

July ARTI newsletter
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Keepers of the Gate

In anti-racism workshops hosted by ARTI, leaders ask members of the group to raise their hands if they are a “gatekeeper.” Very few hands go up.

When asked why, people usually give examples of malicious gatekeepers: those who have power over others and misuse it through exclusion, blocking access and opportunity, and withholding resources. No one in the room will admit this is their job!

The leaders then ask whether any participants are parents who make decisions on behalf of their children, and hands go up.

Going further, the leaders ask: Are they ever asked to speak on behalf of others in their community or in their work? Perhaps they are a project leader, in a position to decide which tools and resources team-members will need to complete a task and which are not; a grant-writer speaking on behalf of their community by choosing what to say about the people they plan to serve; a committee member deciding what information to pass on or withhold from co-workers.

More hands go up.

Workshop participants begin to see that gatekeeping isn’t necessarily bad or good; we all have the power to influence outcomes in our own small spheres of influence.

The truth is that as gatekeepers, we usually uphold the core values of the institutions we belong to: families, peer groups, workplaces.

When it comes to identifying and dismantling racism, workshop participants learn that a gatekeeper’s allegiance to these core values plays out as one of the many ways in which discriminatory, racist practices and policies can become entrenched and institutionalized. By making biased decisions – whether the bias is conscious or unconscious – gatekeepers have the power to exclude others from equal participation and just treatment, and perpetuate racist practices.

On the bright side, gatekeepers can be change agents.

This kind of gatekeeper, often referred to as a “liberated gatekeeper”, knows that a toxic, racist environment will result if discriminatory gatekeeping is not called out and dismantled. This kind of gatekeeper steps in and will not remain silent on the issue. Allies are welcome in this work, especially those not from the demographic which is the target of the toxic behavior. This

kind of gatekeeper has developed vision “through the lens of race” and applies that vision in all they do.

And how does one develop vision through the lens of race? A great place to start is with the principles shared by the People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond (www.pisab.org) and their co-founders, Ron Chisom and Jim Dunn:

- Understand racism
- Engage in culture sharing
- Learn from history
- Analyze power
- Build support networks: “nets that work”
- Maintain accountability to those you serve

The first principle is the key to the rest. While racism is very real, human classification by race has no basis in biology, and in fact was created by people, in part to make race-based gatekeeping possible.

We know that since it was people who made up the specious concept of separate races, the resulting racism can be ‘undone’ by people, as well.

A liberated gatekeeper, operating with a view through the lens of race, becomes aware of the power they hold, and works to be a change agent by sharing power, building coalitions, and disrupting toxic situations.