

What I Wish I Knew: My Own Goals for Anti-Racist Practice

by Catherine Jones

These are some principles that I've developed for myself so that I can stay focused on actually doing anti-racist work, rather than thinking and talking about it a whole lot. These all come straight from lessons I've learned from my experience of doing the work. I'm not saying that any of these statements is The Answer; this whole list of stuff is more a reflection of where I'm at right now in my ongoing struggle to figure it all out. Maybe it'll work for you, and maybe it really won't. My main point in all of this is, if you want to do anti-racist work, do it. Don't wait until you feel like you're the perfect anti-racist. There's a whole big movement out there that needs you!

Do your homework. There IS stuff going on in your community. Find out what it is and how you can support the work.

Don't expect people or organizations of color to tell you how to be in solidarity with them, but be willing to modify or toss out any of your ideas if they think there's a better way for you to support them. Have a very rough plan that you can be flexible with and that's based on an authentic and accountable understanding—not just your own thoughts—of where people and organizations of color can use your support.

Be conscious about how you prioritize your work- spend a significant chunk of your time doing the stuff that really is unsexy and be conscious about what you do and don't commit your time to. If going to 8 workshops a week has you feeling too exhausted to do childcare at a meeting for low-income women of color, you may want to re-evaluate.

Build accountable relationships with other white anti-racists who can both support you and call you on your shit when it's necessary.

Take care of yourself but be real about it. Figure out the things that rejuvenate you and do them; take breaks when you need them, but don't use the excuse of "self-care" to get out of doing the work. Set realistic boundaries for yourself and stick to them.

Give Practical Support!!!! What are your resources that you can share with organizations of color? Maybe you can provide food or childcare or translation at meetings, maybe you can help phonebank for specific events, maybe you can volunteer to work at the front desk, give people rides, find out where a group can get donated computer equipment, or throw a fundraising party at your house. There are tons of ways for white folks to give necessary behind-the-scenes

support to organizations of color. Figure out—don't assume you know—what people need, and find a way to help out.

Don't abandon the work if it makes you feel “uncomfortable.” This is a pretty common feeling when white folks are actually working with people of color. Acknowledge that you feel this way, try and figure out why, get support from other white anti-racists who you respect, and keep going. Most of us have been there.

Don't wait for people to come to you out of the blue 'cause they won't. Be proactive about letting organizations and allies know who you are and what you do. Figure out when it's appropriate to get involved, and do it.

If the majority of your anti-racist work consists of educating other white folks on anti-racism, make sure to spend a lot of time focusing on ways the participants in your training or workshop can plug into racial justice struggles that are going on in their community. Work on developing tools for identifying existing struggles and developing a group's capacity to support those struggles in a practical, not just an ideological, way.

Make sure not to confuse anti-racist group dynamics with anti-racist work. And don't give up on one just because you're practicing the other.

Do authentic and accountable leadership development with emerging white anti-racists, especially around doing the work. Talk to newer white anti-racists about their work, what they've learned, and what's been challenging. Help them to build the practical skills they need. Be there for them.

Give props to white folks who are doing practical, behind-the-scenes anti-racist work in your community.

Find role models of your own, white folks who are doing anti-racist work in a variety of capacities. Seek out these folks in your own community. They're there.

Be willing to do what's needed. Maybe you really want to be working with some amazing and popular organization of color that doesn't actually have a whole lot of opportunities for you to plug in, while another organization down the street is doing less high-profile work but really needs some folks to help them with fundraising. Take the opportunity to be of use.

Take criticism from people of color for what it is—a gift.

If you have political disagreements with a person or organization of color that you're doing political work with, think critically about what your issues are and where they're coming from. Don't abandon your principles simply because a person of color may have a different take on a certain idea, but don't be afraid to

challenge some of your deeply-held beliefs if you find that they don't hold up when you look at them with an anti-racist framework. Be open to criticism, even criticism of your politics, if it comes from an anti-racist perspective.

You're gonna make mistakes. You're gonna feel embarrassed when you do. This is not a reason to stop doing the work! In my experience, if people know that you're a generally accountable person who shows up and kicks ass when you're needed, they won't take it nearly as hard if you say or do the wrong thing every now and then. But learn from your mistake, don't make it again, and do what you can to smooth things over in a principled way.

Build authentic and good personal, as well as political, relationships with people of color.

Don't be a shrinking violet. Sometimes white folks think they're being anti-racist if they go to a meeting and don't do or say anything at all. You can step up to the plate without dominating. Just make sure the stuff you're stepping up to do is appropriate. (If you're not sure what's appropriate or not, start out by volunteering to do behind-the-scenes support work that someone else won't have to take a whole lot of time to show you how to do. As your relationship with the organization progresses you'll get a feel for how much leadership or visibility they want you to take.)

This is my motto—say less, think less, do more. Remember that you're not a whole lot of use to the movement if you're sitting in a workshop. Put your knowledge to use. The struggle needs you!

(...and Don't Talk Too Much At The Meeting. Really.)

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