, might learn from their experience. While each racial equity journey will be unique to the person as well as to the team, we hope these insights can shine a light along anyone’s path as they commit— and then recommit—to advancing racial equity in the field of environmental learning and beyond.

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