

# Resisting White Dominant Culture in Continuous Improvement

This resource<sup>1</sup> is drawn from the article, "[Swimming Against the Current: Resisting White Dominant Culture in Continuous Improvement](#)," by [Amanda Meyer](#). The table below provides examples of what continuous improvement in education organizations can look like when it is being influenced in potentially negative ways by white dominant culture. The right hand column proposes a starter set of moves that improvers can make to resist these patterns and use continuous improvement in more liberatory ways. The characteristics of white dominant culture described here are based on the seminal work of Tema Okun and colleagues, shared in her recently revised and expanded [website](#)<sup>2</sup> and accompanying article, "White Supremacy Culture - Still Here." Those who are unfamiliar with the original framework are encouraged to start there before making meaning of this table.

White Dominant Culture Characteristic	Harmful patterns <i>What continuous improvement looks like when influenced by this characteristic</i>	Moves to resist & reimagine <i>Ways to interrupt white dominant culture in our improvement work</i>
Perfectionism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feeling pressure to implement something perfectly, whether it is a change idea or continuous improvement itself.</li> <li>• Feeling that you need to do continuous improvement perfectly yourself before you can help others to do it.</li> <li>• Believing that there is one best way to practice continuous improvement.</li> <li>• Fearing failure so much that you keep the improvement work superficial and move through it quickly.</li> <li>• Feeling so strongly that we need to meet our target that we don't set ambitious goals.</li> <li>• Not being able to admit when targets aren't met, and not learning from times when we don't achieve improvement.</li> <li>• Focusing more on identifying and analyzing all the ways we are falling short, rather than</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Emphasize More Than One "Right" Way:</b> Ensure your practice of improvement remains open to a variety of tools and approaches for making meaning of systems and working to change them. Refrain from conveying improvement is a linear or lock-step process.</li> <li>• <b>Give Yourself Permission to Start Before You're Ready:</b> Be honest about where you are in your own journey of learning about continuous improvement, and encourage others to do the same. Don't be afraid to try and learn along the way, ideally with the support of colleagues and a coach. There is a developmental trajectory for continuous improvement just like there is for learning any other complex set of knowledge and skills.</li> <li>• <b>Look for Success:</b> Engage in bright spots analysis to identify strengths, assets, and pockets of success. Develop change ideas based on bright spots, not just breakdowns or barriers.</li> <li>• <b>Publicly Celebrate Failure:</b> Normalize mistakes and appreciate failures as a natural and important part of learning. Emphasize that more is often learned from "failed" tests than ones where the expected results are achieved!</li> <li>• <b>Emphasize Grace and Compassion:</b> Encourage and model offering ourselves and others grace and compassion.</li> </ul>

<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this handout was developed through collaboration between [Jill Hoogendyk](#), [Enikia Ford-Morthel](#), [Eve Arbogast](#) and [Amanda Meyer](#), and presented at the 2022 Carnegie Foundation Summit on Improvement in Education.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.whitesupremacyculture.info/characteristics.html>

	<p>amplifying and replicating ways in which we are succeeding.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b>Leaders Model Humility and Vulnerability:</b> When leaders publicly admit when things don't go as predicted and celebrate failures along with successes, it becomes safe for others in the organization to do so as well.</li> <li>● <b>Other Move:</b></li> </ul>
<p>Sense of Urgency</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Setting unrealistic targets, driven by accountability and fear, in which huge progress is expected in a short amount of time.</li> <li>● Responding to accountability and fear by "playing it safe" and pursuing superficial rather than transformative goals given the short timeframe allowed.</li> <li>● Letting our sense of urgency make us move faster than relationships, trust, and readiness allow.</li> <li>● Rushing collaborative processes and underinvesting in relationship-building throughout.</li> <li>● Acting "now, now, now" as opposed to intentionally pausing to think about what we are learning.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b>Calendar the Time the Work Requires:</b> Put time for continuous improvement onto individual, team, and organization-wide calendars. Allocate the resource of time appropriately for the depth of reflection, dialogue, and learning that continuous improvement requires.</li> <li>● <b>Less is More:</b> Select a small number of specific targets and stay focused on those priorities. Narrow the number of different things we are asking ourselves and others to focus on at a given time.</li> <li>● <b>See Improvement Aims as Predictions, Not Targets to be Evaluated By:</b> An improvement aim is our prediction of the results we think we can create if our theory of improvement is correct. Not meeting our aim is not something to be ashamed of; it is a call to action to re-evaluate our theory or the degree to which we actually put changes into practice.</li> <li>● <b>Find the Natural Consolidation Moments:</b> Identify where in our system we have natural opportunities to slow down and reflect. Leaders recognize those points in time and ask for it.</li> <li>● <b>Start Small:</b> Even though this is one of the fundamental principles of continuous improvement, the pressure we are under can make it hard to resist the urge to go too big, too soon! Be the voice in the room that says, "How could we test this on a smaller scale?" This is not the opposite of urgency: starting smaller means learning faster.</li> <li>● <b>Other Move:</b></li> </ul>

<p>Transactional Goals &amp; Relationships</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Rushing the improvement journey and treating continuous improvement activities as items to check off a list.</li> <li>● Setting goals that are overly fixated on quantifiable factors, in a rush to get concrete results that can be reported quickly.</li> <li>● Measuring only at the superficial or transactional level, such as participation rates rather than the quality of the participation <i>experience</i> for users.</li> <li>● Using the reasoning that something is “hard to measure” as an excuse for not trying to capture it or get feedback about it.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b>Push Deeper to Quality:</b> Attend not just to easily-measurable quantity, but actual <i>quality</i>. Push beyond the level of transactional to assess whether the experiences of those you are trying to impact have actually changed.</li> <li>● <b>Redefine “Data”:</b> Broaden your definition of data to include “street data,” such as observation, anecdotes, and storytelling (Safir &amp; Dugan 2021). Bring these forms of data regularly when investigating the current state or completing Plan-Do-Study-Act cycles.</li> <li>● <b>Measure Experiences, Not Only Outcomes:</b> Articulate a clear vision for how you want the work to be <i>experienced</i> by all involved, and conduct regular checks on the process, not just the outcomes you are working towards.</li> <li>● <b>Other Move:</b></li> </ul>
<p>Paternalism</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Underestimating the value of co-creation and assuming you are qualified to solve problems for others.</li> <li>● Using the excuse of limited resources or looming deadlines to shortchange stakeholder engagement.</li> <li>● Deciding what you’re going to do without engaging folks.</li> <li>● Making a plan without the folks who are most impacted, or who will be operationalizing the plan.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b>Let Those Most Impacted Lead:</b> Engage those most impacted as equal members of improvement work.<sup>3</sup> This could look like students, parents, or community members serving on your improvement team and following their lead as they determine the direction of the work (Hinnant-Crawford 2020).</li> <li>● <b>Invest in 1-to-1s:</b> Engage in the practice of one-to-one conversations that provide ample space for perspectives to be shared and relationships built.</li> <li>● <b>Let People Choose:</b> Allow teachers, leaders, or whoever is doing the improvement work to name the focus of their own inquiry.</li> <li>● <b>Other Move:</b></li> </ul>

<sup>3</sup>More and more, improvement efforts are recognizing the importance of engaging students as designers and improvers of their own school experiences. [Studentpoweredimprovement.com](http://Studentpoweredimprovement.com) is one great resource.

<p>Superiority of the Written Word</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Overemphasizing written products or equating what is written down with what has been learned.</li> <li>● Creating such stringent expectations for documentation that it overwhelms or disincentivizes people from doing the work of improvement.</li> <li>● Equating continuous improvement with forms and templates, rather than reflection, dialogue, and learning.</li> <li>● Overemphasizing jargon and technical language.</li> <li>● Valuing ideas that are documented or packaged in a visually appealing way over the practical, experiential wisdom people are using in their work.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b>Make Learning Explicit:</b> Help people see the ways they have already been engaged in continuous improvement thinking, even if they haven't written anything down.</li> <li>● <b>Create Early Experiences Disconnected from the Written Word:</b> Disconnect PDSA cycles from the written word by inviting someone to try something and come back next week/month to reflect verbally.</li> <li>● <b>Develop Approachable, Common Language:</b> Use approachable language that people are already familiar with, such as "small change cycles" or "inquiry," so that people don't feel excluded by language. Common, locally-meaningful language helps bring clarity, shared accountability, and understanding.</li> <li>● <b>Conduct PDSAs Through Conversation:</b> Experiment with various formats to engage people in conversation about their testing cycles. Use a huddle structure to scaffold and pace testing cycles. Rather than asking everyone to come back with a write-up, ask them to join the meeting ready to share what they tried and what they learned.</li> <li>● <b>Other Move:</b></li> </ul>
<p>Right to Comfort &amp; Fear of Open Conflict</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Assuming shared values around equity without unpacking what it truly means.</li> <li>● Prioritizing harmony over challenging individual and shared beliefs.</li> <li>● Being unable to hear criticism or receive feedback without feeling blamed.</li> <li>● Blaming people of color for causing discomfort with their critique rather than considering the content of their observations.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b>Create the Conditions for Difficult Conversations:</b> Applying an equity lens to our improvement work necessitates honest dialogue. Racism, patriarchy, and other forms of oppression are so baked into our society that the very programs we design to interrupt inequities can perpetuate them just by how they operate. If we are not explicitly talking about how we are resisting oppression, we are likely perpetuating it.</li> <li>● <b>Develop Listening Skills:</b> Support your team in growing their capacity for listening and sitting with discomfort. Incorporate opportunities for the release of emotion through speaking and listening - such as through open-ended prompts in a constructivist listening dyad.</li> <li>● <b>Practice Emotional Regulation and Somatic Healing:</b> A great deal of harm in equity work is caused by defensive emotional reactions by people of advantaged identities, especially white people. To equip ourselves and our teams to lean into discomfort and have the conversations required to face</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Investing more in technical skills than in relational skills, such as giving and receiving feedback effectively.</li> </ul>	<p>inequity, we must work to understand our triggers, how threat response shows up in our bodies, and how to create space between emotional reaction and outward action.<sup>4</sup></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Create Intentional Moments for Pause and Follow-Through:</b> Leveraging the practice of “equity pauses” can create windows to stop, reflect and re-set during group collaboration. When pauses are pre-planned or integrated as a regular routine, it can help the team grow its collective muscles around identifying and discussing equity issues. However, it is important to ensure they are used intentionally to shift the dynamics of a conversation and not as an after-thought to check the “we talked about equity today” box.</li> <li><b>Leverage a 3rd Party Perspective:</b> Using tools such as equity audits or equity rubrics can provide outside criteria against which your team can evaluate its improvement efforts. The use of more objective descriptors can “de-personalize” areas of concern and can prevent an undue burden for raising equity concerns from being placed on particular team members.</li> <li><b>Other Move:</b></li> </ul>
One Right Way & Objectivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Assumption that continuous tools, protocols, and data make it possible to be truly objective when studying or addressing a problem.</li> <li>Falling into “solutionitis” or expecting we can find a single, quick fix for a complex issue.</li> <li>Talking about our theories as if we will discover one “truth” for how something works, or assuming that we will be able to discern a direct link between cause and effect.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Ask Questions:</b> “One right way” thinking represents a lack of the curiosity and humility that are integral to continuous improvement. Return consistently to asking and answering questions.</li> <li><b>Look for Complexity, Not Truth:</b> Instead of looking for one answer, aim to discover and make visible the variety of factors that are inevitably at play when it comes to a particular inequity.</li> <li><b>Dig Into the Data:</b> Use data as a vehicle for asking more questions and revealing more layers, rather than as a source of solutions. If a particular data display gives rise to more questions, seek out additional data. Be wary of summative statistics that could be hiding inequities beneath the surface (La Salle and Johnson 2019).</li> </ul>

<sup>4</sup> Thanks to Iris Lopez for naming this work as critical to efforts to dismantle white dominant culture.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lack of awareness that continuous improvement, though it involves strategic thinking and logic, is still susceptible to bias and influenced by emotion.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>See it from Another Angle:</b> Recognize that everyone has a set of experiences that has shaped their worldview, including you! Inquire into the perspectives of others. Regularly identify whose voice has not been at the table and work to engage those people in the work.</li> <li><b>Other Move:</b></li> </ul>
Power Hoarding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Setting out to improve the work of <i>other</i> people. This can look like an improvement team formed to improve math teaching, composed of central office and school-site administration, without math teachers who are actually responsible for doing the teaching, or students who are responsible for doing the learning.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Revisit Team Composition:</b> Don't be afraid to revisit an improvement team's composition regularly to see if changes or additions are needed. If at any moment, the conversation is about improving the work of someone else, not the work of those sitting around the table, that is a sign that we have a mismatch between problem and team composition.</li> <li><b>Other Move:</b></li> </ul>

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