123 Lessons for
THRIVING LEADERSHIP & JUSTICE
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Dr. Keith E. Edwards helps individuals, organizations, and communities to realize their fullest potential. He is a trusted leader and authentic educator on leadership, curricular approaches beyond the classroom, social justice education, sexual assault prevention, and men’s identity. He has spoken and consulted with more than 200 organizations, presented more than 200 programs at national conferences, and has written more than 20 articles or book chapters on these issues. His research, writing, and speaking has received national awards and recognition. He is co-author of the new book The Curricular Approach to Student Affairs and co-edited the book Addressing Sexual Violence in Higher Education. His TEDx Talk on preventing sexual violence has been viewed around the world. His work on aspiring allyship is referenced by the Southern Poverty Law Center’s publication Teaching Tolerance. Corporations including Microsoft and Price Waterhouse Cooper have integrated his model as a cornerstone of their leadership and diversity training programs. Keith is co-host of Student Affairs NOW, the premier podcast for student affairs.

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HOW TO

I’ve compiled here some of the tips and suggestions I share over and over with leaders and organizations. This resource offers too many suggestions. This resource is not meant to be a book you read. That would be overwhelming. Skim to find the suggestions and tips that are most helpful to you in this moment and put them into practice. Perhaps, later you’ll come back to another suggestion or another tip when you are in a different moment. If you are like me, some of these you will need to come back to over and over. Just because we know better doesn’t mean we do better. I hope this resource will help you both know better and do better.

Much of what is here is also on blog posts and resources on my website. You are welcome to explore there as well, as there might be more context, links to other resources, and stories that might help you get even more value.

I wanted this resource to be as helpful as possible to people just like you. If you have suggestions on improving and being more helpful to more folks, please let me know with an email at Keith@KeithEdwards.com.

All my best,
Keith
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THRIVING
6 SUCCESS STRATEGIES

Here are six strategies proven by research to help you succeed at whatever you want to do.

1. Well-Being
   - SLEEP is the foundation. Without adequate sleep everything else falls apart. Prioritize sleep.
   - EAT WELL. You literally are what you eat. My mantra is to eat better and eat less more often.
   - EXERCISE. This doesn’t mean that you need to be a marathon runner or pounding protein powder and creatine. Just move your body. Go for a walk. Ride your bike. Do 20 pushups and body squats between meetings. Get 10,000 steps. Play Frisbee. Take a yoga class. Change Zoom meetings to phone calls and walk around the neighborhood. Go for a walk and call your mom. And don’t let the cold be an excuse. As we say here in Minnesota, there is no such thing as bad weather, just poor clothing decisions.

2. Strengths

Find out what your strengths are and use them more often. This doesn’t mean only doing what you are good at. Use your strengths to find the best path for you to accomplish your goals and tasks.

3. Gratitude

Gratitude is the antidote to anxiety. Gratitude is a practice. Be grateful for big things and little things. Keep a gratitude journal. Write down 3 happy moments and ask WWW – What went well? What led to this? What does it mean to me?
4. Meditate
There is an avalanche of research on the numerous benefits of meditation. By taking 10 minutes each day to meditate, you can literally rewire your brain for calm, perspective, and success (neuroplasticity). Meditation is free, easy, and requires no app. But if you want an app to assist you, Insight Timer is free and terrific. If paying for a subscription might hold you accountable for using it - Headspace and Calm are both excellent.

5. Be Kind.
• Research shows that being kind to others makes us feel better than when others are kind to us. So, if you feel like you could use/deserve more kindness, the solution is finding someone to be kind to in your life.
  1. Buy a coffee for the person in line behind you.
  2. Ask how someone is doing and really listen.
  3. Send a handwritten card of appreciation, encouragement, or condolences.
  4. Donate to a cause you believe in. Tell no one.
  5. Tip 50% on your next take-out order from your favorite place. Imagine the delight, confusion, and curiosity when they see it.

6. Relationships
Social supports are crucial to success. Relationships make the good better and the bad less bad. Make some new friends. “I've enjoyed our interactions (on Zoom, over social media, or on that webinar last week). Can we connect for a virtual coffee or walk and talk and learn more about each other?” Re-connect with friends and family you have been out of touch with for a while.
5 STRATEGIES TOWARD THRIVING

These strategies are based on neuroscience and research on what works.

1. Leaders go first.

Many of us wait and see how someone else shows up and respond. We see if the grocery clerk is in a good mood and pleasant or hope that the group we are speaking to is engaged. Leaders don’t wait. Leaders go first. Leaders show up with the energy they want in others. Leaders show up and smile and genuinely ask how others are doing, and see how they respond. Leaders “bring the weather” they want from the group in the room.

2. Don’t flip your lid.

Neuroscientist and psychologist Daniel Siegel talked about “flipping your lid” as that moment when your amygdala’s emotional response mechanism overrides our pre-frontal cortex’s executive functioning. When this happens, we react by saying and doing things we don’t think or feel and later regret. Sacred pauses help keep you from flipping your lid. Most parents learn quickly that timeouts are for grown-ups.

3. Hope

We need to cultivate hope. Without hope, we might be tempted to give up or give in. The world can be so discouraging. How do we cultivate hope to keep us engaged and working toward a better tomorrow, individually and collectively? I love Shane Lopez’s definition of hope. In his book, Making Hope Happen, he described hope as thinking “that the future will be better and that you have a role in making it so.” He describes the first part as optimism and the second part as agency.
4. Shift your perspective.

We often believe that good things happen and bad things happen, and our response is what it is. In reality, many things happen to us, and we can consider multiple perspectives to view that reality and choose a perspective that serves us well. This does not mean we pretend that bad things don’t happen, put a spin on the bad things that happen, or ignore our negative emotions. These strategies are counter-productive, according to psychology research. What does work is noticing that there are multiple true perspectives and choosing a perspective that serves us.

5. Celebrate.

Integrate gratitude, celebrations, and kindness as leadership strategies. Start your meetings with celebrations. When you start with highs and lows, the human brain consumes the lows and twice the rate of the highs. Highs and lows deplete the brain of your team members of a neurochemical called serotonin. When you start with celebrations, you begin your meeting flooding their brains with serotonin, making them more open to diversity, creativity, and solution-focused. Starting with celebrations is valuable as you take on the real challenges and problems facing your team. Same for family dinners, virtual happy hours, and more.
5 Levels of Celebration and Gratitude

We think that successful people have lots to be happy about, but science has shown us that it is actually the opposite. Happiness helps people be more successful. Similarly, we think that happy people have lots to be grateful for when it is actually the opposite. Gratitude helps people be happier. For some of us, celebrating can be really hard. Here are five levels of celebrations and gratitude to help you become better at celebrating.

Who knows, perhaps you could even practice being a Jedi celebrator!

Level 1 – Uncomfortable

Some of us have a hard time appreciating anything in our life. We downplay birthdays, promotions, public accolades, and dismiss attempts at affirmations for significant successes. We are more comfortable focusing on what didn’t go right or the downside of these celebrations – “Another year closer to death” or “Sure, there will be a bit more pay, but a lot more work!” The reason people are uncomfortable celebrating is often because those things we celebrated as children were taken away.

Level 2 – Event Focused

Event focused celebrators can take time and enjoy the big moments in life. We will have dinner with friends on a birthday or after a significant success, but other than that, say to ourselves and others, “let’s not get carried away.”

Level 3 – Detailed

Practiced celebrators appreciate minor things to be grateful for in life. We celebrate the meeting that went well, the unexpected phone call from a friend, the compliment on our new haircut, or just a kind word from a stranger at the coffee shop.
Level 4 – Wonderful
These celebrators appreciate with wonder the everyday things that others take for granted and wouldn’t even notice. We marvel at simply turning a knob and hot water coming out. We appreciate a complicated computerized car that provides air conditioning, heat, radio, and Bluetooth and, for the most part, just requires gas in it once a week. We appreciate the beauty of nature around us every day and the cityscape before us – for both are wondrous beauty in their own ways.

Level 5 - Jedi
What is left to celebrate? The Jedi celebrators practice being grateful for the things that are not good. We celebrate our mistakes for the learning we gain from making them. We celebrate our loss as a reminder of the gift that it was. We celebrate our hurts because they attune us to our humanity. We celebrate the transgressions against us because they help us be clear about who we want to be in the world. We celebrate divorce for the experience the relationship has offered us, the lessons we have learned, and for the possibility of a better relationship as a result. We even celebrate death because there is a whole life worth being grateful for and for the reminder that we only have one short life. I recently listened to Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, who had just lost his mother, explain that he was staying in the experience and feeling of grief until he had found the blessing in it. A Jedi, to be sure.
LEADERSHIP
8 FOUNDATIONS OF MINDFUL LEADERSHIP

Many of us are looking for new ways of being as leaders, especially in our world of increasing uncertainty. Here are some of the foundations of mindful leadership I find helpful when the going gets tough.

1. Give up control - Claim agency.
How can I give up as much control as possible over what is beyond me and simultaneously claim as much agency as possible over what is within me? Mindful leadership is about letting go of control AND claiming agency. Weather is an excellent example of this. When it is raining, it doesn’t serve us well to lament and complain that it shouldn’t be raining (control). Instead, we’re well served to acknowledge that it is raining and make decisions about bringing an umbrella or not (agency). Yet, many of us experience significant suffering because we are trying to control things that are out of our control, like weather, circumstances, elections, or other people, AND we give up agency over changes we can make within ourselves like decisions, responses, and actions.

2. Focus on the process to achieve the outcome
When some goals or outcomes are important to you, focus on the process that will get you there. Often the outcome is beyond our control, but we have agency over the process. How do we let go of control over the outcome of winning the game, getting the sale, finding the right person, or getting kids to wear winter jackets? How do we instead focus on putting in all of our energy and effort into each play, connecting with the client, making ourselves vulnerable, or being as patient as we can?
3. **How could caring less, help you be a better leader?**

Buddhists refer to this as the middle path. Psychologists call this healthy non-attachment. On the one hand, we have caring too much and holding on too tightly to what happens. On the other hand, we have not caring at all and giving up. Neither serves leaders very well. The middle path is about letting go of where this might go or what might happen but focusing on being and giving our best toward the important outcomes. How are we all in with our time, energy, and effort but let go of any expectations that it will work out the way we wanted?

4. **Great leaders have professional will and personal humility.**

They take their work very seriously, but they don’t take themselves seriously at all.

5. **Humor.**

How does our taking critical issues too seriously prevent us from seeing possibilities, solutions, and creatively addressing problems? I heard Jon Kabat-Zinn use this approach when talking about the impact of social media on our well-being as well as instances of global terrorism.

6. **Essentialism.**

If everything is a priority, then nothing is a priority. How can you do less, so you can be more? How can you weed the garden of your life? How can you apply the Pareto principle (80/20 rule)? Author Greg McKeown explores all of this in his book Essentialism. I recommend it highly and often. Essentialism is something I think about and try to put into practice daily.
7. Radical acceptance.

The two wings of radical acceptance from Tara Brach are mindfulness and compassion. Mindfulness is the full, complete, and nonjudgmental acceptance of reality. Compassion is engaging with it. Compassion might be kindness or offering to help a friend, stranger, or ourselves.

8. Letting go.

Mindful leadership is mostly about letting go. It is about letting go of control, perfectionism, fear of failure, being right, getting it right, and more. It means letting go of your ego to open yourself up to be more effectively aligned with your purpose.
7 PRACTICES FOR MINDFUL LEADERSHIP

These practices can help you bring mindfulness into your day-to-day leadership.

1. Practice mindfulness and meditation.

Mindfulness and meditation are often confused and used interchangeably when they are two different but related ideas. Mindfulness is simply the practice of being in this moment. And then in this moment. And being fully present in each moment. Buddhist monk Tich Nhat Hanh explained that mindfulness is not thinking about nirvana while you wash the dishes. Mindfulness is about finding nirvana by doing nothing but washing the dishes. Meditation is the focused practice of being fully present. I love the Buddhist proverb, “Everyone should sit in meditation for 20 minutes each day. Unless they are too busy, then they should sit for an hour.” Meditation is simple. It is hard. It takes practice. And it is often misunderstood. It also has been proven in thousands of research studies to make us happier, healthier, and more effective.

2. Cultivate a beginner’s mind.

We are often socialized to be knowers, not learners. We often fall into predicting what other people will say, think, or do, rather than listening. Bringing a beginner’s mind means engaging in this conversation as though we’ve never had it before. Buddhist teacher Shunryu Suzuki explained, “In the beginner’s mind, there are many possibilities. In the expert’s mind, there are few.” How do we indulge in un-experting ourselves?
3. Practice unlearning.

I used to think that to be smart in this world; I needed to learn new things. Being the parent of very small children taught me that to be wise, I need to unlearn much of what I have learned. How do we unlearn the internalized oppression from our socialization; the armor and walls we have developed to protect us from our hurts, pains, and traumas; and the patterns and habits that once kept us safe that no longer serve us?


Try it. Right now. Doesn’t it feel good? It is an excellent tool for mindfulness, awareness, perspective, and letting go. Here are two breathing techniques I find helpful.

1. Navy Seals and Brené Brown use box breathing. Count 4 seconds for each; breath in, hold the breath, exhale the breath, and hold the exhale. Repeat.

2. 4-7-8 Breathing is from Dr. Andrew Weil and is more strenuous and shouldn’t be repeated more than 4 cycles at a time. Breathe in for 4 seconds, hold for 7 seconds, breathe out for 8 seconds. Repeat 4 times. You might feel a little (delightfully) lightheaded.
5. Don’t react; choose your response.

How do we recognize our initial emotional or ego-centered reactions and take a sacred pause, so we can move out of this reactivity and choose a response that aligns with our values and purpose?

6. Practice your sacred pauses.

From the Book of Joy by the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, “Sacred pause and widest perspective helps us solve problems with creativity and compassion rather than rigidity and reactivity.” Breathe. Sleep on it. Take a walk. Don’t respond to that email until tomorrow.

7. Stop arguing with reality.

How do we stop arguing with reality and practice radical acceptance? As long as we are arguing with what is real, we cannot engage in responding effectively. As long as we are stuck arguing that it shouldn’t be raining today, we aren’t engaging in decisions about bringing an umbrella or adjusting our plans. How many of us have found ourselves stuck arguing with the reality of weather, presidential elections, systemic oppression, childhood trauma, and so much more.
31 STRATEGIES FOR CULTIVATING EMOTIONALLY INTELLIGENT LEADERSHIP

Emotional intelligence is not a complicated concept. Although these scholars frame it slightly differently or use somewhat different language, I see it as the four quadrants at the intersections of self and relationships and awareness and management: Self Awareness, Self Management, Relationship Awareness, and Relationship Management. I’m eager for these opportunities to engage leaders in intentional activities grounded in science to help them cultivate their emotional intelligence.

Self Awareness

1. Identity & Equity – Get clear about who you are in social context.
2. Values – What are your core values?
3. Inner Guide & Inner Critic – Get clear about the voices in your head.
4. Life Purpose – 1 short sentence.
5. Underneath Our Armor – How are you imprisoning yourself?
6. Emotional Literacy – How are you feeling, exactly?
7. Radical Acceptance = Mindfulness + Compassion
8. Hope – How can you help make tomorrow better?

Self Management

1. Enoughness – You are enough.
2. Flipping Your Lid – How can you see this coming and manage it?
3. Sacred Pause – Timeouts are for grown-ups.
4. Mindfulness & Meditation – Be fully present right here, right now.
5. Shifting Perspectives – Which truth will best serve you?
6. Emotions as Feelings – Where is the emotion in your body?
7. Agency vs Control – Claim more agency. Let go of control.
8. Self-care, Community-care & Healing – How will you heal?
31 STRATEGIES FOR CULTIVATING EMOTIONALLY INTELLIGENT LEADERSHIP
CONT.

Relationship Awareness
1. Humility – You didn’t get here on your own.
2. Curiosity – Be a learner, not a knower.
3. Deep Listening – Practice all 3 levels of listening.
4. Empathy – Feel with others.
5. Privilege & Oppression – How do you experience social structures?
6. Change & Transitions – The only constant is change.

Relationship Management
1. Leaders Go First – How do you want to show up?
2. Developing Trust – Vulnerability leads to trust.
3. Creating Cultures of Learning – Develop a learning organization.
4. Process vs Outcomes – Focus on the process to achieve the outcome.
6. Accountability – How do you hold others accountable?
7. Equity & Liberation – We all do better when we all do better.
8. Apologies & Forgiveness – Say you’re sorry. Forgiveness is selfish.
9 COMMON LESSONS FROM COACHING INDIVIDUALS AND ORGANIZATIONS

I get to work with individuals and organizations to help them realize their fullest potential. For organizations, this comes in the form of facilitating or co-facilitating leadership retreats, curriculum workshops, and strategic planning. For individuals, this comes in leadership and executive coaching with clients, including college presidents, CEOs and entrepreneurs, and independent scholars and activists. Although the details of what I discuss with clients are confidential, I wanted to share some common lessons in these conversations as they might benefit others as well.

1. Essentialism
Setting priorities is one of the primary solutions that both individuals and organizations identify to move them forward. If you feel busy once in a while, it is likely situational. However, if you feel busy all the time, then it is likely because you cannot prioritize your own life. And when you don’t prioritize your own life, everyone else will.

2. Meditation
Being more present or mindful is something most individuals I work with are seeking. Meditation, of one kind or another, is a common practice that individuals want to integrate into their lives. Meditation has been proven through thousands of scientific studies to have many benefits.

3. Handle Your Inner Critic
Setting priorities is one of the primary solutions that both individuals and organizations identify to move them forward. If you feel busy once in a while, it is likely situational. However, if you feel busy all the time, then it is likely because you cannot prioritize your own life. And when you don’t prioritize your own life, everyone else will.
9 COMMON LESSONS FROM COACHING INDIVIDUALS AND ORGANIZATIONS

CONT.

4. Don’t Make It Complicated

When we really sit back and take a look, we are often the biggest obstacles in our own way. What are the things that we make into a much bigger deal than they need to be? How do we avoid this? What is the simplest possible structure or solution to our problems?

5. Purpose Before Action

If we don’t know why we are working on this project, pursuing that goal, leading this team, or raising these kids, we can’t do a great job. We especially need to know why, so that when things don’t go as planned (and when do they ever?) we can improvise and still be moving toward our purpose. Most people feel that they have a sense of purpose, but it can’t be good guidance for day-to-day decisions unless you can write it down on an index card. I help my clients get clear about their purpose and work with them to learn how to consult their purpose to live on purpose.

6. Sharpen the Saw

You’ve got to perfect your instrument. If you invest the time in sharpening your saw, you can save time overall as you cut down the tree. In today’s day and age, our most important instrument is us. When we take care of ourselves and prioritize our well-being, we increase our creativity, productivity, and clear thinking. Determining what regular routines help them be at their best and sticking to them is often obvious to know and transformative to do.
7. The Middle Path or Healthy Non-Attachment

I often remind individuals and organizations wrestling with complex problems that they might be better off if they cared a little less. At first, many are shocked or appalled. However, I’m not suggesting that they don’t care at all. I am suggesting that caring too much is getting in their way of seeing new possibilities and solutions. I’m suggesting practicing what Buddhists call “the middle path” and psychologists call healthy non-attachment.

8. Career Clarity

Many individuals come to coaching because they feel stuck in their current careers. They have not progressed the way they thought they “should.” What has been fascinating to me is that after deep reflection, about half of my clients decide to pursue a step up (or two or three) in their career, and the other half realize that their career is not as important, but it allows for what matters. Discovering the career path that aligns with your purpose and values and helps you live your best life is always helpful. The answer is just not always moving up.
9 COMMON LESSONS FROM COACHING INDIVIDUALS AND ORGANIZATIONS CONT.

9. Connecting Their Spirituality

One of the most surprising conversations clients come to is enhancing the role of spirituality in their lives. Most clients come to coaching with practical goals like getting a better job, being healthier, or getting out of debt. They are often surprised that they choose to explore greater spirituality in their lives. For my clients, this rarely moves from non-spiritual to spiritual or even embracing, changing, or being more committed to their religious practices. It is more often about bringing their spirituality into more day-to-day aspects of their lives. It might mean connecting their spirituality to their work or finding spiritual guidance from a tradition outside their religious tradition.
KEYS TO APOLOGIES AND FORGIVENESS

We live in a culture where people do not take ownership and responsibility for their misses, mistakes, and how they hurt others. We need more apologies. We also live in a culture that demands atonement but is often unwilling to offer forgiveness. Lack of forgiveness makes true accountability where learning, growth, and change happen difficult.

4 Keys to Apologies
These steps to a good apology come from restorative justice.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Share what happened.</th>
<th>“I spilled the milk.”</th>
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<td>Describe your role.</td>
<td>“I spilled the milk.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Share what you won’t do.</td>
<td>“I won’t spill the milk again.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share what you will do to keep that commitment.</td>
<td>“From now on, I will use two hands when I grab the milk.”</td>
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4 Keys to Forgiveness
One of the most valuable gifts I ever received was the lesson that we don’t forgive others to release them; we forgive to release ourselves. Forgiveness is selfish (in a good way). Forgiving others can be very difficult. For some of us, the hardest person to forgive is ourselves. Here are four steps to forgiveness.

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<tr>
<th>Tell your story.</th>
<th>Share the story of what happened.</th>
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<td>Name the hurt.</td>
<td>Express the emotion specifically and with depth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grant forgiveness.</td>
<td>Forgiveness is easy to say and hard to do. In some situations, it might take years to come to the point where you can do this. In some cases, it can just be a decision.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Renew or release the relationship.</td>
<td>Forgiveness doesn’t mean you are obligated to keep the person in your life. You might forgive them and end the relationship. However, if you do decide to renew the relationship, you must forgive and let it go. It is not fair to the other person or you to say you’ve forgiven them but to not let it go and just keep them on probation.</td>
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JUSTICE
4 LEARNING OUTCOMES FOR DIVERSITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE EDUCATION

Just about everyone I know values diversity and wants more inclusion. We want to foster multiculturalism in ourselves, in our organizations, and in the learning we are nurturing. However, the details of what that looks like in a developmentally sequenced manner can be mystifying. I work with many organizations to clarify precisely what they mean by social justice education. Here are four outcomes that can help organize our work toward greater equity.

1. Critical Consciousness

What are my individual and social group identities, and how does that affect my experience? What are my own biases about others, and how can I be prepared to monitor, address, and/or manage these biases? How can I make the unconscious things I have been socialized to believe more conscious so that I can wrestle with them and not be an unwitting puppet to them? What role does shame play in my unwillingness to do so? How can I understand that being more aware of what I have been socialized to believe, no matter how embarrassing and shameful those beliefs are, is liberating not just for the oppressed but also for the privileged?

2. Cultural Competence

How can I demonstrate multicultural competency by being cognizant of cultural norms, values, communication styles, traditions, etc., for various groups? How will I recognize how these factors might affect cross-cultural interactions? We may have different names for this, such as communicating across differences, multicultural competence, cross-cultural competence, or intercultural communication. Given the many differences among us, can I recognize that every interaction with another person is cross-cultural? The exchange may be cross-cultural due to differences between the other person and me that are invisible to me, or perhaps there are things at play for each of us that we are unaware of ourselves.
3. Privilege and Oppression

How do social systems grant some of us advantages we didn’t earn and don’t deserve, and some of us disadvantages we didn’t earn and don’t deserve based on our identities? How do systems of oppression function in society, and how is that system maintained and perpetuated? How does this play out on individual, institutional, and societal levels? How does this play out consciously/intentionally and unconsciously/unintentionally?

4. Social Justice

How can I work systemically to foster more justice and equity? How can I act as an advocate for social justice, identifying ways to create change and promote social justice in our communities and the greater society? What roles can I play through my actions and encouraging and empowering others in various personal and professional settings? How can I set my ego aside and work strategically to make change happen most effectively?
OBSTACLES AND TOOLS FOR ASPIRING ALLIES FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

OBSTACLES

1. Anger
How does anger get in your way of working for change or doing so effectively?

2. Perfectionism
Tema Okun has written about how perfectionism is a key component of white supremacy culture. How does perfectionism keep us stuck, worried about messing up, making it worse, or being held accountable? How can we push past this perfectionism and be willing to be a bit messy, do our best, make some mistakes, and learn from them?

3. Performativity
Performative social justice work, done only to get credit or score points on social media, can do real harm. Being motivated by performativity may also be an entry point that helps folks new to social justice work become more sincerely engaged. What social justice work are you willing to do even if no one ever knew?

4. Fear of critique
Fear of critique ties back to perfectionism. So many of us see injustice in the world and want to speak out or take action, but then question whether there may be a critique of this action or that action. We are so afraid of critique that we get stuck and do nothing.

5. Fear of my own ism
In my experience, my fear of critique is often rooted in a fear that my own ism might be exposed as I am working to be an aspiring ally. Trying to keep others, and ourselves, convinced that we somehow missed the socialization everyone else received frees us up to acknowledge and wrestle with our internalized socialization.

6. Binary thinking
Either/or, good/bad, woke/not woke, get it/don't get it. It is so tempting to sort the world into binary categories. The world is more complicated, and binary thinking is dominator thinking.
OBSTACLES AND TOOLS FOR ASPIRING ALLIES FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

TOOLS

1. Hope
How do we actively cultivate hope to stay engaged and contribute toward creating a better world for all of us?

2. Mindfulness
Mindfulness can help us be aware of what we are feeling and experiencing as aspiring allies. Is this anger, remorse, shame, or hopelessness? Mindfulness can help us pause, get grounded and centered, and equip us to re-engage in more effective and sustainable ways.

3. Radical Acceptance
Tara Brach explained the two wings of radical acceptance as mindfulness and compassion. Mindfulness is being fully present and aware of what is happening – in the world, on the news, and within us. Compassion helps us move into action with what is happening.

4. Apologies & Forgiveness
Taking responsibility and apologizing for our transgression is critical for our growth. Forgiving ourselves and others is also essential for change and transformation; otherwise, we just engage in condemnation.

5. Messing Up & Accountability
How do we summon the courage, self-worth, and commitment to do our absolute best and be aware that our best isn’t always good enough? Let's do our best and when we mess up, listen and be accountable.

6. Systemic Accountability
Ally among allies, Paul Kivel once asked me, “How will you hold yourself systemically accountable to the communities you aspire to be an ally to without placing the burden of your accountability on them?” I thought this was a great question. I was ashamed I didn’t have a good answer. Kivel eventually explained that he didn’t have a good answer either but that it was a question that we should always be wrestling with as aspiring allies. A powerful question.
9 LESSONS FOR MOVING FROM ANTI-OPPRESSION TO LIBERATION FOCUSED SOCIAL JUSTICE EDUCATION

1. Avoid binary thinking.
   It is so tempting to separate folks into good/bad, woke/unwoke, get it/don’t get it, etc. However, sorting works at Hogwarts, but it is not a strategy for real change. It also keeps us from hard work of accountability and transformation by tempting us with the easy work of condemnation. bell hooks reminded us, “Even among liberal and progressive people; we want to divide the world up into this binary of good and bad guys so that when we do that, we actually keep dominator culture in place.”

2. From casting blame to cultivating transformation.
   hooks also explains, “Casting blame is a crucial component of dominator thinking. It helps promote a culture of victimization. When we are more energized by the practice of blaming than we are by efforts to create transformation, we not only cannot find relief from suffering, we are creating the conditions that help keep us stuck in the status quo. Our attachment to blaming, to identifying the oppressor, stems from the fear that if we cannot unequivocally and absolutely state who the enemy is, then how can we know how to organize resistance struggle?”

3. “Justice is what love looks like in public.”
   This quote by Cornell West has become a bright line for me in deciphering when I am doing good social justice work and when I am being self-righteous and making it more about me and less about justice and equity. Love doesn’t always appear nice, quiet, and polite. Love sometimes appears like disappointed anger, especially when those we care so much about and expect so much of let us down. This isn’t about tone policing, which focuses on making those who experience privilege more comfortable. This is about trying to find what will be most effective in bringing about more justice.
4. Transform our anger of destruction into an anger of fierce compassion.

I first made this connection listening to Buddhist teachers Sharon Salzberg and Robert Thurman talking about loving your enemies and the idea that “love” is not always gentle and kind, but it is powerful. Thurman described trying to transform his destructive and self-righteous anger into something grounded in love, which he calls “fierce compassion.” He then explained how tempting it can be to just describe that self-righteous and destructively anger as “fierce compassion” when that’s not really what it is. This shift may require spiritual practice, as many social justice advocates have shown us, from Thich Nhat Hanh to Dalai Lama to Maya Angelou to John Lewis.

5. From activists to strategists.

Years ago, I heard Larry Roper share that we need fewer activists and more strategists. That’s not a criticism of activists but a call for their activism to be more thoughtful, strategic, and ultimately more effective. We may disagree over what the right strategy may be. Creating discomfort and dissonance may be strategic. We can also be mindful that those determining strategies may be growing and learning too. These strategists may also be exhausted from lack of sleep, grief and loss, and pain from mental, emotional, or physical wounds. Ultimately, the only real way to know what the effective strategy is by seeing what worked (or didn’t) after the fact.
6. Be good company for the journey.

Social change work is transformation work, and all transformation work is at its heart learning work. As Marcia Baxter Magolda reminded us, we must be good company for the journey. We often see in social justice circles that once we have had our learning opportunities and crossed the bridge, we often demand that others on the other side of the bridge be where we are. We demand and belittle often because we are so ashamed that we once didn’t know what we now know. This is also classist and rooted in formal and informal education privilege. The more significant point is that we might not always be in a place to be good partners on that journey. That is legitimate and real. Awareness and work on our healing, especially if we want to be responsible in our role as educators, is critical.

7. Grace fosters accountability.

Understandably, we are cautious of giving grace to others who have hurt us. In contrast, offering grace to those who have hurt us or others is a critical aspect of letting them have the space to grow, learn, reflect, and work to do better. Sure, some may not do better, and others will take advantage, but if actual change at the individual level is one of our goals, then grace is a crucial factor in fostering that transformation in other human beings. How can we hold others accountable in ways that allow them to change?
9 LESSONS FOR MOVING FROM ANTI-OPPRESSION TO LIBERATION FOCUSED SOCIAL JUSTICE EDUCATION

8. More calling in, less calling out.

I came to the term “calling in” from Ngoc Loan Trần’s blog. Calling others out in a manner that makes you look good, shames them, and is self-righteous is commonplace. I often find this so tempting. Calling out often makes people defensive and dig into their denial or dig into their isms and is a lousy strategy in moving toward transformation. “Calling-in” isn’t about being nice or only holding people accountable in private - it is an ethic of holding others accountable in a manner and tone that invites self-reflection, openness, increased awareness, and change. I’ve been “called in” in some pretty direct, uncomfortable, and even public ways, but they all created space for me to grow, learn, and transform.

9. More brave space, less safe space.

Kristi Clemens and Brian Arao introduced me to the idea of brave space, rather than safe space. Safe space is never really possible and often is established to 1) place all the responsibility for people’s feelings in difficult conversations on the facilitator and 2) to make it safe for individuals from the dominant group to say oppressive things and either not be held accountable or be held accountable in a way that makes them comfortable (tone policing). Brave space is a shared responsibility to be brave themselves and doing what they can to foster a community that encourages, empowers, and supports others to be brave. This means being brave and saying what you really think. It also means being brave and listening to the impact on others. It also means being brave enough to stay in the conversation and being open to being changed. As I’ve shifted to seeking brave rather than safe space, the conversations have changed dramatically for the better.
MORE
9 MOST RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

I’m an avid learner and love to share. These are the resources I recommend most often to individual and organizational clients and family and friends.

1. **Essentialism** by Greg McKeown

Essentialism is the book I recommend most. I think about and try to practice essentialism every day—a powerful and easy read.

2. **On Being with Krista Tippett**

I recommend episodes from this podcast regularly. All of the guests are terrific and the conversations full of learning and insight about what it means to be human in our current context.

3. **The Book of Joy** by Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu

This book records the weeklong conversation between these two spiritual leaders who have survived generational genocide and won Nobel Peace Prizes. So full of beautiful foundations for living a life of joy.

4. **Radical Acceptance** by Tara Brach

Psychologist and mindfulness teacher Tara Brach explains the powerful concept of radical acceptance and its two wings of mindfulness and compassion. The lesson to not argue with reality but engage with it is transformative.

5. **Dare to Lead** by Brené Brown

This book pulls the best lessons from her previous books together for leaders. The book is full of real-world lessons that are as applicable as they are insightful.

Brown shares many beautiful insights on leadership for social justice. Her perspective, experience, and approach are refreshing, inspiring, and helpful.

7. *Trauma Stewardship* by Laura van Dernoot Lipsky

This book is a powerful look at how trauma affects those of us who support others in their trauma. It is full of hard truths about how we use the trauma we experience and observe in others to justify our own unhealthy and unhelpful ways of showing up in the world. Lipsky includes a deep oppression lens throughout the entire book and lots of humor.

8. *The Wise Heart* by Jack Kornfield

Buddhist psychologist Jack Kornfield explores Buddhism not as a religion or a set of spiritual practices but as scientific psychology, including its intersections, affirmations, and conflicts with psychology as practiced in the West. He offers tremendous lessons, insights, and practices.

9. *Mindsight* by Daniel Siegel

Siegel is a psychologist and neuroscientist who is also a masterful teacher. His explanations and metaphors make complex neuroscience so easy to understand. The first third of the book explains neuroscience, and the second two-thirds how he applies it with his clients to address a wide range of challenges.
LET’S CONNECT

Keith works with individuals and organizations to help them unleash their fullest potential. He is a trusted leader whose clients come back to working with him again and again. He is an authentic educator who loves helping others.

If you have found what is in this resource valuable, let’s bring it to more folks in your organization so that they can thrive in their life, lead more effectively, and work toward greater justice for us all.

Keith offers speaking, facilitation, consulting, retreats, staff development, and strategic planning to serve each organization best. He is also a certified coach whose clients include college presidents, non-profit leaders, CEOs and entrepreneurs, and independent scholars and activists

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