

# choice

the magazine of professional coaching



From  
*Inclusion* to

## BELONGING

Why DEI isn't enough



# *From Inclusion to* **BELONGING**

## **Why DEI isn't enough**

How can you coach leaders for cultural competency? What does allyship look like for a coach? For a client? Why does talking about anti-racism, social injustice and inequality have to be "messy and uncomfortable"? Where and how does racism show up in your coaching and in the life of your client? What is the psychology of racism? How can we as coaches support healing, belonging and racial equity? Join us as we explore why Diversity, Equity & Inclusion (DEI) aren't enough.

# RACISM



## Owning or denying our rank and power

By Gavin Shaskolsky, BSc, LLB, CCP

I am a white, privileged, Jewish male on a committed journey of owning my racism, taking accountability for my behavior and recognizing when I slip into racist thoughts, feelings and actions. I have lived most of my life in South Africa, with its brutal, inhumane Apartheid regime. I journeyed into the new dawn of the Rainbow nation to celebrate diversity and provide equality to all, yet its entrenched roots of systemic and institutionalized racism, police brutality and unconscious white privilege live on.

I still benefit from these forms of racism today. Mine is an ongoing, committed quest to acknowledge how often I slip into unconscious blindness, which is part my unearned rank and power of being white.

Exploring our relationship to our rank is central to leading effectively and humanely in the world. Rank is the experience of power or powerlessness which is earned or unearned. Those who have rank are usually unaware of it – they live their lives in mainstream roles – while those who don't have rank (i.e. marginal roles) are attuned to the poor use of rank by the mainstream and often feel powerless.

This rank unconsciousness negatively harms relationships, organizations and environments. If I deny, ignore or misuse my rank, then I directly contribute to injustice, inequality, and the very root structure of racism in society. It is not something I can choose to be neutral about. I either have rank, acknowledge it and work to make a more just society, free from racism, or I perpetuate the injustice and trauma of the past through my rank and power blindness. There is no room to sit on the fence. There is no fence! I am either actively committed to growing and learning about my rank and how to use it for the greater good or I am wandering around with unconscious rank hurting, harming and retraumatizing people who live with marginal ranks.

There are four types of rank: two external (social and structural) relating to how society is structured and two internal (psychological and spiritual) relating to our internal landscape.

Social rank reflects how much power society bestows on me, such as race, gender, education, religion, etc. By virtue of being a white heterosexual male, I am handed ranks from society that I have not earned, while a Black, gay woman is much more vulnerable and marginalized purely based on social rank.

Structural rank bestows power on institutions and people who enforce their policies, procedures and rules. Structural rank is often given to those who have social rank, resulting in white men usually setting policy and making decisions. We need only look at the proportion of white men leading governments, companies, lobby groups and industries to recognize this insidious interrelationship. Structural rank can be difficult to engage with or dismantle given the powerful hidden ranks that pull the strings behind the scenes.

Psychological rank refers to how we feel about ourselves and our psychological wellbeing. We see that being raised in a loving, caring home provides more unearned psychological rank and self-esteem than being brought up in an abusive home with parents who trample the child's psychological safety and wellbeing into the ground daily.

## **I either have rank, acknowledge it and work to make a more just society, free from racism, or I perpetuate the injustice and trauma of the past through my rank and power blindness.**

Similarly, if we have suffered from institutionalized racism, we are more likely to internally marginalize and retraumatize ourselves even when the abuser is no longer around. White people, who have unearned rank and who have benefitted from institutionalized racism, have been taught consciously and unconsciously that they are superior to Black people, which results in an internal confidence and sense of wellbeing usually being higher than those of Black people. Therefore, activist leaders like Steve Biko and Malcolm X emphasized Black people growing a healthy Black consciousness from within to overcome the racist system.

Spiritual rank refers to our connection to something greater than ourselves, something that gives our lives greater meaning and purpose. People often connect to spiritual rank through religious practice, their faith, or a commitment to spiritual teachings that shape their character, values and how they lead themselves and others.

People with spiritual rank such as Nelson Mandela, Mother Theresa, Harriet Tubman and Martin Luther King found deeper spiritual connection in order to rise above circumstances and injustice, ultimately helping to bring about change. While these are examples of famous leaders, we all know and recognize people who have spiritual rank by their presence, the way they carry themselves and the light that shines in their eyes.

As coaches, the more awareness we have of our rank and power, the more effectively we can work with it within ourselves and our client systems. This orientation sharpens awareness and deepens the understanding we bring as coaches. After all, rank and power are an orientation rather than a coaching model; an orientation that is transferable and relatable for any client, model or context.

Here are a few questions you can use and share with your clients:

1. What ethnic group do I belong to? What groups do others associate me with? What is my nationality, race, gender, age, physical condition, religion, background, class etc.
2. What legal privileges or advantages do I feel deprived of because of my identity? What psychological challenges do I have because of my identity?
3. What privileges and/or rank relate to my identity?
4. How can I celebrate my social, structural, psychological and spiritual privileges?
5. How am I using my most powerful privileges?
6. How can I use my rank to change my relationships, my family, my community, my world?

Turning our attention to anti-Black racism and systemic violence in South Africa and America, it is critical to consider our reactions to the brutal murders of Collins Khoza and George Floyd, the racist behavior of Amy Cooper in Central Park, New York City, and countless other examples from the past and present. It's important to reflect on how rank perpetuates and entrenches reactions across a spectrum so that we move away from blaming the looters, defending the right wing, attacking politicians, or consenting through silence.

It's vital to look in the mirror, to own our ranks and acknowledge, listen and learn from those who have been oppressed and abused for centuries, so we can create a more inclusive and just society for all. Only then will the rotting seeds of racism be uprooted and be replaced by the heartbeat of understanding, respect, and love for all. Only then will we move more consciously and deliberately towards celebrating the WE of our collective humanity in the spirit of Ubuntu.

The time to own our rank and power has come. The time to act is now. ●