

Race and Ethnicity Relations Dialogue with a Racially Homogenous Audience

Extension facilitators' experiences and lessons learned

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Abstract

A race and ethnicity relations dialogue workshop was provided to Extension faculty and staff, a highly racially homogenous group. Two trained Extension Educators facilitated the dialogue with a focus on promoting racial understanding and healing and enhancing community relations. The trained coaches have highlighted their own experiences and lessons learned while implementing this workshop that may be valuable to those doing similar work within their own organizations.

Introduction

Idaho's 2019 population was 93% White (United States Census Bureau, 2019). In 2019, 89% of Extension faculty identify as White (University of Idaho Extension, 2020). The majority of people of color (POC) in Extension are in non-faculty positions. Additionally, a diversity specialist and support-designated position for University of Idaho Extension, does not currently exist.

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Two Family and Consumer Sciences Extension faculty attended the 2018 Coming Together for Racial Understanding Train-the-Trainer Workshop at the National 4-H Center. Idaho was one of 20 states represented in the five-day pilot. The Coming Together for Racial Understanding initiative seeks to promote racial understanding and healing through civil dialogue within the Cooperative Extension System (SRDC, 2017). Those who complete the workshop become trained “coaches” and bring content back to their state Extension system to facilitate civil dialogues surrounding race and ethnicity relations (SRDC, 2017). The designed dialogue process centers around having “a diverse, broad-base of participants relative to the situation” for optimal understanding and learning to thrive (SRDC, 2017).

The trained coaches offered a statewide two-day workshop for Extension faculty and staff in October 2019. Bringing this dialogue content to a highly racially homogenous state would require strategic adaptations of the curriculum. Even with intentional adaptation and audience considerations, the coaches learned about offering this content to an audience with little representation from marginalized populations.

Detailed in this article are the experiences and learnings the coaches gained in regards to:

- promotion of the workshop,
- facilitating dialogue using the affinity group format,
- navigating the Step Forward, Step Back activity,
- and the addition of state-specific history in the workshop.

Learning 1: Promotion of Diversity Dialogue Training to a Racially Homogenous Audience

The coaches expected resistance from faculty and staff to attend a two-day workshop focusing on race and ethnicity relations dialogue. To promote the workshop, coaches recruited support from administration. Administration played a vital role

in increasing participation by sharing provided messaging with subordinates and by providing travel scholarships to subordinates.

To provide participants with insight into the workshop, a “teaser” (introductory training) program took place during the university’s annual Extension conference. The full two-day workshop had 48 Extension participants in attendance. Of those that completed the post-survey, three participants self-identified as Hispanic/Latinx, three participants did not respond, and the remaining participants identified as White.

The strategic marketing of the two-day training likely encouraged attendance. However, with continued facilitation of this dialogue, the Idaho coaches conclude that while gaining leadership’s support is important, it can create a “volun-told” mentality for subordinate employees. This encouragement can unwillingly promote participant attendance to a sensitive workshop they may not be ready to engage in, potentially causing more harm than good for the participant and their peers. Instead, gain and foster leadership support, while ensuring clear messaging to personnel and participants “...invite involvement rather than mandate participation” (SRDC, 2017).

Learning 2: Affinity Group Formats with Little Diversity

Two workshop activities include separation of participants into self-identified affinity groups, based on race and ethnicity. Affinity groups “...give people with similar racial or ethnic backgrounds an opportunity to talk about issues that are very important to them” (Everyday Democracy, 2008). Due to a majority of white participants in this workshop, the white participants separated into male and female affinity groups. Two particular scenarios occurred as groups convened: white leadership joined a marginalized affinity group (Scenario One), and the white female group, the largest affinity group, resulted in ineffective race relations discussion (Scenario Two).

SCENARIO ONE

Two white participants in superior positions chose to join the Hispanic/Latinx Affinity Group (the only diverse affinity group present). Coaches became aware of this happening, but were inexperienced in handling the situation.

After reflecting with a Hispanic/Latinx Affinity Group member, it was clear the member was looking forward to the affinity group to allow for some relief from the workshop, as being one of a handful of diverse participants at a diversity training can be exhausting. Having people who do not identify with the affinity group did not allow for the group to reflect and discuss amongst peers that can relate. This aligns with research indicating that POC tend to enjoy affinity groups greater than white people (Lambertz-Bendt, 2016).

Research indicates that white people can view affinity groups as a design intended to continue to separate races and ultimately create more segregation (Lambertz-Bendt, 2016). Potentially, white people may join diverse affinity groups because they may feel that it is more beneficial for them to learn from people of different races, rather than from their white peers (Lambertz-Bendt, 2016).

To prevent this situation in the future, the Idaho coaches need to be trained to improve their facilitation skills to address these issues when they occur (Lambertz-Bendt, 2016). Effectively intervening at the time and continuing to communicate the purpose of affinity groups may prevent and resolve a similar situation from occurring in the future.

SCENARIO TWO

The white female group was the largest affinity group at the workshop. Rather than exploring their racial identities, reflecting on lived realities, and practice talking about race, the group less-than productively encouraged the less constructive voices in the group to express assumptions, attitudes, and experiences that stifled effective dialogue. Because these voices took up more space and room in the dialogue, they muffled voices that may think differently and provide new perspectives.

Reflecting on this experience, this group was undergoing “conversation roadblocks” (Catalyst, 2016). These roadblocks are “...assumptions,

attitudes, or experiences that can stifle our ability to talk about our differences...often with (an) underlying motivation such as fear, resistance...(Catalyst, 2016)”

To better facilitate a future affinity group, coaches need to continue to remind participants of dialogue ground rules and the intention of the affinity group. It is important to note that some members in this group may not have been ready to participate in race and ethnicity relations dialogue. Incorporating what was understood in Scenario One (above) could help prevent this situation in the future.

Learning 3: Step Forward, Step Back Activity with Little Diversity

The Step Forward, Step Back activity is also called The Privilege Walk. The activity is used to share stark equitable differences based on race and ethnicity. In our case, this activity sparked strong emotions from the few POC in attendance. Through post-activity dialogue with those individuals, emotions stemmed from feeling like a target of sympathy or tokenism. The diverse representation in the room poorly received this activity. This was different from the experience the coaches had when they participated in the national training. However, the national training had greater diverse representation, which could have allowed for less tokenism and a shared sense of community and identity among POC.

In reflection, this activity has been shown to cause strong emotions, build barriers that might not have otherwise existed, and offer a learning experience for white people that is often reliant on the lived oppression of POC. These outcomes are more likely to occur when the activity is only centered around race and ethnicity, and no other forms of identity and oppression (i.e. economic status, gender identity, etc.).

To prevent similar responses in the future, allow participants to use all sense of identity and lived experiences, not just race and ethnicity, when answering the questions to Step Forward, Step Back. There are alternative activities that promote the same message, without capitalizing on the marginalized populations in the room, like the Privilege for Sale activity (The Office of Intercultural Engagement, n.d.). Finally, engaging POC in the workshop planning and implementation may allow for diverse perspectives and prevent harmful experiences from occurring.

Learning 4: Pulling in State-Specific History

The audience of this workshop was comprised of many individuals who have lived in, or currently live in rural, racially homogenous communities for the majority of their lives. Many have not seen or recognized racial disparities. This is largely due to a lack of experience, education, and relationships with POC. To pull this content closer to home, the two-day workshop took place in the state's capitol where the Idaho Anne Frank Human Rights Memorial resides. The memorial was built in Idaho due to Idaho's history with white supremacy. The coaches arranged a tour of the memorial with the intent to build connection between the workshop content and the participant. Through reflection, feedback and evaluation responses, facilitators viewed this workshop activity as a successful component that resonated with this audience.

Conclusion

For Extension systems without a diversity specialist position, Extension Educators with alternate specialties may step into a diversity and inclusion role. Although, a designated diversity specialist position could provide more experienced facilitation, expertise, and time allotted to this work. These lessons may be valuable to other diversity and inclusion coaches who provide similar efforts within their organizations, who may be inexperienced in this work, and who work within racially homogenous systems. With continuous reflection and research, coaches can build competence in race and ethnicity relations dialogue. *

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