

## White Culture

By Judith H. Katz

White Culture? Where's the value in talking about that? It's so ephemeral, intangible, complex. How can you get your arms around it? It's so hard to see, particularly if you're white.

Still, especially for people involved in Organizational Development work, it is important for us all to understand White Culture because many organizations have assumptions, values and beliefs based on White Culture deeply embedded in their policies, practices, and styles for success. For example...

- In the manner of speech, behavior, dress and aesthetic of the organization.
- In the favored writing style and accepted language of the organization.
- In the paintings and artwork that fills the hallways.
- In the location of the sport of choice – the golf course – closed to anyone other than white men for decades.

It is only recently that the cafeterias and food services in many organizations have begun to reflect a more diverse workforce. And clearly, benefit programs, have long reflected the idealized white nuclear family.

So let's talk about White Culture. But let's be careful, because by its very nature, culture is insidious. It's just the way you live and breathe, what you value, how you treat others and expect to be treated. From birth to death, culture informs us – about what is appropriate behavior, how to welcome a new soul onto the earth, what is expected in any social interaction, how to communicate, how to make decisions. Our values, beliefs and aesthetics all stem from deeply rooted cultural assumptions and teachings which may be conscious or unconscious.

Therefore, looking at and making explicit what is White Culture presents many challenges. More often it's easier to see another person's culture than one's own because our culture is like the air we breathe: it's just there.

Recently I conducted a workshop specifically for white people with my colleague Michael Brazzel, focusing on what white people can do about racism. During the workshop, we asked participants to brainstorm what they saw as the components of White Culture: the values, beliefs, behaviors, aesthetics (art, music, literature, notions of beauty), family structure, styles of communication, history, celebrations and rituals important to white culture.

For many, this was a difficult task. It was hard for participants to separate a commercial or capitalistic set of values and behaviors and the larger United States culture from white culture. It was hard for many to not present an idealized or demonized set of what they would like White Culture to be. For many whites, their own shame of racism and being white seems to preclude them from being able to look objectively at identifying a larger cultural frame.

As the group struggled, what became clear to us all is how potent a force White Culture is in shaping much of what whites believe is right or wrong. And yet, at the same time, how elusive it is.

When asked to define and describe White Culture, it was easier for our brainstorming groups to identify differentiation among whites (for example to talk about one's Italian or German roots) than to focus on the generalizations that form the constellation of white culture. Participants asked, "Do we mean the general culture? White, middle class culture? United States culture? Television and movie culture?"

When the participants finally were able to move through the layers of denial, avoidance, shame, and confusion, they began to generate in their groups a fairly consistent listing of dimensions that characterize White Culture in the United States. While it was clearly understood that not all whites believe in the same set of assumptions and values, it was also clear that White Culture forms the underpinnings of what many whites believe is "appropriate" behavior in many organizations. White Culture is the lens through which many white people view, evaluate and judge themselves and others regarding what is "professional" and "normal" behavior in many contexts.

These assumptions, as stated above, get baked into the policies, practices, and norms of our organizations. When that occurs it puts whites at advantage – cultural advantage – and all other groups at a disadvantage. It creates "Affirmative Action for Whites," i.e., a playing field that is slanted to our advantage.

If our organizations are going to be fair for all so we can leverage the diversity of the workforce, we as whites must expose the positive cultural bias that organizations have for us to the light of day. We must make it visible and acknowledged and known. We must ensure that white cultural aspects are utilized when they are appropriate and add value for the benefit of all. And we also must ensure that they are not utilized when they prevent some groups from making their full added-value contribution.

To maintain the flexibility needed to succeed in today's rapidly changing marketplace, organizations must be able to access a range of options, styles and behaviors. This can

only be accomplished by making each culture visible and conscious, white culture included.

If we are to become the best people and OD practitioners we can be, we must make White Culture visible and conscious for each one of us. And we must help our organizations understand it as just one of many cultures – one set of values, attitudes and behaviors among many such sets in a diverse and challenging environment.