

The Robinson Group

A Case for Discussion

Center for Assessment and Policy Development

MP Associates

World Trust Educational Services

This case was created for the Transforming White Privilege: A 21st Century Leadership Capacity learning modules.

Please see www.racialequitytools.org for more information about this case.

Contents

1. **Robinson Case Part 1**
 - a. Hand-out, text.....page 3
 - b. First set of reflection questions.....page 4

2. **Robinson Case Part 2**
 - a. Hand-out text for theater play.....page 5
 - b. Second set of reflection questions.....page 6

3. **Robinson Case Part 3**
 - a. Hand-out text.....page 7-8
 - b. Third set of reflection questions.....page 9

4. **Additional Supports**
 - a. Hand-out: Intervention and Strategy Reflection Questions
(Modified from page 27 – Flipping the Script).....page 10

Robinson Group Case Part I

Handout text and Reflection questions

The Robinson Group is a small organization with a big mission – to help communities attract businesses and new residents to their communities. As part of that mission, their work often involves providing technical assistance and consulting to locally organized groups. For example, they have worked with a group pulled together by the local chamber of commerce, that includes representatives from local government, the schools, business leaders, the faith community and neighborhood groups. Often, their work involves helping a coalition to assess the quality of a community's schools, transportation, housing stock and employment opportunities, perhaps to figure out ways of promoting or improving the quality of the local labor force.

James Robinson, a white man, started the organization in the 1960's. He was a very successful real estate agent. He also was very civic minded, and got involved with local causes. He was active in promoting racial integration in housing and education in his own community. At some point, he founded the Robinson Group to share the skills that had made him so successful.

Mr. Robinson passed away 5 years ago, but he left the organization in good hands. The current Executive Director is Larry Glendin, also a white man. He was hired by Mr. Robinson in the 1980's. Larry is a big believer that the more people get together across their differences to work on their communities, the more likely the community will be to open itself up to new ideas, new residents and to attract new businesses.

For a long time, the organization operated well – it had a small staff and little turnover. In addition to Larry, three other senior staff provided technical assistance to clients. They were Jen, an Asian-American woman, Barry, a white man, and Sarah, a white woman. There were also usually two administrative assistants on staff – often two relatively young African-American women.

In the last year or two, the Robinson Group got several really big contracts, and had to expand quickly. And, given changing demographics in the United States, they decided it would be a good idea to make an effort to diversify the staff. They hired a few younger people, and also made a particular effort to bring on people of color – particularly African American and Latino men and women who could provide technical assistance to their clients. They were somewhat successful, and ended up adding 4 additional part-time staff – 2 African American women, 1 Asian American man and 1 Latina, all of whom were hired to be technical assistance providers.

The organization decided to take advantage of this diversity in its communications and proposals for new work. For example, they let their clients and potential clients know that the Robinson Group now had *more* capacity to help them deal with issues of immigration, housing integration and changing community demographics.

Reflection Questions Set I

1. What seem to be some of the assumptions built into the Robinson organization's worldview that reflect white culture and/or white privilege?
2. If you were one of the new staff people, how might you feel about the Robinson Group's culture and norms? How might you figure out why you feel that way? What could be useful entry points for dealing with the feelings and the facts?
3. Imagine you are one of the current Robinson Group employees. How might you frame a conversation about white culture and/or white privilege with one of the other current employees you know well? What points might you want to make? What terms might you use to make them?

Try out a sentence or two with a partner. Each of you take a minute to think of those sentences. Then, one of you try them out – say them out-loud, and ask for feedback. What did you hear? How did you feel about what you heard? What did you want to do about what you heard (your most immediate thought of what you wanted to do about what was said, if anything)? Then switch so you both get a chance to try this out.

Robinson Group Case Part II

Handout text for theater play and Reflection questions

The public relations effort worked, because the Robinson Group began getting a lot of requests from community coalitions who wanted to call on Robinson's newly diverse staff. The Robinson group had also upped its own focus on understanding diversity, and had begun to take the idea of working on racial equity more seriously as well. For example, when clients asked for help on making sure their schools were turning out the kind of labor force that would attract new businesses, the Robinson Group now had a policy of helping them look at outcomes for students by race, not just overall.

But, things got a little complicated when the staff began to discuss what client groups should do about those data, particularly when they showed racial disparities. It turned out there were a lot of very different ideas among staff about possible causes and solutions. Also, when staff tried to talk these things out, it didn't go well.

The first thing the Robinson Group did was begin a series of internal bag lunches to discuss how to help their community clients. People were asked to volunteer to run a session on a topic of interest to them. The ED went first, just to start things off. He talked about how James Robinson believed strongly in the power of bringing people together to come up with solutions to community problems. He told a lot of stories about how that had led to people who didn't know each other getting to see what they had in common. The ED also talked about some of the ways that the organization had increased the diversity of its staff and the consultant pool, and how important that was.

It was difficult to get other people to volunteer after that. Also, there began to be side conversations about why all of the organization's management was white, and why none of the administrative assistants, who were typically people of color, had ever been trained and promoted to technical assistance positions. The ED began to hear about these conversations. He decided to bring in some diversity consultants to help out.

The internal work started out pretty well – people thought work on race was a good idea, given how they had positioned themselves with the clients, and the diversifying staff. Some strong relationships were built among white people and people of color as they talked about their life experiences. There were also some tensions. People began to ask more about promotion policies, and bringing up the need for more training so everyone on staff working with communities would be up to speed. Some of the people of color felt insulted by the behavior of white staff – the white staff wanted to know more about the life experiences of people of color but seemed less interested in how organizational practices were exclusive and sometime demeaning. Some of the white people felt that the people of color were accusing them of being racists. The organization was very disappointed with the diversity consultant, and fired him. They brought in another diversity consultant to clean up the mess and re-shape the process.

Theater Play Reflection Questions (Part II)

In small groups, take a part of the case above and act it out.

- I. What came up for you as you were doing the theater play?
 - a. What do you think that was tapping into – in some way connected with your own internalized entitlement or internalized racism?

2. Can you identify a few (other) examples of white privilege or its consequences in this scenario?

Robinson Group Case Part III

Handout for Case Work and Reflection questions

While all this was going on, clients continued to ask for help on what they felt were problems that hindered economic growth. One in particular was running into some problems. Case County has two high schools, one in Lemon City and one in the outskirts 30 miles away. Both are funded through local property taxes, state, federal and foundation funds. Both have their own elected School Boards. Years ago, when the schools were ordered to desegregate, white families moved in droves from Lemon City to other parts of the county. Expensive houses were built all over the county, while property values dropped in the city. Over time, the outlying areas of Case County became mostly white and affluent. Poorer people, many of them African-American or Latino immigrants, were more and more concentrated in Lemon City.

At this point, Lemon City High School serves mostly students of color from the neighborhood. The school has high standards and dedicated staff. Its School Board includes the Mayor, several long-time community residents and a representative from the County. Lemon City High School is old and in need of repair. The pay scale for teachers is low. Case High School serves mostly white students living outside the city. It pays better and holds onto its faculty for a longer time. Many members of the Case School Board are faculty at the local college, one is a senior official at a local bank and another is head of the local energy company. For the past ten years Case High School has usually ranked near the top of all schools in the state on standardized tests of reading and math. Lemon High School is often near the bottom of all schools in the state on these tests.

About five years ago, a foundation made a major grant to the region to improve education. The money was given to the regional United Way to administer, in cooperation with city and county government. Lemon High School received new plumbing and desks, and had its asbestos removed. Case High School put in a new high-tech laboratory and a media center.

Apart from this effort, a multi-racial group of civic and church leaders are meeting. They were fed up with watching the city and county do things the same old way. They paid dues and were able to hire a very competent organizer. In addition, they were able to convince Robinson Group to include them among its 14 communities working to improve education, and have been getting technical assistance from one of the Robinson Groups' multi-racial teams.

With the help of the organizer and the Robinson Group, the team expanded and formed a somewhat formal coalition. They defined their mission as civic involvement and self-determination. Coalition members have spent time looking at the different test scores for the two high schools. They talk about racial differences in the scores, but haven't yet had collective conversations about white privilege, or done much analysis together of why the racial differences in test scores might exist. However, the differences were compelling to them, and after considerable deliberation, listening to many different voices, the coalition decided to focus its first public efforts on improving Lemon High School.

There is a lot going on right now. The foundation has recently signaled its interest in continuing to support education in the region. A few powerful people in Case County seem interested in putting out a bond referendum to improve education in the region. The Lemon City Mayor is up for re-election. Given all this, some members of the coalition want to revisit their agreement to focus on Lemon High School. They want to think more regionally. Others are adamant that the decision to focus on Lemon High School stand, even if it means losing out on foundation funding. There is also disagreement on whether or not to get involved in the referendum or the Mayoral election. Things are getting quite heated in the coalition. Coalition members are just beginning to accuse each other of grandstanding and back door deal making, and to lose faith in each other's goodwill.

Reflection Questions Set III

1. What are some of the specific consequences of white privilege playing out in this scenario?
2. Assume you are a technical assistance provider with the Robinson Group. What are some questions you could ask the coalition members to help them sort out what is going on? For example, how could you help people identify their internalized entitlement or internalized racism? How could you help people identify institutional and structural relationships that could be changed?
3. What would the Robinson group team have to know or do in order to be prepared adequately to assist the community?
4. What are some of the ways the Robinson Group team could make things worse in this scenario – what should they avoid doing or saying – particularly so they do not reinforce the kinds of white privilege already in evidence?

Additional Supports

Handout: Intervention and Strategy Reflection Questions

Modified from page 27 – Flipping the Script

“We are fairly certain that the concepts of white privilege, racism, internalized racism and community building are not new to readers. At the same time, we hope that putting these concepts together in this section can stimulate some new clarity about where the privilege and racism reside in our work...To help identify white privilege and racism in community building, we can ask ourselves the following:

Who decides?

- Who decided the community (place) needs to be different?
- Who decided a community building or place-based effort would happen there?
- Who created the vision for this initiative (work)?
- Did individuals or groups within the community invite people from outside the community to come into the community to work with them?
- Who decided whether or not that was a legitimate invitation?

How are the issues defined and addressed?

- Who sets the goals? Whose values do they reflect?
- Who decides what success is, and how it will be measured?
- What is the theory about why things aren't as good as they could be? For example, what are the assumptions about why some children aren't doing well in school; what a neighborhood experiences a lot of arson; why people don't earn a living wage?
- What kinds of strategies or interventions are considered legitimate? What are the consequences for putting in place, or trying to put in place strategies outside those boundaries?
- What strategies are built into the work or community building effort to take care of white people? To keep them from being uncomfortable or angry? To maintain the status quo?
- Who sets the timetable for things to change?
- Who establishes the consequences for meeting or not meeting the timetable or goals?
- Who decides how resources are allocated?
- What standards are set for monitoring resource allocation and alignment of resources with values – and how consistently are those standards applied to different groups of people or organizations?
- Does the effort clearly focus on eliminating white privilege, or is it more about giving some places or groups more access within current systems of privilege or reducing the consequences of privilege for some groups or places at the expense of others?

Is the process inclusive?

- Who decides who is a leader?
- How transparent are the roles that people of color are expected to play in the effort?
- How transparent are the roles that white people are expected to play in the effort?
- What is built into the effort to encourage effective alliances across racial groups?
- What is built into the effort to encourage people to work on their own issues of internalized superiority and internalized inferiority?”