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# Beyond Solidarity Statements: Brave Workplaces as a Pre-Requisite for Addressing Systemic Discrimination

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Published in: *The Philanthropist*

ISSN: 2562-1491

Date: August 31, 2020

Original Link: <https://thephilanthropist.ca/2020/08/beyond-solidarity-statements-brave-workplaces-as-a-pre-requisite-for-addressing-systemic-discrimination/>

Date of PDF Download: September 20, 2020

This seems to be a year of reckoning on systemic discrimination for Canadian society, including in non-profit and charitable workplaces.

Over the summer, I watched as many organizations responded to mass protests in Canada against systemic anti-Black racism through solidarity statements, equity and inclusion trainings, and hiring racialized and equity and inclusion staff. I also observed as Black, Indigenous, and racialized workers in the sector spoke out in unprecedented ways about the disconnect between their experiences in workplaces, and organizations' external communications.

As consultants, my colleagues and I are often called upon to devise and deliver strategies, audits, and tailored training for organizations on a host of topics relating to workplace equity and inclusion. In many instances, however, we are brought in by organizational leadership reactively, to mitigate damage after conflicts stemming from discrimination occur, rather than proactively. This, coupled with my experiences as a current non-profit board member and former non-profit worker, make me believe that proactive first steps — that go beyond solidarity statements and “diverse” hiring — are necessary for a better sector for all.

These first steps include fostering brave workplaces that value feedback from Black, Indigenous, and racialized workers. Instead of guaranteeing safety, brave workplaces ask those of us with racial and other forms of power and privilege to welcome discomfort and be open to perspectives that challenge our assumptions. In leveraging our power differently, we can ultimately support processes of organizational growth and transformation for a healthier sector.

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## **Systemic discrimination as a pressing reality**

Many well-known organizations in the non-profit and charitable sector are currently in the spotlight. As allegations pertaining to equity and equality in the workplace emerge, it is becoming clearer that internal challenges are made public when racialized workers have no other recourse. Going public seems to coincide with cultures of inaction, low accountability, and reprisals against those who raise experiences of racial discrimination (Bain, 2020; Porter and Austen, 2020).

To be clear, systemic discrimination against individuals with limited power and privilege in non-profits and charities — often racialized, younger women, and nonbinary folks — is not new. There are countless personal accounts illustrating the pervasive phenomenon (Centre for Community Organizations, 2018; Bhatia, 2019). What may be surprising, however, is that many of these embattled organizations have missions and visions outlining commitments to human rights, equity, and inclusion. Which raises the question — where is the disconnect between language used externally, and workers' experiences?

The reality is that most workplaces are likely to be discriminatory as a result of our settler colonial history and the way our society is ordered. These social power structures interact with individuals' intersecting identities to confer varying degrees of advantage or disadvantage (Saad, 2018).

As a result, in many workplaces, workers' identities factor into decisions about hiring, pay, retention, and opportunities for growth and advancement (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2005). Further, discriminatory policies and practices create and legitimize acts of interpersonal discrimination — daily indignities in the workplace that contribute to “death by a thousand cuts” (Kendi, 2019, p. 44; Vassel, 2020).

### **Why address systemic discrimination?**

While leading this work, one of the questions we contend with is how it can simultaneously meet the goals of sector leadership while authentically improving the experiences of workers with less social and organizational power.

From racialized workers' point of view, discriminatory workplaces take a toll on mental and physical wellbeing. Studies on the subject show that workplace bullying, which stems from systemic discrimination, leads to higher levels of anxiety and hopelessness among racialized people (Attell et al, 2017).

While systemic discrimination affects the career progression and socio-economic success of racialized people, eventually this impacts us all, because it shapes our economy. For instance, recent studies have linked small incremental increases in employment equity in the United States since the 1960s with economic growth of more than 25% (Hsieh et al, 2020). As we can see in the current climate, conflicts linked to allegations of systemic racism and discrimination can also lead to reputational damage and legal costs for organizations.

The good news is that this means that leadership and workers' interests are aligned, because improving the experiences of all workers in any given workplace is good for business. Research shows that workplaces free of systemic (and interpersonal) discrimination, where workers are

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treated fairly, valued, and made to feel they belong, are more likely to foster collaboration, innovation, productivity, and the achievement of business outcomes (Bourke and Dillon, 2018, p.85-87).

This, coupled with the fact that there is an overwhelming demand for workplace equity and inclusion interventions right now, are reasons to be hopeful, and demonstrate a clear interest in doing better.

### **Organizational culture as a barrier to addressing systemic discrimination**

When addressing equity and inclusion issues within organizations, we often begin by focusing on organizational culture, which can be the most challenging aspect of transformation. This is because new behaviours from leaders and workers are often antithetical to certain workplace norms, which have historically prioritized efficiency.

In my experience, when an organizational culture is not conducive to change, organizations will not benefit from training, audits, or policy interventions. Instead, these will serve only as band-aid solutions and will not address deeper issues of systemic discrimination, because they are unable to address the roots of inequality.

Below, I outline three of the most salient features of organizational cultures that enable unchecked systemic racism and discrimination.

- *Low levels of reflexivity in relation to power dynamics within an organization:* Occasionally, leaders, board members, and workers with seniority in the workplace are uncomfortable with acknowledging, or unaware of, power dynamics at play. Without critically examining our own unconscious values, biases, and how we benefit from discriminatory policies and practices within organizations, however, it is impossible to shift cultures, and ultimately systems, for progress (Blackmore, 2006, p.192). Discomfort with recognizing personal privilege often goes hand-in-hand with the expectation that a single workplace intervention — such as a training — will solve all issues of discrimination in the workplace. However, addressing systemic racism and discrimination in the workplace is an iterative process that requires constant self-reflection and assessment.
- *Fragility and silencing hinder organizational transformation and growth:* Transformation and growth require that leadership and those with power and privilege within organizations remain open to learning and hearing feedback from those with different experiences and levels of privilege. However, as is highlighted by the #NotSoEqualVoice hashtag and stories, there is often an intolerance for racialized people speaking about experiences of racism and discrimination within the sector. Known as fragility, this is a tendency to view any challenges to the racial status quo as a personal attack. Common responses by those with power include claims of “bullying” or “harassment” (Owusu, 2019). Silencing and censorship is another manifestation of fragility and can be seen in the use of institutional power to prevent dialogue about the realities of racism, as allegations from former WE Charity employees demonstrate (Cargle, 2019). In its most extreme forms, silencing and censorship of racialized and less privileged people involves enforcement using legal power (King, 2020). Other tactics to distract from concerns about systemic racism that arise from fragility include the denial of allegations; gaslighting, which causes those raising concerns to doubt their own understanding of events; and tone policing, in which those with privilege focus on

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- the way feedback is communicated, rather than the spirit of the feedback (Saad, 2019).
- *Organizations are still stuck in the “diversity trap.”* Countless initiatives speak to low levels of leadership and staff diversity in the sector as important indicators of systemic discrimination. These relatively low levels of diversity are highlighted in the recent *Diversity Leads 2020* report by Ryerson University and TD Bank (Cukier et al, 2020), which demonstrates how much further we have to go to achieve racial and gender parity on board leadership in Canada. In efforts to address this, Bill C-25, passed earlier this year, requires non-profit corporations to report data on the subject. While these initiatives are rightly focused on representation as part of the solution, representation alone is not enough.

As anti-racism theorists argue, and recent conversations in other sectors illustrate, systemic discrimination doesn't end simply because racialized people enter organizations — even when they are hired in positions of leadership (Kendi, 2019, 134; Paradkar, 2019). One can hardly discount the recent report by the Ontario Human Rights Commission (2020) on pervasive systemic anti-Black racism within the Toronto Police Services, because former Chief Mark Saunders identifies as Black (TVO, 2020). In these instances, representation acts to mask the problem of racial power differentials, rather than address it. This phenomenon, commonly referred to as tokenism, or cosmetic diversity, is something self-reflexive organizations will be vigilant about (Elghawaby, 2020; Saad, 2019, p.143).

### **Fostering brave workplaces**

At its core, addressing systemic racism and discrimination in the workplace is about transformation. It requires re-evaluating who we think is entitled to feel comfortable when issues of race, power, and oppression are raised and addressed within organizations. The following are broad recommendations to assist with creating brave workplaces as a first step to addressing systemic racism and discrimination in the sector:

- Recognize and consider how we each use our personal power and privilege consciously or unconsciously within the workplace. How are we engaged in silencing, denial, or tone policing when interacting with individuals with less privilege? How are we receiving unearned workplace benefits by virtue of our power and privilege?
- Recognize that “comfort” and “safety” are different things. On a daily basis, people with less power and privilege navigate constant discomfort as well as concerns about safety in the workplace, while those with more power and privilege are accustomed to both safety and comfort. Fostering brave workplaces will require turning these norms on their head, by prioritizing the comfort of those with less privilege. Simultaneously, brave workplaces will encourage those with more privilege within organizations to be open to new ideas, controversy, being contradicted, and corrected (Arao and Clemens, 2013, p. 39). In other words, those of us with power in the sector must accept being comfortable with discomfort, in order to receive constructive feedback and grow.
- Develop norms to guide difficult conversations about race, power, and oppression in the workplace. It's easy to lapse and revert to established norms and social hierarchies when sensitive conversations are taking place. However, in line with best practices in group facilitation, workplaces may benefit from developing a shared set of norms that can be easily referred to during conversations. Norms in brave workplaces will name personal power and privilege as important factors to acknowledge and keep in check during discussion.

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- Listen to feedback from racialized workers and others with limited power and privilege within your organization.
  - Acknowledge past mistakes and make commitments to learn and improve.
  - Think about what feedback has revealed about challenges at your organization, what an ongoing process for addressing systemic discrimination might look like and allocate resources accordingly. Whether it is a leadership commitment to take part in the [Me and White Supremacy Challenge](#), or a choice to contract external experts in Anti-Black Racism and Anti-Oppression (ABRAO), there are many pathways to further organizational growth and transformation.

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