Anti-Racist Organizational (AROC): Most Significant Change September 2018

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Introduction:

For two years, the CommunityWise Resource Centre has been undertaking an Anti-Racist Organizational Change (AROC) process to better understand how organizational racism works and how it can begin to be addressed.

The following report outlines the findings from the Most Significant Change activity that was held with the AROC Advisory Group (AG) and Working Group (WG) in July 2018.

The focus of this evaluation activity was to surface the learning and change that has occurred for individuals since they began their participation in one or both of these groups.

Most Significant Change:

We chose Most Significant Change (MSC) because it helps identify tangible changes in knowledge, thought, and behavior[1]. The change is often described in detail by the individuals who are experiencing it and offers a rich picture of what is happening. The process is quite participatory and is guided only by a few simple questions that help structure the participant's input. It is broad enough that the individual is free to share a range of thoughts and perspectives.

Most importantly, it encourages analysis at the story-telling level. This means that individuals are engaging in their own meaning-making and analysis of the change that is occurring, and this action-reflection process can further influence their participation in the change process. Often, the final product of a MSC process is the sharing of the change story by the participants in their own words and in a variety of formats.

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[1] Most Significant Change, "Better Evaluation."
https://www.betterevaluation.org/en/plan/approach/most_significant_change (accessed July 2018)

Details of the AROC MSC:

In order to guide the story-telling reflection of participants, we asked two simple questions:

1. *Write a story of what has changed for you since you started with AROC*
2. *What has been a most significant change?*

During a three-hour facilitated session with an external evaluator, participants were given individual time to reflect on these questions and write or record their change stories. Others who were not in attendance or who needed more time were given the opportunity to share their stories via email. A total of sixteen stories were shared.

Analysis:

For the purposes of this report, the evaluator has organized the larger themes that emerged from the MSC in to four domains of change. They are:

- **Individual:** change that is occurring for the individual in knowledge, awareness, attitude and/or behavior.
- **Group/caucus:** change that occurred as a result of and/or in the caucus WG and AG sessions.
- **Individual's immediate environment:** change that is occurring in the environments the individual has direct impact on: workplace, organizations, groups, etc.
- **Individual's outside environment:** change that may be occurring in the larger community where individuals reside: sectors, neighborhoods, city, province, etc.

Findings in brief:

It is clear from the collection of stories that deep individual-level change is occurring. In general, individuals feel that their increased awareness = increased skills = increased confidence in being able to see and address issues of marginalization, racism, and white consciousness in their personal lives and workplaces.

Some participants spoke of the large leap they have made in shattering some of the ideas they previously held about themselves and of society. Others spoke of a more nuanced

view they now hold after having had the chance to reflect on what they know of themselves and the world they live in.

Profound change seemed to occur for *racialized* participants who felt they could share and digest their personal experiences of racism and marginalization. Some attributed this "cathartic" experience, where they can wrestle with the impact that racism has had in their lives, to the opportunity of sharing personal experiences of racism with others in a comfortable, open, and accountable space. Moreover, by talking freely about their experience, racialized participants found strength in moving from internalizing the impact to discharging it by recognizing that racism is a shared experience, rather than one that the individual has to manage alone.

On the other hand, *white* members spoke about experiencing a loss of control, and about inviting more "chaos" into lives. They also referred to a sort of "jarring" in the way they had previously thought about race, equity, and whiteness as something that needed to be addressed outside of themselves. Now, there is an inward focus that includes having to change the way they see themselves and the white consciousness they are increasingly aware of. Some spoke of how this has contributed to changing the ways they work, engage in, and construct their work environments.

At the group level, *racialized* participants were able to speak freely and to acknowledge the commonality of their experiences with others. This shared learning space was extremely valued by racialized participants and provided the opportunity for release and renewed energy for anti-racist action. For *white* participants, they appreciated having a space where they could keep other white folks accountable and be held accountable, and to discuss the role whiteness and white fragility plays in their lives and workplaces.
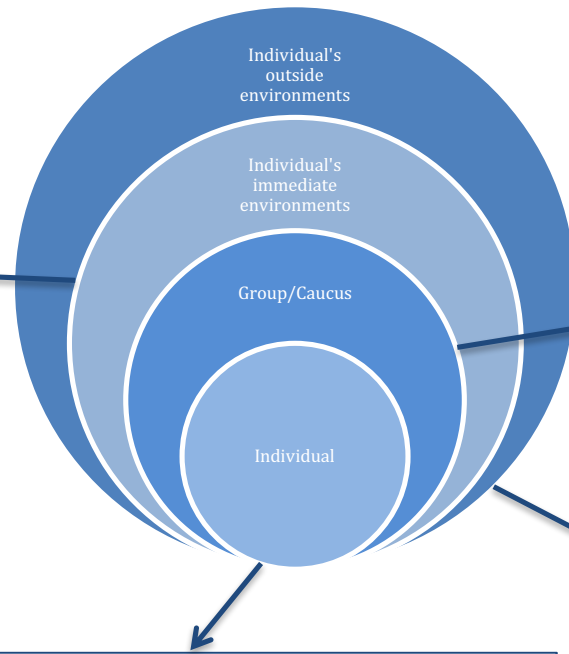
The following page shows the four domains of change and the high-level themes that emerged in each of the domains. In order to showcase the description of change in the participant's voices, direct quotes are also included.

Changes to the individual's outside environment were not surfaced. Given the extent and the time required for such changes, this was to be expected.

Changes that occurred via caucus discussions:
- Moved beyond individual understanding of racism to a collective understanding.
- Gained an incredible array of tools to discuss racism with others
- Have learned exactly what a safe space is: Come as you are and you will be respected, listened to and sometimes challenged.
- In a shared environment, learning that racism can and is experienced differently for different individuals – the forms and intensity.
- Felt validated in the truth that is common experiences.
- Freedom to discuss things people have not felt free to discuss elsewhere
- Space to hold self and other White people accountable.

Changes in the individual's immediate environments:
- New awareness of the racism that exists in their workplace.
- New language and understanding so that individuals can see racism, speak up more confidently and take leadership on addressing oppression and marginalization in the workplace.
- Increased personal responsibility to address racism and to ensure equitable opportunities and representation to diverse people.
- Demand more accountable spaces for marginalized people.
- Bringing more explicit emphasis of race into organizations meetings and into life contexts outside of work.

Individual's outside environments

Individual's immediate environments

Group/Caucus

Individual

Changes in the individual's outside environments:

Not yet surfaced

Changes at the individual level:
- A lot of previously unconscious actions and efforts have become more conscious.
- More nuanced understanding of own ethno-racial identity.
- Far more aware of how overt racism works in society, as well as how subtle and structural racism works.
- Better equipped to change how racism is perpetuated within the individual
- Gained confidence in being able to talk about racism, that encouraged communication and understanding, rather than shutting down conversation.
- It has offered language and an understanding for racialized people to be able to express anger with oppression and colonization.
- More skills to engage people in discussion, instead of just calling people out or shutting down.
- The space to make sense of personal experiences of racism and to be able to manage the lingering emotions from those experiences.
- Heightened awareness of having "white privilege" and "white fragility" and what that means for their day to day.
- Focus on decolonization and on unlearning all the norms we absorb and to experiment with new ways of being in the world.

Changes in detail

Skills -- leading, teaching, discernment, new language, listening, goal-setting, taking responsibility, dancing in the un-learning, changing work patterns and structures, better engagement skills, focusing on equity.

Impact on self via sharing of experiences with racism – healing, cathartic, being seen and heard, relief, validation, less alone, no longer lost, finally make sense of what I've seen and heard, new found strength, renewed energy,

Impact on self via learning about whiteness – loss of control, feels chaotic, challenges 'normal' ways of doing work, made me more honest with myself and others, racism is not just outside of me but inside as well, experience more racial 'discomfort', better listening and less talking.

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Heightened awareness of white privilege:

"While I have long been aware of my white privilege in society more broadly, I hadn't previously done the work of deeply examining the ways in which my language, behaviours, skills, work style, expectations, and my implicit and affinity biases have been shaped by white supremacy, and by white privilege, or how I continue to both benefit from and perpetuate white supremacy in the workplace and in the sector. "

"It makes me sad and embarrassed to say, but it takes constant reminders and ongoing participation because favouring or deferring to the needs of white-led and well-resourced members and individuals (myself included) generally can be a very strong force because it is embedded in society."

Seeing racism differently:

"I used to understand I was racist but I didn't know how I was racist."

"I can see structural racism more clearly, in the rules written and unwritten, that govern things everywhere, all the time. I can't turn it off (even though I'd like to sometimes).

In organizational contexts:

"I no longer deny that my own non-profit organization is racist. I no longer see that as a scary fact that should be denied and justified away. It's simply a true fact. And once it's accepted as true, it's easier to see that we can work to change it."

Confidence and strength in making a difference:

"I think the most significant change that I have experienced as a result of my participation in AROC is an increase in confidence that has come from learning new skills, and having opportunities to practice both self-reflection and critical analysis of situations. This newly growing confidence has helped me speak public about my own experiences, and to continue

the pursuit of positive change toward greater equity. I feel less alone, and much more hopeful about possibilities for working toward greater racial equity."

"AROC sessions, both advisory and working groups, provided a safe space to practice expressing thoughts, experiences, reflections on racism in my life as a radicalized immigrant/settler woman. This opportunity gives me validation and support to then carry out the dialoguing outside of this safe space."

"The most significant change for me since joining AROC has been the new found confidence, strength and drive I've found within myself when it comes to advocating and supporting the work of anti-racism work here in Calgary. When I first started doing anti-racism work a few years back, I found the work to be so mentally, emotionally, and physically exhausting that I had to step away from it altogether. I now realize, after joining AROC, that I needed to find a way to reconcile my personal experiences with racism and work towards my own healing before I could continue on with anti-racism work. I have since gotten back in the field and feel better equipped to continue fighting the cause of racial justice within our city. "

Experiencing "freedom":

"You can tell that others have never had the chance to caucus, or able to share and learn so freely. This is interesting because when this happens in the group, it's like they've been holding it in for so long that they just burst out with everything they have to say."

"Things have been different for me since joining AROC. For the first time in my life, I feel like l have a place where I can go to learn, explore, and understand my personal experiences with racism; and an outlet where I can finally make sense of my personal experiences of racism, an outlet where I can finally make sense of what I've experienced over the years and manage the emotions that still linger on many years after."

Further information:

For clarification about CommunityWise's Anti-Racist Organizational Change process, please contact Thulasy Lettner at equity@communitywise.net

For information and questions about Most Significant Change and the findings in this report, please contact Rida Abboud, Phd of Rida Abboud Consulting at rida.abboud@gmail.com

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