



Photo: Caroline Bruno

A Connection-Oriented Model of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Work

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Introduction

When organizations decide to make Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion part of their mission, a lot of people immediately think about changing mission statements and policies and diversifying their team, their leadership, or their client base.

But in our urgency to change policies and diversify hiring and leadership we often skip the fundamentals of relationship-building and community-building. Even with a firm intention to change our organizations, many patterns of disconnection sabotage our DEI work because of how deep and ingrained racism is.

Trying to diversify an organization without addressing these patterns often leads to a revolving door of employees, leaders, and even board members who are Black, Indigenous, and people of color.

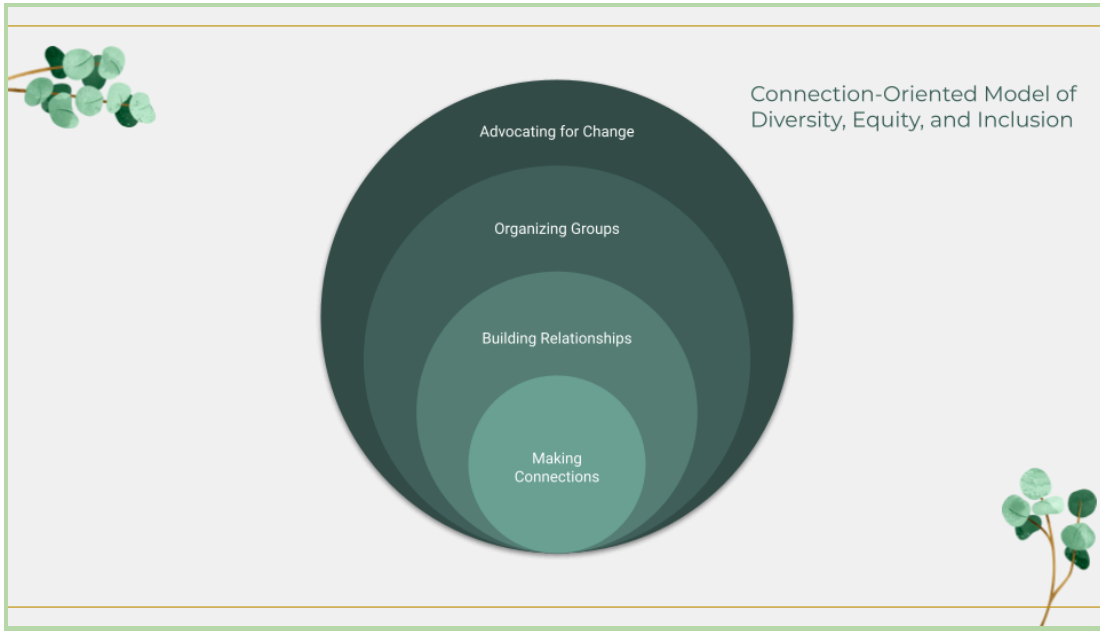
For example: without deeper cultural changes, organizations who succeed in elevating people of color to leadership expose them to being undermined and attacked.

When we rush to hire or promote people of color without building strong relationships and communities committed to ending racism, we are setting people of color up for failure, exploitation, or mistreatment.

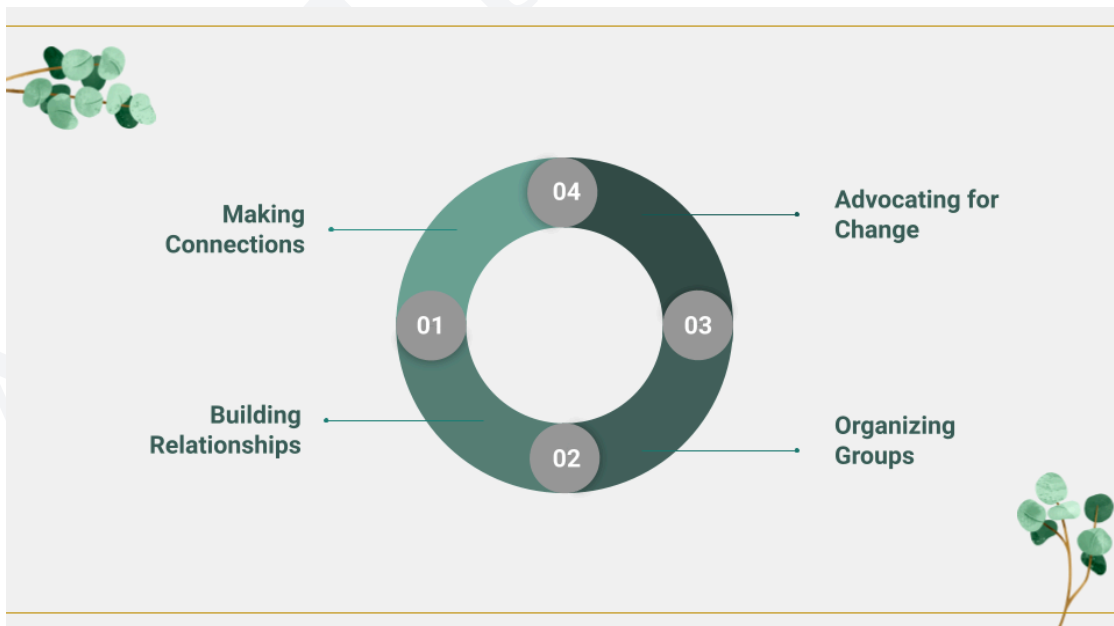
Ending racism means not only changing policies but building relational skills, emotional support skills, organizing skills, and last but not least, advocacy skills to implement significant changes all the way through our organizations.

Our model consists of four elements: Making Connections, Building Relationships, Organizing Groups, and Advocating for Change.

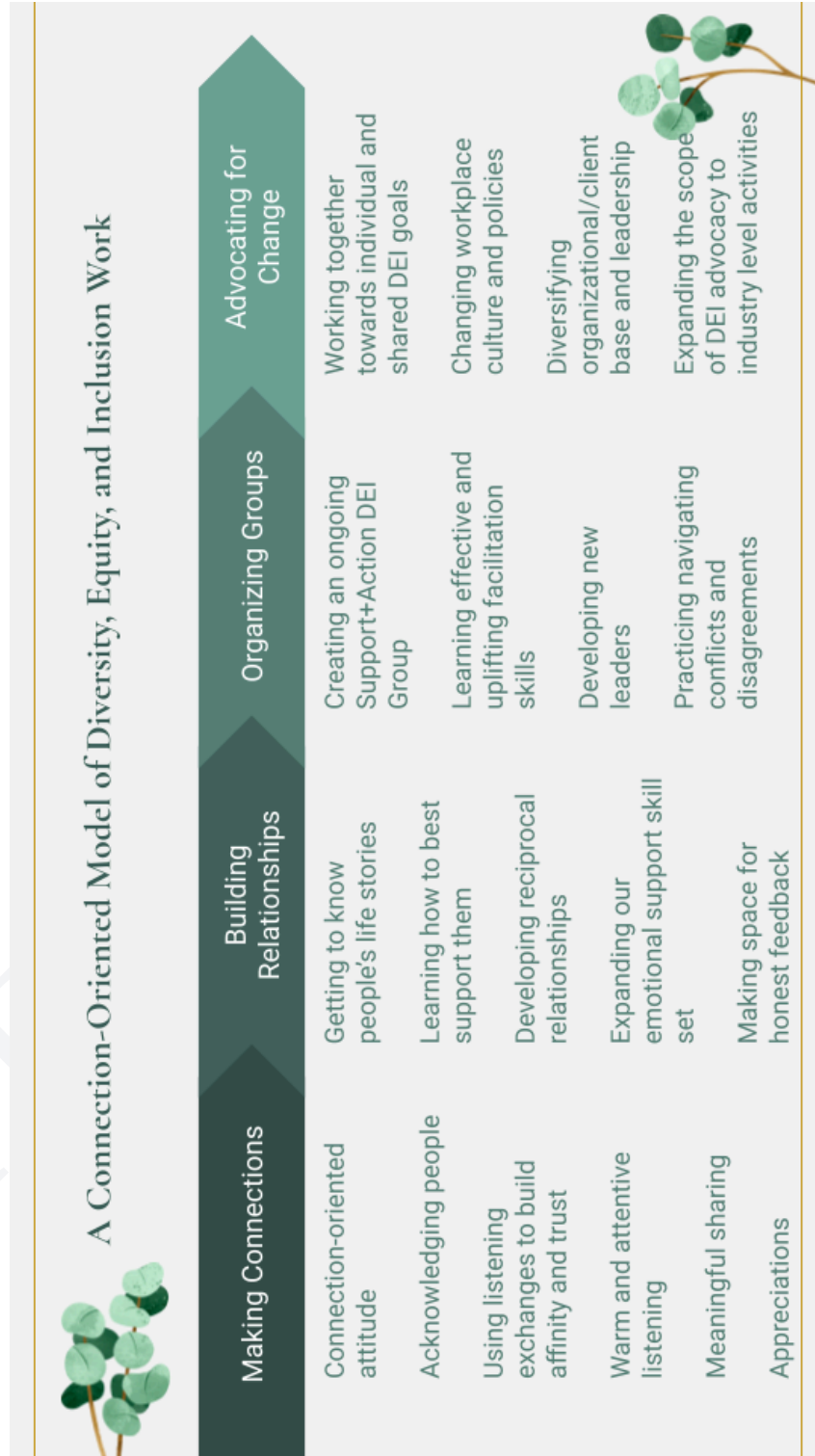
Our first diagram illustrates the nested nature of these practices:



The second diagram demonstrates how the model is cyclical. Advocating for bigger structural changes will require an ongoing effort to make new connections, build relationships, and organize groups at every level of an organization or industry:



Finally, this table details significant skills in each element of the model, which we will discuss over the next pages:



Making Connections

First, we cannot end racism by trying to do it alone or through policy changes. Connecting with people is the fundamental skill and practice of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion work.

- Practice being inviting and welcoming. Commit to treating everyone as if you believed they were smart and interesting.
- Make sure to acknowledge people and talk to them when opportunities present themselves. It starts with saying hello and taking the time to chat for five minutes.

Use the tools we discussed at our workshop to help you get to know people and practice your listening and appreciation skills.

Tool #1: Attitudes to Remember and Practice:

The most important tool for connection is trust in ourselves and each other: that we are good, that we belong together, and that we can learn to make better connections.

- I am an excellent human, with a whole history, unique perspective, and fabulous abilities
- You are an excellent human, with a whole history, unique perspective, and fabulous abilities
- There are a lot of reasons for me to like you
- There are a lot of reasons for you to like me
- We have much to learn from each other
- We can make a difference in each other's lives

- It's common to feel anxiety or awkwardness during opportunities for connection
- I can correct the mistakes I make while learning
- I can and will get better at connecting with people on a personal level

Tool #2: Listening Exchanges

- The basic operating principle of listening exchanges is the exchange of attentive listening and meaningful sharing between people
 - Warm and Attentive Listening
 - Assume there is a smart, interesting, likable person sitting across from you
 - Show your attention with your body language (eye contact, posture, movement)
 - Listen without offering advice or commenting
 - Meaningful Sharing
 - During your own turn, use your time to share something personal and meaningful
 - Be genuine and show yourself; this can feel hard and vulnerable, but it paves the way for stronger connections
- Decide how much time you want to spend and divide it into the number of people participating
- Use a prompt or invite people to share what is on their mind or what they are working on

Listening exchanges can be easily incorporated at the beginning of meetings (like a check-in), in monthly meetings, in DEI meetings, etc.

The power of listening exchanges is cumulative. Giving people an opportunity to share about themselves and to listen to each other is a powerful way to foster relationships

between people because it helps us to get to know each other and build trust and cohesion over time.

Tool #3: Expressing Appreciation: take the time to verbally appreciate people for their work, their abilities, and their presence. Acts of service also go a long way to express appreciation (see next section for tips on how to offer the most effective help).

- Work on becoming a better listener, asking braver questions, and taking the time to research things you may not know that relate to the people you are trying to connect with.
 - Find out how to make people laugh and smile.
 - Commit to making connections with both people of color and white people, regardless of their politics or opinions. Whether you are a person of color or white person, you need to think about befriending white people, not just people of color, as part of your broader Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion work and strategy.
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Building Relationships

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion work is personal and requires us to build real, personal relationships with people.

In the United States we often use the value of privacy to justify patterns of disconnection or isolation. Challenge yourself to move towards people in a gradual and

respectful way. It's normal to have feelings of insecurity or uncertainty about how to develop closer relationships in your field of work but don't let that stop you.

Strong relationships create the safety and trust that are the basis for significant social and cultural changes. They allow us to talk about difficult things in an open and caring way that helps to diffuse everyone's fears and defensiveness. Having someone who we trust to support us makes it a lot easier for us to consider new ideas, change the way we do things, and take bigger risks.

- Create as many opportunities as possible to have meaningful conversations, whether individually or in groups. Much of building relationships actually hinges on learning more about people's life story, history, family, values, and identities.
- Focus on making relationships reciprocal. Ask for people's support and share your struggles with them. Model what it is like to be vulnerable and talk about your own life story, history, family, values, and preferred kinds of support.
- Learn how to support each person by asking/answering these questions:
 - ◆ What do they most want or need from you?
 - ◆ How do you recognize when they are struggling?
 - ◆ When is the best time to step in to help?
 - ◆ What kind of help works best for them?
- Develop emotional support skills for yourself as well as for others. Learn how to welcome your own feelings and release tension by talking, crying, laughing, etc. Learn how to help other people release their feelings and tension by talking, crying, laughing, etc. Practice encouraging people in a relaxed and confident way.

→ Invest in the openness and genuineness of each relationship. Recognize and appreciate people as often as possible. Find ways to ask for feedback about the quality of your relationships. Cultivate your ability to hear feedback without defensiveness. Practice openly apologizing when you make mistakes and ask how you can repair the situation or relationship.

Organizing Groups

In order to reverse patterns of disconnection we need a supportive and uplifting learning environment to restore our ability to understand, assist, and encourage each other, to experiment, to problem-solve, to fix mistakes, and to be persistent.

A powerful strategy to develop one such environment is a Support+Action Group – a recurring group where participants can exchange emotional care and work towards goals and action together.

Developing group-level facilitation and emotional support skills is an interesting challenge. Feelings of despair are a feature of the work to end racism. Racism as a system of structural disconnection and mistreatment will consistently generate fear, hopelessness, discouragement, confusion, conflict, even forgetfulness. Without building effective and ongoing support for ourselves it's hard to get very far.

- Set up recurring groups (monthly works well) to work towards shared goals and action steps.
- Learn how to facilitate lively, uplifting, and equitable meetings and events in general and for your Support+Action Group.

- Bring humor and lightness to the work. Laughing together is a great way to build stronger connections.
- Integrate mutual encouragement and specific support to help participants set and fulfill concrete goals.
- Practice tackling conflict and disagreements in an open and caring way.
- Develop leadership and facilitation opportunities for everyone in the group. Make space for people to learn to facilitate and to share new ideas out loud. Mentor and coach new leaders, particularly people with marginalized identities.

Advocating for Change

An established Support+Action group with 5-8 people with strong relationships who are committed to backing and supporting each other no matter how discouraging things get is an effective way to strategize and advocate for changes. Together you can think about organizational issues like policies, training, hiring processes, work culture, and leadership diversity.

- ❖ Check out this resource for more guidance on how to lead organizational-level Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion changes:

<https://c4disc.pubpub.org/antiracism-toolkit-for-organizations>

Concluding Thoughts

Our model of connection and relationship building to end racism works well to address lots of different Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion challenges.

With strong Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion-focused relationships and a Support+Action Group you can:

- Have a sounding board for navigating oppressive comments or interactions
- Practice and troubleshoot being an ally to colleagues or coworkers with marginalized identities
- Avoid paralysis by tackling feelings of discouragement or powerlessness
- Develop strategic plans for bigger organizational or industry-wide changes

Reflection Question: How would your work to end racism change by prioritizing building connections and relationships with people in your professional spaces?