Understanding Equity

RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP™ TOOLKIT

The journey of self-reflection often starts with a deeper understanding of how we fit into the world, but often fails to explore how the world is impacting and shaping our perceptions, our systems, and communities. We need to understand the forces at play that provide socially-constructed advantage and disadvantage to certain groups, perpetuating inequity and oppression.

In order to support equity in our institutions and communities, it's essential that we share a common language and understanding. This guide is meant to help define equity terms and concepts in order to help better prepare individuals to have conversations around them.

CONTENTS

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WHAT IS EQUITY?

Equity is about fairness or justice in the way people are treated. But what does that mean? What is fairness and justice and how do we achieve it?

In the context of this toolkit, we are defining equity as the point at which each of us gets **what we need to survive and thrive, including access to opportunity, resources, and support.**

UNPACKING EQUITY > EQUITY VS. EQUALITY

These terms are often used interchangeably, but they represent a very different approach to change. Both terms are related to a concept of fairness, but they have one key difference. Where **equality** refers to a sense of **fairness on the part of benefits** (everyone should receive the same care/services) **equity** refers to making sure that **all individuals end up at a fair outcome** (everyone should be given the care they need to be at their optimal health).

Equality

Everyone gets the same bicycle.

Equity

Everyone is able to use their bicycle.

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Equity works to address the needs of the entire community. Whereas charity is one directional, with the wealthy giving to "those less fortunate," equity is about everyone dismantling systems of oppression, **working together to transform the world**.

"If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together."

Lilla Watson

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SYSTEMS OF OPPRESSION

Equity is important because people do not all start out the same and therefore do not all have the same needs, perspectives, or experiences. Not only do individuals not start out from the same place, but **cycles of oppression** continue to advantage certain groups and disadvantage others, making it difficult to escape the cycle.

OPPRESSION | the systematic dominance over one or more social groups by another for its own benefit. This dominance is maintained through institutional control, ideological domination, marginalization, exploitation, violence, and the imposition of the dominant group's culture, values, and customs onto the oppressed group.

Oppression is different from discrimination, bias, prejudice, or bigotry because:

- It **exists throughout society —** found in our institutions (ex: organizations, government), and is also embedded within individuals and how they think/act.

- It is **restricting** — structural barriers (ex: school, infrastructure) significantly shape a person's life chances and sense of possibility in ways beyond an individual's control.

- It is **hierarchical** — dominant groups benefit (often in unconscious ways) from non-dominant groups not having the same opportunities.

- It is **intersectional** — issues are complex, interrelated, and overlapping.

There is also value in defining different groups facing oppression, which take the form of **"isms"** (classism, racism, sexism, ableism, and so on). No one form of oppression is the basis for all others; they are all inextricably connected to and reinforce one another. Racism is one of the most prevalent and destructive forms of oppression, both globally and specifically in the United States, but it is one of many types of oppression that are maintained in today's society.

As with identity, oppression is not strictly linear or binary. There are not simply those who are "dominant" and those who are "oppressed." Different aspects of our identity may give us advantage or disadvantage (ex: being a wealthy gay black cis-gendered male). In addition, individuals with complex identities (ex: being bi-racial) and individuals who are in close relationships with someone from oppressed groups (ex: being a parent with disabled child) may experience different levels of oppression and privilege depending on context.

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TYPES OF OPPRESSION > MULTIPLE DIMENSIONS

There are three aspects, or dimensions, to consider when thinking about a type of oppression:

1. AWARENESS | How aware are those benefiting from the oppression?

Conscious: the act of oppression is deliberate and known

Unconscious: the act of oppression is not understood or known

2. APPLICATION | How is the act of oppression being communicated?

Attitude: a value, belief, or idea (stereotypes, biases, etc.)

Behavior: an action, policy, or law (regulations, restrictions, etc.)

3. CONTEXT | At what level is this oppression occurring?

Individual Level

Internal: Occurs within individuals as private manifestations of oppression that reside inside minds, regardless of personal identity (both dominant and oppressed individuals).

Interpersonal: Occurs between individuals when private beliefs are brought into interaction with others.

Systemic Level

Institutional: Occurs within institutions or organizations as discriminatory treatment, unfair policies and practices, and inequitable opportunities and impacts.

Structural: Occurs broadly across culture and society. It's the cumulative and compounded effects of an array of factors that systematically privilege and disadvantage groups.
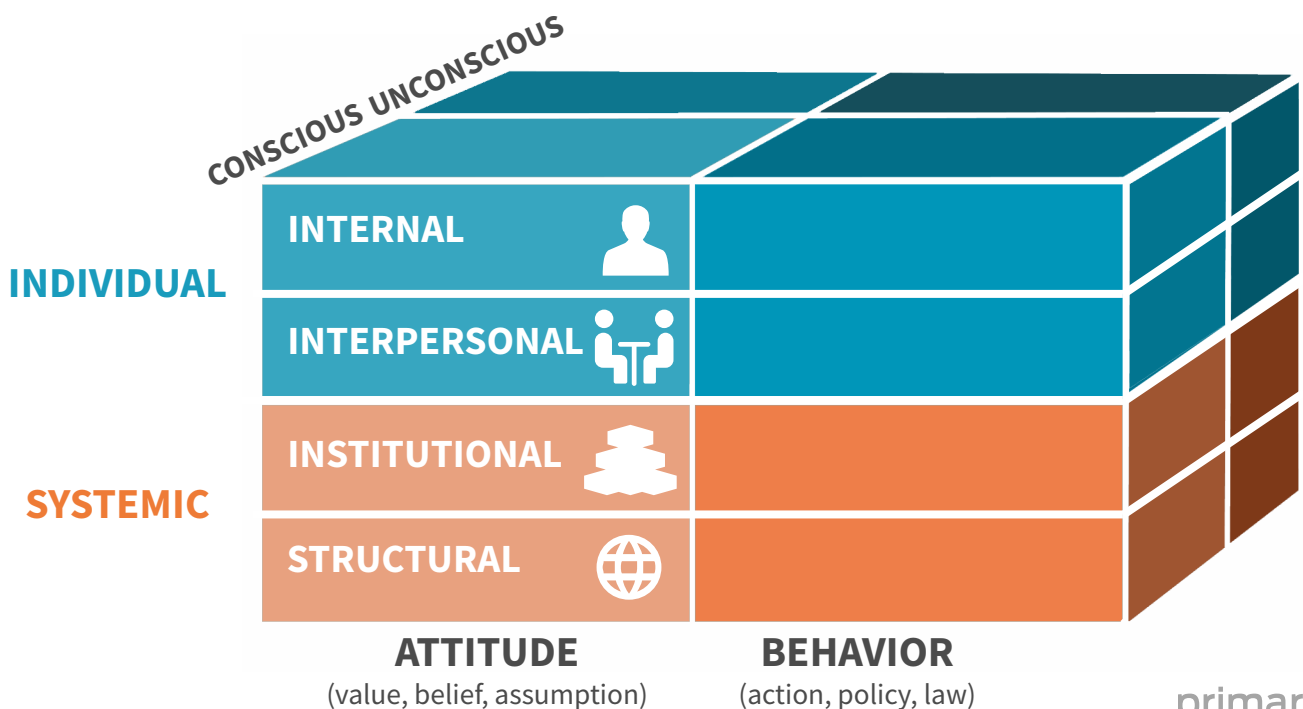
EXAMPLES > TYPES OF OPPRESSION

What does this actually look like in action? Let's look at a few examples:

DESCRIPTION	AWARENESS	APPLICATION	CONTEXT
Person's belief that men are better leaders because they are more rational and reasonable.	Conscious	Attitude (belief)	Internal
Person talking loudly when addressing a physically disabled person.	Unconscious	Behavior (action)	Interpersonal
A business not providing bereavement leave to a LGBTQ staff member when their partner dies.	Conscious	Behavior (policy)	Institutional
Tracking systems (AP, vocational, etc.) in public schools which produce long-term, material, discriminatory consequences for youth of color.	Unconscious	Attitude (value) and Behavior (policy)	Institutional and Structural

These are complex situations that involve many aspects of oppression, so they may not fit into one finite area. For example, while the tracking system itself may be part of an **institution** (public school), the implicit bias and prejudices (**internal** and **interpersonal**) of a college counselor at the school may contribute to who is put in a vocational track vs a pre-college track. The general belief that certain people are more suited to vocational or academic tracks, *and* that you can determine that through assessments, is part of a **structural** societal norm that we as a community ascribe to.
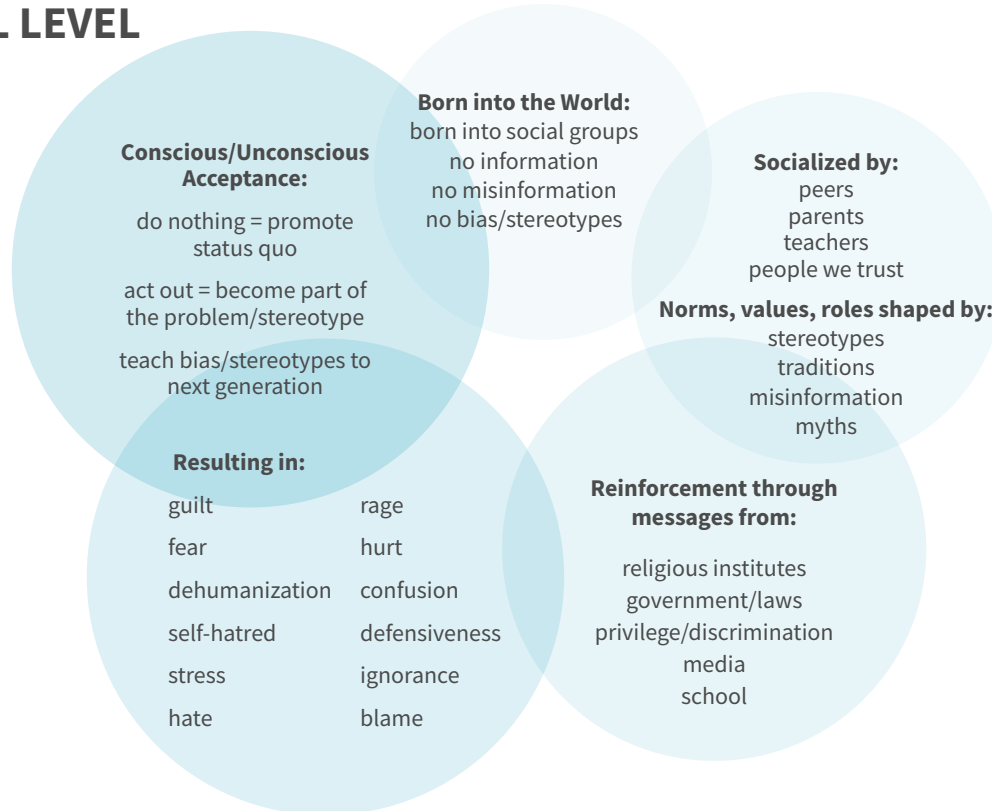
Now look at the next few examples and see if you can determine what types of oppression may be involved:

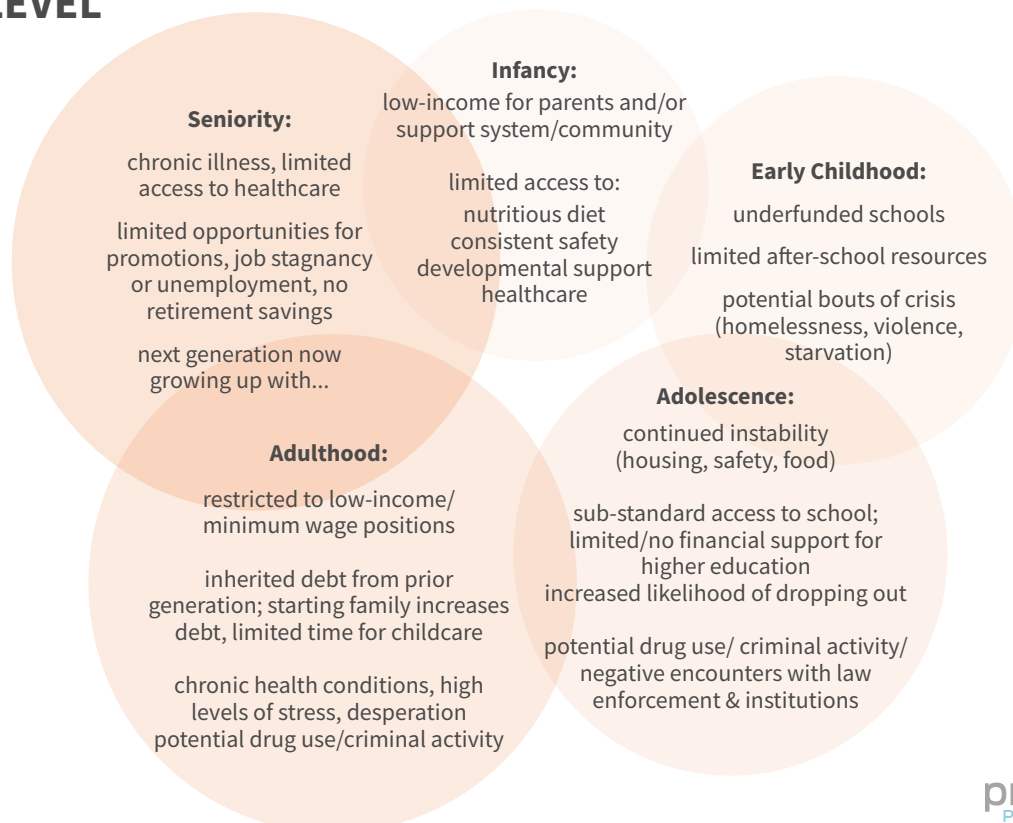| DESCRIPTION	AWARENESS	APPLICATION	CONTEXT
Multiple institutions/ federal policies which make it very difficult for LGBTQ individuals to adopt children.	_____	_____	_____
Woman clutching her purse tighter when passing a person of color on the street.	_____	_____	_____
Makeup, concealer, and band-aids with names like "flesh" or "nude" that are made for white skin.	_____	_____	_____
The common practice of building new commercial and residential buildings that are not accessible to those with mobility impairments.	_____	_____	_____
Research in New Jersey found that all races violate traffic laws at similar rates, but while people of color account for just 15% of drivers on the turnpike, blacks accounted for 42% of stops.	_____	_____	_____
Workplace schedules that mandate Christian holidays but require employees to use PTO or sick days for non-Christian holidays.	_____	_____	_____

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THE CYCLE OF SOCIALIZATION> REINFORCING OPPRESSION

Systems of oppression are so hard to disrupt because of the cycle of socialization we all experience. Below is an example of how the cycle of socialization reinforces classism over a prolonged period of time.

INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

Born into the World:
born into social groups
no information
no misinformation
no bias/stereotypes

Conscious/Unconscious Acceptance:

do nothing = promote status quo

act out = become part of the problem/stereotype

teach bias/stereotypes to next generation

Socialized by:
peers
parents
teachers
people we trust

Norms, values, roles shaped by:
stereotypes
traditions
misinformation
myths

Resulting in:

guilt	rage
fear	hurt
dehumanization	confusion
self-hatred	defensiveness
stress	ignorance
hate	blame

Reinforcement through messages from:

religious institutes
government/laws
privilege/discrimination
media
school

SYSTEMIC LEVEL

Infancy:
low-income for parents and/or support system/community

limited access to:
nutritious diet
consistent safety
developmental support
healthcare

Seniority:

chronic illness, limited access to healthcare

limited opportunities for promotions, job stagnancy or unemployment, no retirement savings

next generation now growing up with…

Early Childhood:

underfunded schools

limited after-school resources

potential bouts of crisis (homelessness, violence, starvation)

Adolescence:

continued instability (housing, safety, food)

sub-standard access to school; limited/no financial support for higher education
increased likelihood of dropping out

potential drug use/ criminal activity/ negative encounters with law enforcement & institutions

Adulthood:

restricted to low-income/ minimum wage positions

inherited debt from prior generation; starting family increases debt, limited time for childcare

chronic health conditions, high levels of stress, desperation potential drug use/criminal activity

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SYMBIOTIC CYCLES > WHY ADVANTAGE FUELS OPPRESSION

Perhaps one of the reasons cycles of oppression continue to persist is that the corresponding cycle of privilege is so appealing. As it feels terrible to be treated poorly unjustly, it simultaneously feels pleasant to be given unearned advantage and the "benefit of the doubt."

Just as targeted groups internalize oppression and may react against or live up to the stereotypes and misinformation learned, privileged groups use such stereotypes to justify their status, and this reinforces oppressive systems.

> When one is accustomed to privilege, equality feels like oppression.

In order to truly dismantle systems of oppression, those in dominant groups must be willing to relinquish their unearned privileges.

For those in dominant groups this could mean longer lines, more red-tape, increased police scrutiny, competition for jobs, or increased cost of goods. When accustomed to having these advantages, losing them can feel like "reverse discrimination," when in fact, it is simply a leveling of playing fields.

DISRUPTING THE CYCLE

So how do we interrupt cycles of oppression? Much of that depends on whether we are from a dominant group or a targeted one.

Those coming from cultures of power, and as such are groups advantaged by systems of oppression, have the ability to fight against these systems as allies. **When acting as an ally it's important to:**

- Learn about systems of oppression and the history that created it.
- Observe who has power and how it is being used in various contexts.
- Respect and acknowledge diversity of identities, cultures, and traditions.
- Create and support opportunities for power with those from oppressed communities to lead.
- Speak up against injustices you witness (don't expect that it is the responsibility of those experiencing injustice to speak out).

Those coming from targeted groups have to first overcome the internalized aspects of oppression they were socialized to accept. Paolo Freire referred to this as "conscientization", the awareness of the systems at play against them. **As a member of a targeted community**:

- Take opportunities to celebrate and take pride in your identities, cultures, and traditions.
- Work in coalitions with other oppressed communities.
- Speak up and share about injustices you have experienced.

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UNPACKING RACISM

RACISM = PREJUDICE + POWER

RACE A socially constructed way of grouping and identifying people, based on skin color and other apparent physical differences, which has no genetic or scientific basis. This social construct was created and used to justify social and economic oppression of People of Color by Whites.

RACISM A form of oppression based on the socially constructed concept of race that is used to the advantage of the dominant racial group (Whites) and the disadvantage of non-dominant racial groups through the use of institutional power and authority to support prejudices and enforce discriminatory behaviors in systemic ways with far-reaching outcomes and effects.

USING THE TERM WHITE SUPREMACY

It is important to distinguish between supremacist and supremacy. Rather than focus solely on the individual levels of racism which are harmful but isolated, it is necessary that we bring the conversation on racism to the systemic levels.

White Supremacy is a historically based, institutionally perpetuated **system** of exploitation and oppression of continents, nations, and people of color by white peoples for the purpose of maintaining and defending a system of wealth, power, and privilege. It is about policies, laws, cultural norms, and assumptions that continue to project white culture, values, and behaviors as somehow innately better than others.

Whether conscious or unconscious, system-wide belief of white supremacy has historically led to slavery, colonization, and genocide, and continues to encourage dehumanizing policies and laws around the world.

WHITE FRAGILITY

The privileged environment of racial dominance builds White expectations for racial comfort. The concept of "fragility" refers to a state occurring in White individuals in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive behaviors and emotions.

While there are many ways fragility manifests, there are two concepts rooted in most responses: **individualism** (ex: "not all men") where one anecdote or example is used to refute statistics or broader systemic issues; and **universalism** (ex: "all lives matter") where broad statements negate the lived reality for marginalized groups.

These two seemingly contradictory frameworks (we are all the same and all unique) are used to remove any blame for the impact of racism and require people of color to focus more energy on making sure white people feel comfortable than on the very real systemic challenges facing communities of color.

* These definitions and frameworks can be adapted and applied across all social identities and "isms."

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DEFINING COMMON TERMS

DOMINANT CULTURE/ CULTURE OF POWER

The dominant culture that is the most powerful, widespread, or influential within a social or institutional space. In this context, culture refers to expectations and standards related to language, values, rituals, and social customs. It is often so ubiquitous that it is almost invisible; behavior which is viewed as "normal."

CULTURAL IMPERIALISM

The systemic wide-spread practice of promoting a more powerful culture over another culture by conveying the idea that behaviors and values are "better" or more "normal" than those from another community.

CULTURAL ASSIMILATION

A process by which members of an ethnic minority group lose or are expected to give up cultural characteristics that distinguish them from the dominant cultural group in order to take on the cultural characteristics of another group.

SOCIAL IDENTITIES

Defined categories or identities that are socially constructed, *but very real,* which create barriers/advantages for certain groups (ex: race, gender, sexual orientation, class, primary language, etc.).

INTERSECTIONALITY

The idea that various biological, social, and cultural identities — including gender, race, class, and ethnicity — interact and impact one another, towards greater systematic social inequality.

CODE-SWITCHING

The ability to shift between multiple customs, languages, or behaviors depending on a given context. It is used by those from a non-dominant culture to adapt to expectations to conform to the customs of the dominant culture.

PRIVILEGE/ OPPRESSION

Privilege is a special unearned advantage, immunity, permission, right, or benefit granted to or enjoyed by an individual because of their class, caste, gender, or racial/ethnic group. Oppression is the result of the use of institutional privilege and power, wherein one person or group benefits at the expense of another.

SOCIAL ADVANTAGE/ DISADVANTAGE

Unearned advantages or disadvantages afforded to individuals based on social identity categories, not on personal merit or accomplishment.

MARGINALIZATION

The process in which groups of people are excluded from making decisions and positions of power. Marginalization is often used in an economic or political sense to refer to the rendering of an individual, an ethnic or national group, or a nation-state powerless by a more powerful individual.

EXPLOITATION

The unjust power relations when certain individuals' or communities' energies and capacities are controlled by, and appropriated for the benefit of others. Includes limiting or restricting access to education, capital, or opportunities.

DISCRIMINATION

The unequal treatment of members of various groups based on race, gender, social class, sexual orientation, physical ability, religion, and other social identity categories.

PREJUDICE

A prejudgment or unjustifiable, and usually negative, attitude of one type of individual or groups toward another group and its members.

XENOPHOBIA

A culturally based fear of outsiders. Xenophobia has often been associated with the hostile reception given to those who immigrate into societies and communities.

MICRO-AGGRESSIONS

Brief and commonplace verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative slights and insults toward marginalized groups.

IMPLICIT BIAS

Any unconsciously-held set of associations, attitudes, or stereotypes about a social group that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions either positively or negatively.

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APPLICATION: WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR HEALTHCARE?

OPERATE FROM INCLUSIVITY | We have to solve problems together, involving all stakeholders in decision-making and reform strategies. It requires that we engage and learn from one another, co-constructing ideas that will ultimately transform our system. In this context, it means that extra efforts will be needed to include some voices (from non-dominant and oppressed cultures) more than others (dominant culture).

EXAMINE UNDERLYING CAUSES | Through examining the social determinants of health and what health inequities are present in society, we can better understand causes of illnesses and thus determine more effective treatment or prevention for populations. Health equity is a lens to view challenges in a new light — a tool to expand options in healthcare to include more comprehensive and systemic approaches to health.

CHALLENGE ASSUMPTIONS | We must constantly question our own assumptions, roles, and biases in order to provide the best care possible for our communities. This means developing our curiosity and humility, establishing a constant growth mindset, and willingness to see new perspectives.

"Authentic help means that all who are involved help each other mutually, growing together in the common effort to understand the reality they seek to transform."

Paulo Freire

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QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

WHAT BEHAVIORS OR VALUES DOES HEALTHCARE PRIORITIZE?

What are the values I've internalized? (ex: being outcome-oriented and data-driven, valuing speed and efficiency, use of analytical problem solving). How are these related to the dominant culture? Are there other values from different cultures that offer important perspectives? How might these behaviors or values impact my team and how we work together?

HOW AM I POSITIONED AS A LEADER?

Am I taking a leadership role or opportunity that a lot of people with my identity have access to and frequently occupy? If so, how can I leverage that position to extend the opportunity to another individual who may not have equal access to it?

AM I DOING THINGS FOR PEOPLE, OR DOING THINGS WITH THEM?

As a change-maker in healthcare, am I joining ongoing work in the issue? Or am I starting a new initiative and asking others to join me? If the latter, how much time have I spent investigating others in the community who are already doing that work? Why am I assuming a leadership role, and is there an opportunity to support and create space for others?

WHAT ASSUMPTIONS AM I MAKING ABOUT MY PATIENTS?

What biases or assumptions do I have about certain behaviors or groups? Does this impact how I am working with this patient or their family? How might systems of oppression be contributing to the situation?

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DiAngelo, R. White Fragility. International Journal of Critical Pedagogy. 2012. Vol 3 (3) pp 54-70

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ADDITIONAL PCP RESOURCES

To learn more about defining your role and the power dynamics within systems and communities, see our **Identity & Impact Toolkit.**

Our **Health Equity Toolkit** introduces concepts around equity in healthcare, including the social determinants of health and how our healthcare systems contribute to and combat these challenges.

ABOUT RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP™

Relational Leadership™ is a healthcare leadership competency model built upon decades of social psychology research into people, their motivations, how they learn and work, and the unique ways in which they influence and are influenced by others when in groups. It is ultimately a strategy to work together to achieve better results, grounded in the premise that all team members should grow and develop as leaders, working together interdependently towards a common vision. Each of the four Relational Leadership™ domains — Manage Self, Foster Teamwork, Coach & Develop, and Accelerate Change — operate on the individual, interpersonal, institutional, and structural levels to change how we approach learning, work, and collaboration.

COMPLETE LIST OF RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP TOOLKITS

Relational Leadership™ Framework	Conflict Transformation Toolkit	Leadership Transitions Toolkit
Team Starter Kit	Teaming Toolkit	Active Listening Toolkit
Team & Project Launch Toolkit	Meeting Management Toolkit	Coaching Toolkit
Narrative Leadership Toolkit	Team Building Toolkit	Training Toolkit
Identity Toolkit	Collaborative Decision Making Toolkit	Change Framework Toolkit
Equity Toolkit	Facilitation Toolkit	Decision Makers Toolkit
Resilience Toolkit	Team Effectiveness Toolkit	

ADVOCACY PROJECT RESOURCES

Communications Strategy	Community Convening	Action Planning
Community Inventory	Project Sustainability	Health Equity & Social Determinants of Health

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