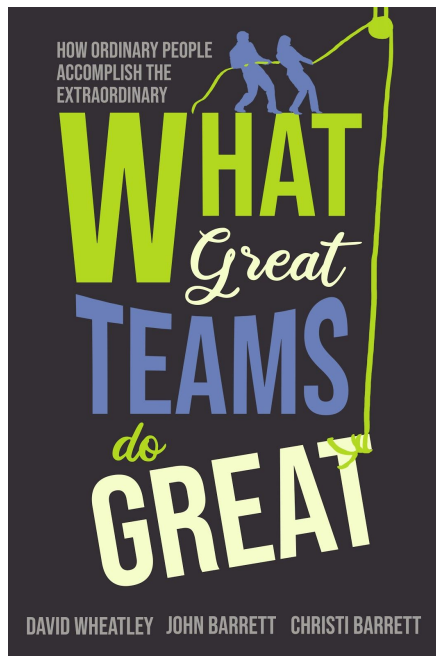


HUMANERGY

# WHAT GREAT TEAMS DO GREAT RACE AND THE POWER DYNAMIC

By David Wheatley and Christi Barrett

---



## Introduction

*What Great Teams Do Great* is both a book and a proven model that describes how high performing teams are successful. This paper is not intended to rewrite the book, however is a supplement to amplify its core principles through the lens of racial dynamics. Please read the book first, which is available at all bookstores.

This supplement to the *What Great Teams Do Great* book is centered around the United States, though other countries have similar cultural frameworks when it comes to race, power and leadership.

It should be noted that this article is written by two people who identify as white, whose careers and life experiences have largely been within the context of white culture described herein. We introduce a number of topics very briefly and encourage you to begin (or continue) learning and listening. We have by no means arrived at the end of our own journeys of deeper understanding about racial conditioning, white supremacy culture and how best to be an ally for individuals and groups facing oppression and trauma.

As many thinkers have said (though it's thought to be originally part of the Talmud), "We see the world not as it is, but as we are." Let's begin to peel back the impact of who we are as it relates to race, supervision, teamwork and the power dynamics.

---

---

## Acknowledgments

The authors extend many thanks to the EDI (Equity, Diversity and Inclusion) professionals who reviewed this work and gave valuable feedback and input: Nakia Baylis, Priscilla Archangel, Carlos Rangel and Kenneth Ponds.

## The Power Dynamic

When at school, the threat of being summoned to the principal's office was terrifying. It didn't matter if we knew we had not done anything wrong; we still sweated it out and entered the room looking nervous and guilty.

As leaders we have the same effect on our direct reports. This power dynamic isn't obvious to the leader, but always apparent to the subordinate. The higher up the organizational chain, the more the power dynamic is in play.

When we factor race into this, the power dynamic is often amplified. In the same way that a black man may be more nervous when stopped by police than a white man, the power dynamic of supervision can have a similar impact. It is incumbent on all leaders to dive into understanding these dynamics at play.

## Why Race Matters in Supervision

It has been said that race no longer matters (or should not matter) in terms of how persons relate to one another. However, to ignore race in the United States, for example, is to reject the impact of the organization's culture.

"Culture refers to the knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relations, concepts of the universe, and material objects and possessions acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving.<sup>1</sup>" While it may be the wish of some people to ignore the organization's and its people's culture(s) when it comes to their work with others, this represents blindly assuming that we act entirely of free will and are not impacted at all by this collective impact.

---

Think about a person (Pat) who lives in the United States throughout their lifetime. Pat absorbs key messages about what it means to be American, like how to greet others (e.g. handshake), what to eat, and how to behave with loved ones, etc<sup>2</sup>. Pat picks up other information too. Some of this is about race, the nature of different groups and how those groups interact with one another.

Pat lives in a culture that is determined largely by the dominant group. In the United States, this dominant group is white people.

The context of culture as it relates to race is important to all aspects of teamwork, and plays out in supervisory situations as well. We will examine some of the power dynamics of the supervisor/supervisee relationship and examine them through the lens of race.

### **Amplification of Authority**

Supervisors have the right to lead others to get things done through others, to set direction and ensure accountability. This amplification is always present, often unconsciously, so leaders do not always recognize it. In fact, though some leaders emphasize that they prefer collaboration over “telling,” the silent authority always plays a part in the relationship. Racial diversity in a supervision relationship means that there may be even greater amplification of authority, particularly if the supervisor is part of the dominant group.

### **Amplification of Privilege**

Persons who are members of the dominant group in society benefit from that reality, even though not by anything they chose. Some have referred to white privilege as winning a lottery you did not know you entered. White privilege does not mean that life has been easy. White privilege is when your skin color does not make your life harder.

In supervisory relationships, add in privilege and there is amplification of authority at an even greater level. Many people are not aware of their privilege, and when they lead others, can be blindsided by the impact of their double privilege - being the boss and being a member of the dominant group.

---

## White Supremacy Culture

Most work environments in the United States have a culture that aligns with that of the dominant group. That is, most organizations exhibit characteristics of white supremacy culture. “White supremacy culture is the idea (ideology) that white people and the ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and actions of white people are superior to People of Colour and their ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and actions<sup>3</sup>.”

Acknowledging that organizations operate within white supremacy culture does not mean that the leaders are inherently racist or operating with malintent. White supremacy culture is simply the “water” in which we all swim if we live and work in the United States.

## White Professionalism

One of the central competency areas for many workers is known as “professionalism.” This term is often used without a great deal of specificity. Rarely do leaders examine the roots of these standards of professionalism, even as they hold their people accountable to them. As Aysa Gray outlines in “The Bias of Professionalism Standards<sup>4</sup>” in the Stanford Social Innovation Review, standards of professionalism “are heavily defined by white supremacy culture—or the systemic, institutionalized centering of whiteness. In the workplace, white supremacy culture explicitly and implicitly privileges whiteness and discriminates against non-Western and non-white professionalism standards related to dress code, speech, work style, and timeliness.”

How do these standards of professionalism show up in organizations that are predominantly white?

- In white and Western standards of dress and hairstyle (straightened hair, suits but not saris, and burqa and beard bans in some countries)
- In speech, accent, word choice, and communication (e.g., never show emotion, must sound “American,” and must speak white standard English)
- In scrutiny (black employees are monitored more closely and face more penalties as a result)
- In attitudes toward timeliness and work style

---

One of the most troublesome aspects of white professionalism standards is that they are assumed to be objective, unbiased and favorable. While there is a need for professionalism standards, there is also a need for these to be equitable, clearly articulated, validated as it relates to their necessity and aligned with the organization's vision and values.

## Leading on the Green Path

When you think about individuals and teams, achieving greatness isn't simply a matter of doing a certain list of functions. To get the maximum impact, people at all levels must be committed to achieve the right things (commitment to impact) for the right reasons (care for greater good) and in the right ways (people intelligence). When people make these types of choices on a regular basis, they are on what we call the Green Path.

When people are on the Red Path, they make different types of choices. They may be more committed to comfort (rather than impact), care mostly about themselves (not greater good) or have limitations in their ability to navigate their own or others' emotional realities (lack of people intelligence).

When it comes to issues of race in the workplace, a leader's and team's choices can create an environment where everyone, including the team and organization, thrives. Conversely, the choices made by the team and its leader can also combine to produce a climate of fear, nonengagement and lack of results.

## Dimensions of Choices

The *What Great Teams Do Great* model refers to leadership not as a title or position, but as a choice made by people at all levels of the organization. On any given day, at any given time, people can make a choice to step up and be a leader.

The nature of choices is key to successful teamwork and supervision. *What Great Teams Do Great* identifies three dimensions of choices.

**Orienting to the greater good.** The greater good takes into account the needs of all of the people who are connected to and who have a stake in the defined success (including

---

the self). In *What Great Teams Do Great*, we referred to those with a stake in success as stakeholders.

When thinking greater good, leaders consider the needs of each of these stakeholders in making choices. Diversity, equity and inclusion should be part of the greater good; without them, organizations lack perspective and suffer from myopic thinking and ineffective action. Diversity in the organization is not enough. Full inclusion and equity are necessary for the organization to succeed and all of its people to thrive.

As a supervisor, this means that first and foremost, look inward. Are you 100% committed to the entire team's success? Have you examined your own implicit bias - attitudes or stereotypes that unconsciously affect understanding, actions, and decisions? Greater good thinking and action means that you take steps to ensure that you do more than assume that you're "one of the good ones."

To ensure the greater good means more than recruiting diverse individuals to the team. Greater good supervisors address the team's and organization's culture and practices to ensure that every person has an equal opportunity to succeed.

**Commitment to impact vs. comfort.** When the going gets tough, some people opt out and others are fully committed to whatever it takes to ensure success. A willingness to take risk, be courageous and focus on the impact that is necessary are hallmarks of commitment to impact.

When it comes to issues of race and leadership, true commitment to impact means more than just hiring people who don't look like you. Too often, a white leader commits to comfort by employing or highlighting people of color and not giving them any real power or responsibility. This is a form of tokenizing. It is easier to say the right things, hire a person or two, and then rest on laurels than to truly step into a fully equitable and inclusive workplace.

Supervisors committed to impact will address the reality that Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) experience on the job. One facet of this reality is that BIPOC typically have to give significant mental energy to operate in the white professional world. This concept of code switching is like working in a country where your first language is not the common language and much effort is needed to fully be understood and to have contributions

---

valued. It is critical leaders understand their real culture and its impact and do the work to understand, value and elevate the contributions of all people.

Commitment to impact means that at times comfort will be hard to come by. Leaders have to make themselves uncomfortable in order to understand themselves, others and the organization. At times, making an impact means the leader must address difficult topics, confront unpleasant situations and speak truth to power. To be committed to impact means being an active ally for ALL people on the team. This requires the leader to speak up at times when it feels uncomfortable to do so.

Commitment to impact requires white leaders to create space for caring, honest and direct conversations, stepping into challenging situations to create an environment where all are fully engaged, heard and valued. It is easy to surround ourselves with people who are like us and to operate as if race were not a factor. It is better (and yields better outcomes for the team and organization) to surround ourselves with people who bring diverse perspectives, experiences and skills to the table.

**Facility with people and emotional intelligence.** This dimension relates to understanding emotions within the self and others, and the ability to develop and keep good interpersonal relationships. People with strong emotional intelligence not only regulate their own emotional state well, they also bring out the best in other people.

Emotional intelligence requires being in tune with what is really going on in the leader's relationships and among the team in general. Are BIPOC really being treated equitably and with the same commitment to emotional safety? Too often, BIPOC are subjected to microaggressions. Microaggressions are the intentional or unintentional communication (verbal and nonverbal) indignities. Strong emotional intelligence requires the leader to notice microaggressions and address them within the team. Some examples include:

"I don't see color."

"You don't sound black."

"I never owned slaves."

"Does your family live on a reservation?"

---

“All lives matter.”

“I’m not racist, I have black/asian/other friends.”

“Of course you’re in IT.”

“Is your mom a maid at that hotel?”

These microaggressions can be unintentional or intentional. Regardless of whether harm was intended, the leader must hold themselves and everyone else accountable to addressing microaggressions on the team. The goal here is that all team members find the work environment to be supportive and welcoming, and when there are issues, to openly address them with care, honesty and directness.

Leaning into emotional intelligence means staying in tune with how the entire team is doing. Sometimes BIPOC feel they must do more without compensation or recognition. A leader's role is to recognize when people are going the extra mile. Leaders with strong emotional intelligence will also examine the performance review process and compensation structures to ensure that objective criteria rewards the efforts and results of all team members.

### **Making it Safe**

In order to reduce the effect of the power dynamic and ensure diversity, inclusion and equity on the team, it is important for leaders to create a safe environment for people to be themselves and be fully engaged in the team's work together. To create such a climate, the leader must:

- **Set the example.** Understand their bias, educate themselves on this dynamic and create space for people to discuss it openly.
- **Be patient.** Culture change doesn't happen overnight. Be patient and open to learning and ensure a cadence of engagement and discussion about diversity, equity and inclusion.
- **Be courageous.** It may not be comfortable, however people are watching the leader. In fact, past experience in most organizations has prioritized white comfort



---

and accommodated white fragility. Because of this history, the leader must be willing to be uncomfortable and not move past it too quickly.

It is critical for white leaders to stand up for a diverse environment of true equity and inclusion and follow through with bold systemic action. The integration of equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) within the mission and scope of the organization is the end result. This is a delicate balance of both mission and EDI. Organizations can over-focus on the mission at the cost of EDI . They can also over-focus on EDI at the cost of the mission. Courage is the integration of both mission and EDI and the recognition that diversity, equity and inclusion are a win for the organization's bottom line.

### **Caring, Honest and Direct (CHaD) Conversations**

It can be difficult to confront uncomfortable situations in any group. Teams often struggle to communicate, and this is more of a problem if members sense conflict around a divisive issue. It would be easy to assume that few teams would talk about race unless they absolutely needed to - and in some cases, even a great need would not overcome our cultural assumption that race does not matter.

When dealing with any conflictual topic, the Green Path way is to exhibit Care and be Honest and Direct (CHaD for short).

**Care.** It may seem obvious that we should show care to one another. Unfortunately, this is not a given in all situations. Some people interpret caring as not talking about uncomfortable topics. In fact, having a compassionate conversation that honors all team members is truly a sign of care. The bottom line is understanding and acting on the greater good for all human beings, which requires leaders to facilitate tough conversations, recognize their own blind spots, be curious about each person's perspective and recognize everyone's contributions. Why? Because it's the right thing to do AND team success is interdependent; it depends on everyone being and doing their best. Ignoring issues of diversity, equity and inclusion prevent the team from being their best, and that means they must be addressed to be a great team.

**Honest.** Honest conversations can either be a tool for good or a weapon for harm. Great leaders are honest in that they say what is true, and they are clear when something is just an opinion or feeling. Being honest is about saying what you really think, not seeking to

---

advance one “truth” or harm others, spinning or avoiding the real issue. Honesty requires humility and acknowledging that no one knows it all. This is particularly true when it comes to issues of race. Some of the most honest conversations leaders have begun are true dialogues that begin with, “help me understand,” then listening deeply.

**Direct.** Having a direct conversation with a person about a sensitive topic is difficult. That’s why so many people avoid it by venting to another person instead of the one with whom they should be speaking. Being direct means taking the full issue (not some tangential or softened version of the issue) to the right person, instead of to your favorite sounding board. Direct is about being timely conversations, so that issues do not fester and grow more difficult to solve. (At Humanergy we use the 24-hour rule, meaning that if we have an issue, even a small thing that is rubbing us the wrong way, we have a duty to bring it up within 24 hours. Sometimes, it is important to wait the full 24 to get self-clarity or perhaps calm down a bit.) When people are direct and timely in communicating, the conflict often is smaller than it might have seemed. It goes without saying that leaders should not only initiate direct conversations; they should be open and curious and humble when they’re on the receiving end of the communication.

### **Engage, Align, Learn and Coordinate**

If leaders are Caring, Honest and Direct, they are open to taking the Green Path which also requires people to:

**Listen to understand.** This is the “put-your-phone-away-and-be-fully-present” type of listening. It means listening to learn, rather than listening in order to respond.

**Defer judgement.** We are hard-wired as humans to categorize, judge and assess. The Green Path requires leaders to consciously avoid judgement, leaning into curiosity, acceptance, genuineness and empathy. The other person may say things that seem unlikely or even crazy. Instead of judging, think, “what if that were true?”

**Acknowledge lenses and biases.** Everyone looks at the world from a perspective, and everyone has biases. One of the assumptions leaders may make is that everyone has had similar life experiences as them, and therefore, views (or should view) the world in the same way. This is not true of course, and assumptions get in the way on teams every day.

---

From the perspective of diversity, equity and inclusion, there must be an acknowledgement that the experience of a white leader may be very different from that of a BIPOC leader. For a more in-depth understanding of bias, take some of Harvard University's Implicit Association Tests<sup>6</sup>.

**Engage align, learn and coordinate.** Great teams are made of people who consistently engage with one another, align toward common goals and ways of working together, learn from each other and mistakes, and coordinate their actions to ensure success. Also, all members of the team are valued, respected for their contributions and included thoughtfully as the team goes about its work.

**Share perspectives.** Sharing perspectives is not a one-way street. Spend as much time listening as talking - or even more, if possible. When sharing their perspective, the leader should be mindful of emulating the type of communication they would like to see in the entire team. That means stepping into topics that may be touchy, but are important.

**Be forward-focused on solutions.** When facing problems, some people dredge up the past, focus on who did what and what happened. While there is some value in understanding the facts behind an issue, it is equally (if not more) important to focus on solutions and what can be done in the future to prevent problems from recurring.

---

## The Leader's Role in Making the Team Truly Great

Leaders are faced with constant change and a myriad of issues to address each day. In the midst of putting out fires, keep sight on what you are trying to achieve, both as an organization and a team and in terms of diversity, equity and inclusion. This will not always be the easy path, however it will be the right one - the Green Path.

There are many key behaviors required to be effective as an ally to BIPOC in your organization and to advance diversity, equity and inclusion. Some of these are:

- Own your feelings, facts, opinions and clearly and accurately label them
- Listen and demonstrate understanding through your words and actions
- Don't take things personally, even when it seems personal. This may simply be a new feeling of discomfort that you were not expecting. Sit with it a while.
- Be compassionate in all you do
- Don't make it transactional ("If you do this, then I will do that")
- Acknowledge when you're on the Red Path and hence part of the problem. Red Path behaviors include, but are not limited to:
  - Avoiding
  - Ignoring
  - Accommodating (win/lose approach)
  - Defensiveness
  - Blaming
  - Excuses
  - Being judgmental
  - Deflecting
  - Whining

Above all, stick with it. Staying on the Green Path, and getting back on it when you stray, will go a long way in advancing diversity, equity and inclusion. Reach out to people who support this effort, and take heart. We are with you in spirit.

---

## Definitions

1. Bias: An inclination of temperament or outlook, especially: a personal and sometimes unreasoned judgment; prejudice
2. Code switching: Process of shifting from one linguistic code (a language or dialect) to another, depending on the social context or conversational setting
3. Green Path: Making choices that reflect commitment to the greater good and impact, and doing so with good people intelligence
4. Implicit bias: Attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner
5. White fragility: Defensive reactions white people have when our racial worldviews, positions, or advantages are questioned or challenged.
6. White privilege: Inherent advantages possessed by a white person on the basis of their race in a society characterized by racial inequality and injustice

## References

1. <https://www.dismantlingracism.org/white-supremacy-culture.html>
2. <https://www.livescience.com/28945-american-culture.html>
3. <https://coco-net.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Coco-WhiteSupCulture-ENG4.pdf>
4. [https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the\\_bias\\_of\\_professionalism\\_standards](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_bias_of_professionalism_standards)
5. <https://projectbliss.net/diversity-in-the-workplace-is-not-enough/>

Copyright © 2020 Humanergy, Inc.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law. For permission requests, write to the publisher at the address below.

Humanergy, Inc.  
P.O. Box 761  
Marshall, MI 49068