

# Inclusive community building

**This brief guide** provides an overview of inclusive community building based on a synthesis of our experiences with communities throughout the US. We hope it serves as a guide and inspiration for others.

**Inclusive community building** refers to the process of building relationships, trust, understanding and skills among members of a community to catalyze collective action. In this context, action is oriented to promote wellness and prosperity with a clear focus on people historically marginalized on the basis of race, culture, socioeconomic status, gender, sexual orientation, abilities, etc.

**The essential roles and practices** described here can be used to focus on a single community, to bridge different communities or to connect communities and government for the development of more equitable policies and programs and more responsive, democratic government. Community can refer to people in a specific place, people linked by a shared interest, religion or culture, or people within a specific organization.

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COMMUNITY  
BUILDING

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# Inclusive community building

## Goals and Focus



AIMS TO  
INCREASE WELLNESS  
AND PROSPERITY

SEEKS HEALING  
AND LIBERATION

AIMS TO DISRUPT  
MARGINALIZATION  
AND CREATE A CULTURE  
OF BELONGING

AIMS TO  
ACHIEVE EQUITY

CAN OCCUR WITHIN  
AND ACROSS COMMUNITIES  
AND ORGANIZATIONS

QUESTIONS TO FOCUS EFFORTS  
AND PROMOTE ONGOING  
ACCOUNTABILITY

>

The specifics of what success looks like for individuals, communities and broader society depends on the people and context. **Relationships** are the driving force, powered by **empathy** and **trust**, leading to enhanced **understanding, creativity, skills** and **confidence**. By embracing each person's humanity and learning their story, we can learn what is needed for all of us to thrive and make progress toward that vision.

>

Racism and colonization are intertwined with the founding of the US and still embedded in policies and practices throughout our society. Racism continues to cause trauma and violence across generations of Black and brown people. Racism and colonization are negative forces that all of us unconsciously internalize and that weighs on people of every race. Racism drains society of energy, resources and creativity. Inclusive community building seeks to **heal** the trauma of racism and celebrate the strength and resilience of **Black, Indigenous and other People of Color** lifting up culture as a key source of strength.

>

Each person has **multiple, intersecting dimensions of identity**, such as race, gender, class, sexual orientation, language, abilities, immigration status, etc. Each person's life is shaped by how society views these different aspects of their identities and to what extent they are privileged or marginalized. Harm and trauma can be compounded when a person has multiple marginalized identities. Inclusive community building seeks to reveal how one's own practices may marginalize others so we can continually **widen the circle of belonging** to include those at the margins of our own understanding.

>

**Equity as an outcome** is achieved when everyone has what they need to thrive and a person's wellness, prosperity and opportunity are not determined by any one aspect of their identity, such as their race, gender, class or zip code. **Equity as a process** is achieved when the people most impacted by injustices are meaningfully involved in understanding problems, defining success and doing the work to get there. People who are relatively privileged in society will not be able to fully understand or design a path to equity on their own. Equitable outcomes cannot be achieved without an equitable process.

>

When organizations and government agencies invest in their own internal work alongside investments in the communities they serve, inclusive community building can yield transformative changes in policies and programs.

>

- What do you and your community need so that everyone can thrive?
- What policies and practices are causing harm and leading to unequal outcomes?
- Who needs to be involved to make lasting, transformative change?

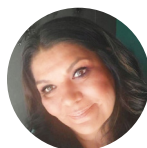
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## ESSENTIAL ROLES

**Our team of co-authors** leads inclusive community building in a wide range of contexts and different places throughout the US and at times internationally. We work separately and sometimes together. Our work is personal and professional.

**As we reflect collectively** on what it looks like and feels like to lead this work, we hold up these essential roles that we take on in communities. We invite you to reflect on which of these roles you take on and what others you might add.

- > **WE ARE GROUNDED IN WHO WE ARE AND WHERE WE COME FROM.**  
We work through our own internalized oppression. We hold our mentors and ancestors close. We are confident and open.
- > **WE ARE ARTISTS AND HEALERS.**  
We heal ourselves first, working through our own traumas and triggers then listening, inviting and holding space. We share food, music and gifts of thanks, also singing, poems or prayers. We share our art.
- > **WE ARE DEFENDERS AND FIERCELY LOYAL.**  
We use our privilege to prevent harm and draw the line.
- > **WE ARE A FLASH POINT.**  
We are a megaphone. We get angry. We ask questions. We make people pay attention and take action.
- > **WE ARE LIAISONS AND SHOCK ABSORBERS.**  
We listen and serve as a buffer when situations become intense.
- > **WE ARE COACHES.**  
We help people navigate systems and build skills, learning the rules so they can remake them.
- > **WE REDISTRIBUTE OPPORTUNITIES AND RESOURCES.**  
We show people how to open doors and let resources flow.
- > **WE REDEFINE TIME**  
according to the ebb and flow of opportunity and energy. We slow down the speeding train to hear people and set clear intentions. We accelerate and mobilize when everything is aligned and ready.
- > **WE STRETCH ACROSS COMMUNITIES AND IDENTITIES,**  
building awareness, connection and bridges. We translate when needed.
- > **WE ARE STORYTELLERS, HISTORY KEEPERS AND WITNESSES,**  
asked to remember, document and hold people accountable.
- > **WE ARE LOVING, RADIANT AND KIND.** Connection and community bring us joy.



ALTHEA



CARLOS



CHANAЕ



DARRYL



DIEDRE



DYLAN



GEORGE



JENNIFER



MIRKA



TARA



TOBY

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# essential practices



We use these essential practices to **shift power** and help people move from surviving to thriving. Change starts with an openness from individuals and individual leadership, while we nurture accountability and momentum at the community level. We consult together, we take action collectively and we reflect and adjust collectively in response to feedback.

- > **INTENTIONAL RELATIONSHIP BUILDING** starts with internal work, intentionality and an openness to learn and change as the relationship takes shape.
  - Exploration of your own identity, privilege and positionality
  - Clarity about who you want to be in relationship with and why
  - Openness to learning about others and recognizing what you don't know
  - Generous with invitations and responding to requests and feedback
- > **LIBERATING SPACES** allow people to be their authentic selves in community with others.
  - Expression and creativity
  - Sharing food, culture and personal connection
  - Safety and care with rules developed together
  - Personal liberation understood in the context of systemic oppression
- > **DIALOGUE** is the exploration of different perspectives. It is the understanding held between people in relationship together that stimulates creativity and deeper connection.
  - Speaking authentically
  - Listening to understand
  - Asking questions to explore differences
  - Layering meaning to create something new
- > **CAPACITY BUILDING** develops skills, confidence and resources for a person or organization to effectively meet their goals. This can include professional development, training, coaching, peer support, networking, direct investment, etc.
- > **MAKING DECISIONS** requires clear decision-making rules and an emphasis on dialogue to explore differences and strengthen relationships before pushing for agreement.
- > **UNLEARNING INTERNALIZED OPPRESSION** requires deep internal reflection and dialogue with others to identify racist, sexist and other oppressive beliefs that have become internalized in our thoughts and actions. With intention and sustained practice, we can reshape our beliefs and practices to be affirming and inclusive.
- > **HEALING** is the physical and spiritual regeneration that can occur after trauma and harm have been stopped and addressed.
  - Feeling heard and validated
  - Receiving care, nurturing and resources
  - Being protected from future harm
  - Addressing root causes
- > **FRAMING ISSUES** is the practice of putting specific words to the issues that a group will work on together to focus learning and decision-making. Specific words are chosen to resonate with people and articulate key questions or differences to explore.
- > **MOBILIZING ACTIONS THAT HAVE IMPACT** relies on engagement and buy-in from key individuals who are well-connected in the community and have influence or authority to distribute power and resources so that community decisions come to life.

## PRACTICING equity AMONG COLLEAGUES

As we work together to lead inclusive community building, it is critical that we practice equity with each other. We cannot be effective in our broader communities if we do not bring our values to life through our daily practices with each other.

- > **EVERYONE IS VALUED** and appreciated fully. We openly negotiate compensation and budgets and offer gestures of appreciation and mutual support.
- > **WE MAKE SPACE AND TIME** to get to know each other and support one another. We make time to stay connected to our communities and bring the work home.
- > **WE ARE TRANSPARENT** and communicate openly together.
- > **WE CHECK-IN FOR CONSENT** at all stages. Anyone can step back for any reason.
- > **WE COMMIT TO FOLLOWING THROUGH.** We flex and adapt to support each other and the continuity of the work.
- > **WE ARE RESPONSIVE TO FEEDBACK.** Feedback is a gift. We take feedback to heart and get creative with it.
- > **WE PRACTICE GRACE.** We have different life histories and experiences. We are vulnerable together. We can be triggered and we get tired. We are mindful of our own privilege and practice grace with each other.

## INCLUSIVE COMMUNITY BUILDING

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR LEARNING + GROWTH

Our work evolves as we actively push forward our own learning and growth in the following areas.

- > **DOING THIS WORK IN DIFFERENT PLACES** with different political contexts and histories. Our collective work is enriched by sharing across geographies, experiences and contexts.
- > **AVOIDING JARGON AND BUZZWORDS.** The language of equity work is intentional and full of purpose, but it can feel confusing and inaccessible, like jargon. As equity concepts are integrated into policies, job announcements and grant applications, these words become buzzwords linked directly to measures of success. People often can reap the benefit from using buzzwords or superficially “checking-the-box” without deeper commitment or learning. We continue to explore and experiment with language to maintain that intentionality and accountability, while also being accessible.
- > **APPRECIATING DIFFERENCES AND EXPRESSING EMOTION.** Many people are able to build community with people similar to them, but building community with people who have very different lived experiences in our segregated society is much more challenging with limited examples to draw from. Increasing polarization and divisive political tactics are real impediments to inclusive community building. Social media plays a dual role of promoting connection and inflaming brutal stereotypes and misinformation.
- > **SUCCESSIONAL PLANNING AND ADVANCING THE WORK ACROSS GENERATIONS.** We continue to get creative about how to develop equitable budgets and organizational structures, promote intergenerational work and invest in leadership development to sustain this long-term, deeply challenging and complex work.
- > **USING DATA AND ASKING QUESTIONS** in ways that effectively reveal problems, engage people most impacted by inequities and track progress and accountability. It is an ongoing challenge to manage the complexity of data available, communicate uncertainty and master the technical skills to do so in the context of public policy decision-making.
- > **BETTER ARTICULATING THIS WORK.** With increasing interest in equity, there are many initiatives with short timelines and big ambitions. By clearly describing this work and documenting the process and successes, we can keep the bar high for accountability, so that funders invest where they can have impact and people authentically doing the work can be fairly compensated.



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## Glossary

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- > **COLONIZATION:** the process of controlling people, land and resources to consolidate wealth for the benefit of a ruling class at the expense of indigenous people and other groups.
- > **COMMUNITY:** a group of people living in the same place or otherwise connected through shared heritage or culture, religion, interests or belonging to a specific organization or employer.
- > **CONSULTATION:** a process of engaging in dialogue to reach mutual understanding, which emphasizes trust, respect and shared responsibility.
- > **EMPATHY:** the ability to feel in response to other people's emotions, including imagining what someone else might be thinking or feeling.
- > **INTERSECTIONALITY:** the interconnected nature of a person's various categories of identity, such as race, gender, class, abilities, etc., and how a person experiences relative privilege or marginalization based on how those identities are viewed by society. Harm and trauma can be compounded when a person has multiple marginalized identities, for example a Black woman with disabilities.
- > **INTERNALIZED OPPRESSION:** norms, stereotypes and bias that people absorb from society, often unconsciously, that says one group is superior or inferior to others, which lead to actions and beliefs that harm oneself and others.
- > **POSITIONALITY:** a person's social position and power relative to other people and how that shapes their identity and access to resources, opportunities, information, etc.
- > **RACISM:** a system of power based on prejudice that benefits white people to the detriment of People of Color. Any prejudice is hurtful at the personal level, but when a person has structural and institutional power in society, their acts of prejudice have much greater impact. In the US, two forms of racism are especially prominent anti-Black racism, which focuses aggression and marginalization on Black people, and Indigenous Erasure, where mainstream US culture discounts and attempts to eliminate Indigenous people from society's awareness.