## **Diversity Gazette** February 2020

My Journey to Finding Comfort in Discomfort.

by Maggie Bailey

"I feel like you're trying to push me out of my leadership role with this group, and I'm really hurt by that."

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At that point, I knew I'd messed up. This is what my friend (a woman of color) said to me (a white woman) after I proposed reevaluating the structure of Alamance Racial Equity Alliance, a group we were both involved in that organizes racial equity trainings. Hearing these words, I felt embarrassed and defensive. But to move forward, I had to get comfortable with being uncomfortable and have a difficult conversation with my friend.

We are afraid of being uncomfortable, especially when talking about race. But our fear of getting proximate to issues around race has consequences. Our institutions, organizations, and norms are white-centered, and people of color are essentially required to be uncomfortable to operate within these systems. To make measurable changes in our organizations, we must transform our discomfort into something productive.

How do we become more comfortable sitting with discomfort? I'm no expert. It's a personal journey that requires initiative, introspection, and persistence. Here are some lessons I've learned in my imperfect pursuit of being a better white ally:

Listen: As white people, we try to separate ourselves from systems of oppression that we did not personally construct. When confronting diversity issues, we often pivot to a rebuke of individual racist perspectives rather than focusing on systemic changes, or we are afraid of saying the wrong thing. While our intentions are well-meaning, they block productive conversations. I've found that when I'm afraid of saying the wrong thing, it's best to listen. Slow down, listen to the other person, and consider their perspective.

## Don't fear a good faith mistake:

We will mess up sometimes. But it's better to make a mistake, learn from it, and resolve to do better than to never have a difficult conversation.

Learn: Educating ourselves about structural racism is essential to our public sector work. We must take it upon ourselves to learn about the past, scrutinize the present, and reimagine the future. Some of my favorite resources:

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- Attending a Racial Equity Institute Phase I workshop<sup>1</sup>
- Listening to "Seeing White," a series on the social construction of whiteness by the podcast Scene on Radio<sup>2</sup>
- Checking out the many resources available on racialequitytools.org

Use the buddy system: Find a friend or community group you can do this work with and hold each other accountable for your learning.

**Encourage dissent:** When we shut down conversations, we silence people of color. In an organizational setting, encouraging dissent may feel threatening. But by using facilitation skills to manage rather than squash dissent, we open the door to making our organizations more equitable, inclusive, and representative.

So, let's get uncomfortable! Let's do the work.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Visit racialequityinstitute.com for more information and training locations.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> I cannot recommend this podcast enough. Search for Scene on Radio in a podcast app or visit www.sceneonradio.org/seeingwhite/