Liberation and Equity:  
Love While Challenging Racist Behavior

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This post (first appeared here) contains a true story and a Facilitator’s Guide for handling situations like this.

A True Story

At a recent training I was leading for an all queer and multiracial group, an older white man "John" took offense to my use of the word queer. As an icebreaker, I had asked the group to share in a pair, when did you first know you were queer? During the debrief, John took time to explain how the Q-word brought back painful memories of the many ways he was shamed growing up. As he explained, he got emotional and then said "using the Q-word is like using the N-word for me." And he actually said the N-word.

The air in the room suddenly got heavy and many people shifted uncomfortably in their seats. The three black men in the group looked stunned, and the rest of the people of color in the circle turned to me to do something. The white man kept talking, completely unaware of that this micro-aggression had caused a change in the room. I waited for a white person to address what happened. But folks remained silent, so just as the next person began sharing, I stopped the process.

“I want to stop and check something out with you and the group. Is it ok if I do that?” I asked John and turned to the group to seek their approval. “John, thank you for sharing the impact that I had on you when I used the Q-word in this circle. I want to account to you for that. I also heard you use the N-word and I am wondering if you would be open to hearing the impact that that word could have had in the space?”

John looked at me lost and unsure. So I repeated myself. Before finishing a black man in the circle jumped in. He was angry and loving at the same time. He spoke about how hearing that word made him afraid that this was not a safe space for him. He shared that challenging the use of the word was necessary for him to remain open and hopeful. At a moment there were tears in his eyes. As John listened, his facial expression shifted from looking lost to looking mortified. Yet he stayed present and listened.

John accounted for having used the N-word. And a few other people shared the impact they experienced. To create closure, I said “the expectations we need to have are that we will screw up. We can lean into love and trust that each person here is deeply commitment to justice, and stay engaged. Thank you all for being vulnerable and sharing your hearts to help us move forward. I asked the group: Is there someone here who is not ok, moving forward?”

Core Element: Liberation and Equity

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A young Latino man spoke and said “I am not ok, but I am fine moving forward.”

I offered the option of finding a way to get feedback from the group and to organize another time when as a group they could go deeper on this.

It takes this level of vulnerability in all of our parts to step into the scary place of facing our blind spots and hearing corrective information that can help us to change. As equity warriors, whether we are leading a process, participating in a process, or if we are the person that put their foot in their mouth; we must have skills to align our thinking and feeling before acting. At a personal level, knowing how my body will react in a moment of stress and how to calm myself enough to think through my options and try to foresee the impact of those actions are crucial.

Here are some tips to develop a strategy to support individuals and groups move through these kinds of challenges in a way that bridges people’s experience instead of creating greater division.

### Facilitator’s Guide

**Take Care of Yourself**

**Take a few deep breaths and ask yourself some questions:**

- Am I triggered right now? Can I bracket my trigger enough to show up strong for the group?
- Do a quick triage of the group – who could be most hurt by what just happened? What are their internal conditions? Have you seen this person deal with a similar situation before and how did they react? Are there any wild cannons in the room? Is there a white ally?
- How much time can we reallocate to manage this situation?
- What are the competing issues, hurts, and emotions present?
- Identify what needs to be named to have those most impacted feel heard by creating a safe space (but often deeply uncomfortable) for people to express their thoughts and feelings.

### 10 Steps to Facilitating Intervention

1. **An open:** Acknowledge to the group that discomfort is natural and needed when managing challenges across difference. And tell the group that you recommend slowing down the process to address what has emerged. Lower the expectations by naming your own vulnerability.

   “Moments like this can derail the whole process, so let’s address it. The way I prepare, and how I ask groups to prepare for an equity session, is different than what we’ve planned today. Let’s see if by using some of our agreements we can hear the impact, account for behavior, and choose to continue.”
2. **Seek permission**: In my example, I did it by first acknowledging and accounting for the impact of my use of the Q-word and then naming the violation I heard the person make, and asking if he was willing to hear the impact.

3. **Anticipate response**: Don’t be afraid if one person starts to share the impact in a passionate manner and wait for a moment of pause to re-establish the expectations of how the conversation will unfold.

4. **Check for agreement**

   “It feels like there are a lot of feelings about this issue. Is it ok if we put a pause to our agenda and take some time to work through this moment?”

5. **Time**: How much time will be spent on resolving the issue? Reach agreement.

6. **Check-in with the group norms**: For this process, we were using the VISIONS INC. Guidelines for Cross-cultural Communications. We used: self-focus, notice intent and impact, and ok to disagree not ok to blame, shame or attack self or others.

7. **Offer participants feedback**: Interrupt and ask people to reframe their statements to “I statements” if anyone starts to point fingers or to assign meaning to people’s action.

8. **Track and honor the time**: Once the time is up, say:

   “The additional time we allocated is now over. I know this is the beginning of a conversation. I know that you all are committed to return to this conversation soon. For now, I am wondering if you are willing to continue with our agenda. Is there anyone here unwilling to continue with our agenda?

9. **Consult with group leaders at the break**: At the break, check in with the leaders and ask for feedback. Also, check in with the people most impacted and ask if they need anything else from you as the meeting facilitator.

10. **Keep it empowering**: Create a way for all participants to ask for what they need in order to continue to engage with the group in a healthy and empowering way. I pass around post-its and ask people to write feedback or ask for what else they would need. Collect them and give the feedback to the leaders and develop a plan to address the feedback.
Interrupt Dynamics

Addressing micro-aggressions is challenging in all environments, however in the spaces we create and invite others to participate in, it is our responsibility to build the skills necessary to step up and interrupt these dynamics. Letting comments or behaviors slip erodes the sense of safety and makes real connection across difference impossible. It re-enforces a sense of isolation and powerlessness by groups who are targets of oppression.

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Ms. Perez has directed multiple organizations and held senior positions in civil rights, national and international policy groups including CARECEN SF, Presente.org, and Global Exchange. Prior to her social justice experience, Ana worked as a print and radio journalist. Ms. Perez and her family fled the Salvadoran civil war in the early 1980s. She grew up in Los Angeles, benefiting from the 1986 immigration reform law. She has a B.A. from UCSD and a Masters in Journalism from UCB.