

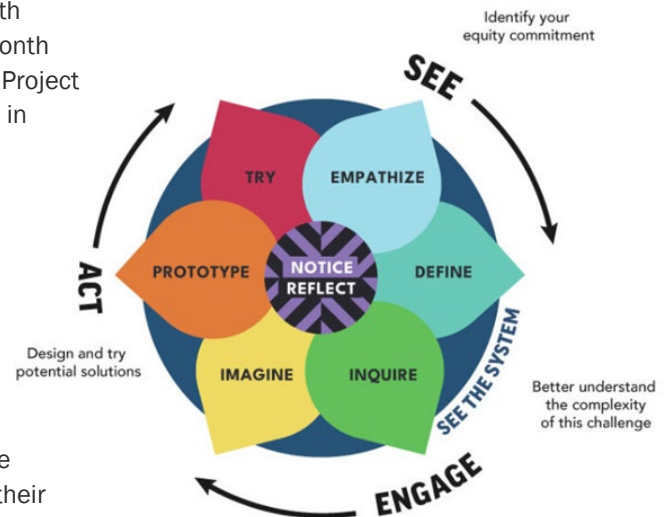
REDI KC Community of Practice

January 2023

Overview of the Community of Practice

The Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation supports organizations in Kansas City (KC) to provide residents with the opportunity to achieve economic stability, mobility, and prosperity regardless of race, gender, or geography. As part of this work, the Kauffman Foundation was interested in cultivating a shared understanding of racial equity, diversity, and inclusion (REDI) amongst those who serve Kansas City. From Spring 2021 through Fall 2022, the Kauffman Foundation brought together 14 organizations across issue areas, along with members of the Kauffman Foundation's own staff, for an 18-month Community of Practice (CoP). Facilitated by the National Equity Project (NEP), the community of practice aimed to support participants in critically examining racial equity in their personal lives, at their organizations, and collectively across Kansas City through monthly facilitated sessions.

The guiding framework for the community of practice was the Liberatory Design Framework, an approach developed by NEP for addressing equity challenges in complex systems through a design lens (see figure to the right). Through the CoP, participants were invited to **see** and understand the history and effects of racial oppression in Kansas City, **engage** with one another to better understand these challenges, and **act** within their own organizations and together by designing and trying potential solutions.



Throughout this process, Engage R+D, an evaluation and learning firm, conducted surveys and interviews with CoP members, observed a sample of CoP meetings, and hosted a series of learning sessions to help participants document and reflect on their experiences. The evaluation included participatory elements: through the learning sessions, CoP members reflected on data and themes that surfaced through the evaluation, made sense of them together, and discussed what was needed going forward. In the final learning session, participants were guided to co-write the story of the community of practice and developed the headlines to frame each section of this brief.

Using this Brief

This brief shares learnings from the community of practice journey told through quotes and insight from participants. It is organized following the Liberatory Design Framework, exploring how participants used the CoP to see, engage, and act in service of racial equity. Learning across each of the stages is organized in the following way:

- **Headings** in each section were developed by participants as they reviewed quotes and key themes from the data collection.
- **The main body text** gives an overview of the activities and outcomes of the CoP.
- **The blue boxes** on each page are participant reflections on the value and inherent tensions of equity work. In equity work, we may have competing values that are in tension with one another. It is important to be aware of this, and like a guitar string, find the proper tension.
- **The bottom of each section** includes additional resources and evaluation data.

“If a guitar string is wound too slack, it buzzes and makes no note. If it’s wound too tight, it’ll snap. Either way, no music. There is a proper tension that makes the string sing. We can’t really avoid tension; we can only find the proper tension.”

- Author Austin Kleon on creative tensions

The brief is designed to provide a reminder of the work for those who participated in the CoP, a tool for sharing the experience with others, and insights for those interested in charting similar journeys. It concludes with key takeaways for those wishing to continue this work.



See: Making Visible What is Unseen

Participants found that they developed a shared understanding of racial equity, history, and context:

“It was really valuable to revisit the history of racism and even learn about things that had specifically happened in the Kansas City area.”

“I don’t know if I would have heard this anywhere else. It was safe, and it was an eye-opening moment”

*“I didn’t know so much of **the history of our country**. It was incredibly powerful to hear those things and to know them now.”*

*“It has enriched my life personally. I learned, I grew, **I actually have a renewed sense of hope.**”*

But some also reflected on how this process took more time than they’d hoped or expected:

*“I felt like we spent much of our time setting down the foundation for that shared experience. **Nothing ever moves as fast as you wish it would.**”*

In the first four sessions of the CoP, the content largely focused on building a collective understanding of racial equity, including the history of race relations in Kansas City, an understanding of structural systems that perpetuate inequities, and ideas for building more just systems. Between sessions, participants read articles from authors such as John A. Powell and Peggy McIntosh. Through Heather McGhee’s book *The Sum of Us*, they discussed concepts such as targeted universalism—the idea that we can set universal goals and employ targeted strategies for particular segments of the population so that all may reach those goals. In *Emergent Strategy*, by adrienne maree brown, the group explored leadership in a changing world. (See links to readings, below.)

Participants described this experience as a chance to “level set” and develop a common language and concepts for discussing racial equity, regardless of their background. Some reported that they learned important history for the first time, while others described their experience as an opportunity to engage with the concepts in community with others from Kansas City. However, there were also tensions in this work. A common reflection was that this phase of the CoP took time, and that it was not always clear where the group was heading. Others noted, however, that equity work is a journey. As one participant said, “If we already had the playbook, then it would be easy enough to just do X, Y, and Z.” They reflected that this experience felt more like a journey to discovering what was needed than following a set playbook.

As a result of the see stage of the CoP, participants reported engaging in self-reflection and growth. In the CoP and reflection sessions, they explored ways they have experienced unearned advantages and disadvantages and how they may need to show up to create a more equitable Kansas City. “It pulls back the curtains a little bit—it makes me think about who I am, where I’ve been helped and where I’ve been challenged and to try to start to better see other people’s perspectives,” reflected one participant on recognizing their privilege as a white person hearing the perspectives of people of color.

Key Concepts and Readings

1. **Race and Systemic Awareness in Kansas City**
 - [Toward a Structural Racism Framework](#) by Andrew Grant-Thomas and John A. Powell
 - [Race, Place, and Opportunity](#) by John A. Powell
2. **Systems of Unearned Advantage & Disadvantage and Belonging**
 - [White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack](#) by Peggy McIntosh
 - [Poverty and Race through a Belongingness Lens](#) by John A. Powell
3. **Targeted Universalism**
 - [The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together](#) by Heather McGhee
 - [Targeted Universalism Primer](#) by John A. Powell, Stephen Menendian, and Wendy Ake
 - PBL Works Video: [Curb Cut](#)
4. **Finding Our Purpose, the Impact We Seek to Have, and the Change We Are After**
 - [Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds](#) by adrienne maree brown

Engage: Drawing Strength from Shared Community



As participants engaged with key concepts, they also engaged with one another. Throughout the CoP, NEP facilitated intentional activities to help participants listen to one another through constructivist listening exercises, share their equity challenges in consultancies and panels, and reflect together in break-out groups. In addition to the Liberatory Design Framework, NEP introduced twelve Liberatory “mindsets” that can be helpful in designing for equity and engaging with one another, including practicing self-awareness, seeking collaboration, and working through fear and discomfort (see below for how participants were using some of these mindsets a year into the CoP). By engaging with one another, participants were encouraged to better understand the complexities of this work from multiple perspectives and work together to design for equity. These activities and tools could also be used by participants to engage others at their organizations in this work.

Most participants noted that the opportunity to connect with other leaders in Kansas City was one of the most valuable aspects of the CoP. They valued the opportunity to have deep and meaningful conversations about racial equity and hear multiple perspectives. Many also appreciated the camaraderie of working with others who share a similar commitment and made connections that they anticipated would continue beyond the CoP. As the group built an intentional community, however, it also struggled with turnover—while early sessions had an attendance of about 50 people, later sessions had about 30 participants. The turnover was for a variety of reasons. Some organizations hired new staff or had employees move on. Some were not able to prioritize the CoP or their organization’s equity work and stopped participating. A few people left their organizations because they didn’t see eye-to-eye on equity issues. Some of the members who remained noted that this turnover made it more difficult to maintain a cohesive community that could draw on shared knowledge and experiences to move forward with the work.

In the final learning session, participants shared commitments to one another, including to “listen fully, advocate, and influence where I can,” “be more vulnerable and courageous in my leadership,” and “give myself the time to grieve and heal in order to show up to my fullest potential and authentic self.”

Through the intentional community of the CoP, participants said they learned from and motivated one another.

“Some of the techniques NEP used cause you to really **stop and listen and engage.**”

“Every month we had **sustained, serious, and direct conversations** about racism. You cannot underestimate the power of that.”

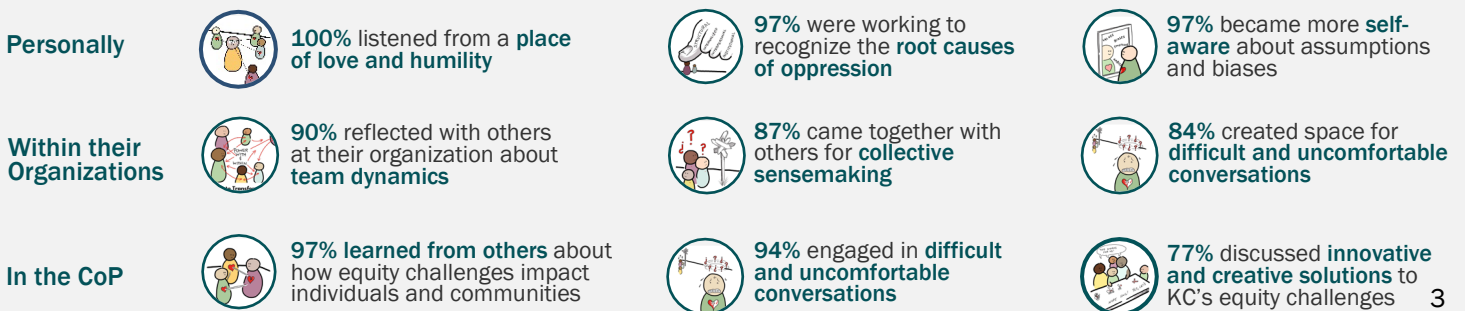
“Learning about each other’s problems of practice has been **eye-opening**. We are meeting people from all over the city and learning more about what these organizations do.”

“It’s easy to feel really alone in this work. It was important to know there were **other people passionate about it**”

Yet many noted that turnover can be a challenge for community cohesion:

“If you have somebody who finds a new job, is their spot backfilled? And they had all that knowledge and experience and they’re no longer in the group. That starts to **chip away at how effective the conversations are.**”

Active Mindsets: As part of the Liberatory Design framework, participants explored various “mindsets” that can be helpful in engaging with one another and designing for equity. The survey results below describe the top ways these mindsets were showing up in participants’ personal, organizational, and collective equity work a year into the CoP. A full description of the liberatory mindsets can be found [here](#).





Act: Doubling Down on Courage

Participants reported that the CoP kept their REDI goals at the forefront and allowed them to think in new ways:

*“[The CoP] gives you backbone to the idea... that **this is the right thing to do** and to not just let it peter out.”*

*“A deeper understanding of the principles in all of these conversations has really helped me **focus more clearly** for our strategic planning process.”*

*“I can't attribute causation necessarily to the CoP... but I do feel confident in being able to say **it kept [equity goals] top of mind.**”*

*“The conversations in the CoP have helped us **evolve** some of those things that we already had in place.”*

*“Nowadays [incorporating **DEI**] is a **standard or normal.** We normalize that every committee, every event, there needs to be diversity in it.”*

The act stage of the Liberatory Design Framework focuses on prototyping and trying new ideas to promote equity. In the second half of the community of practice, participants were encouraged to act both in their organizations and collectively with others in the CoP. Each organization was offered coaching from NEP, and members participated in CoP discussions to support this work.

Over the course of the 18-month CoP, about half of participating organizations reported making progress on their REDI goals. These participants shared how the dedicated time during the CoP, the Liberatory Design concepts, and the exchange of ideas with other participants helped focus and grow their organizational equity work. Organizations took on several equity efforts, ranging from promoting belonging in their hiring practices and organizational culture to engaging with staff and board members on training and strategic planning. Participants who felt their organizations made less progress on their equity goals often reported a lack of buy-in or low engagement from leadership, or that they entered the CoP without having first made an organizational commitment to furthering their equity work.

Throughout the CoP, participants also wrestled with how to act collectively to address equity challenges across Kansas City. They shared different ideas for what to work on and concerns about how their organization could best contribute and work across sectors. For example, the group began working on a public statement and preamble designed to demonstrate their commitment to organizational and collective REDI efforts. Ultimately, the CoP concluded before participants solidified around a plan of action, though several were interested in continuing to meet. The box below contains participants' thoughts on what might be needed for collective action, as well as the tensions the CoP faced.

What is needed for collective action?

Leadership

“If we want to really have an impact on the community, it takes good organization and **it takes dedicated and passionate organizations.**”

Support

“[Organizations] are worried about taking a stand because they're worried about offending their donors. [They need someone to] **cheerlead and inspire confidence** that there would be support to help them do that.”

Capacity

“It takes resources and authority to commit an organization to things that **cost money and time...** The actions and steps should be from people who are living within those broken systems.”

Tensions:

“Whose responsibility was that? The most challenging thing about this Community of Practice is **no one person is assigned responsibility for making movement.**”

“If we're depending on Kauffman to always fund these things, I think that's an **unfair burden.** We need to really look at where the interest is and how it's being developed in Kansas City and start tapping into those.”

“[Nonprofits] **don't have enough time,** they don't have enough **money,** they don't have enough **people** and they have way too big a job to do as it is.”

Key Takeaways

Set during a global pandemic and time of racial justice re-awakening, this journey was not easy. There were tensions. There were difficult conversations. But the journey was also filled with hope, deep awareness, learning, and connection that deserve to be celebrated as part of transformative work. In designing for equity, participants worked together to push themselves in new ways and develop new modes and mindsets. Below are some key takeaways from this work for those considering a similar journey.

Key Takeaways for Participants

Below are key takeaways for those considering joining a racial equity-focused community of practice.

“Transformation doesn't happen in a linear way... It happens in cycles, convergences, explosions... We can realize that we are in iterative cycles, and we can keep asking ourselves — how do I learn from this?”

- adrienne maree brown

- **Make an explicit commitment to equity.** Organizations who said they had made an explicit commitment to REDI work prior to joining the CoP and who had buy-in from senior leadership throughout the process were much more likely to report making progress on their REDI goals. Those considering joining a racial equity community of practice should think about how CoP work will be integrated with internal efforts, get buy-in from participating staff, and make a plan for how to involve key decision-makers in the process.
- **Recognize that seeing takes time.** While many entered the community of practice eager to take action, the first months were spent on slowing down, noticing, and reflecting. NEP emphasized that taking time to understand inequities and build relationships with other participants was crucial for disrupting habits that can perpetuate inequities in actions. By *seeing* and *engaging* with one another, CoP participants built common ground and a new understanding that prepared them for action. Furthermore, the cyclical and iterative nature of equity work often calls for seeing and engaging throughout the process, even as participants move to *action*.

Key Takeaways for CoP Hosts

There are many ways to structure a community of practice. One common model is for a funder or intermediary organization to host the CoP by laying the groundwork for the effort, providing or securing funding, and selecting facilitators and participants. In the case of this community of practice, the Kauffman Foundation was both a host and a participant. Below are key takeaways for those looking to host a community of practice.

- **Consider a process for re-enrollment.** Over the course of the 18-month journey, the CoP experienced staff turnover and saw some organizations become disengaged. Rather than enrolling all participants in a single journey, communities of practice may consider a process for asking members to periodically re-enroll or confirm their commitment with opportunities to join, continue on, or bow out as the work transitions to each new phase. Intentional supports for onboarding and transitions could help maintain group cohesion throughout.
- **Provide thought partnership.** Equity work can be difficult, and CoP participants will necessarily be confronted with challenges such as how to engage leadership, bring back what they're learning to their organization, and focus their efforts to act collectively. With their unique knowledge of the context, CoP hosts can support participants and facilitators by sharing their own ideas and experiences to help participants navigate these complex challenges. This can include setting up additional support groups and learning opportunities, probing the group about a given direction, or reaching out to support individual participants.
- **Be a cheerleader.** Equity work can also be disruptive as organizations try out new ways of working. When hosting CoPs, funders in particular can use their power in the broader ecosystem to elevate the work of the group. This could include championing the value of this work to other funders and helping members of the CoP tell its story. When possible, funders can also step in to provide monetary and non-monetary support to encourage experimentation and new ways of working.