

Qualities of Authentic Relationships across Differences

© Karen Pace and Dionardo Pizaña
Michigan State University Extension

Our commitment to the process of developing an authentic relationship across racial and gender differences has helped us to identify important qualities of our relationship. These characteristics are essential to building trusting and lasting relationships across race and gender within a society that continues to be grounded in racism, sexism and other forms of oppression. It has also been important for us to recognize that, although much of our work in developing an authentic relationship has occurred on the personal and interpersonal levels, our relationship is also deeply impacted by institutional and cultural systems that have influenced our behaviors and defined our privileges – or lack thereof. The following characteristics have been important to us in creating and nurturing an authentic relationship across race and gender:

- **Willingness and eagerness to be challenged.** I understand that out of the challenge comes a deeper understanding of my privileges and the continued work that I must do to remain in an authentic relationship.
- **Willingness to *not* be in a place of denial and resistance.** I know that denial and resistance maintain power and pain and serve only to block the growth and understanding of myself and others.
- **Willingness to look first at *myself* when feelings of mad, sad or scared surface.** When these emotions surface, I ask myself first what is going on with *me* rather than becoming defensive, judgmental or critical of others. I focus on what my feelings are telling me about what I need. I communicate my feelings and needs with the goal of staying in right-relationship with others.
- **Willingness to remain humble.** I don't know what I don't know – and I will never know everything. It's particularly important to remain humble when I'm operating from my non-target group experience.
- **Willingness to recognize and own my places of privilege.** I am clear that authenticity in relationships cannot happen if I do not confront my privileges, own them and work at using them differently – from a place of empowerment rather than guilt or shame.
- **Willingness to engage in a healing process around my target group experience.** I understand that I cannot be an effective ally from my dominant or non-target group experience if I am not engaged in healing processes around my own painful target group experiences.
- **Willingness to avoid "hierarchy of oppression" debates.** I understand that oppression exists in many forms and at many levels. I resist the temptation to try to convince others that "my pain is greater than your pain." I work toward unveiling the interconnectedness of "isms" (i.e., racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, ableism) in order to create change at the personal, interpersonal, institutional and cultural levels.

- **Willingness to hear the anger of target group members without taking it personally.** I know that anger and rage are the understandable by-products of oppression. I do not become defensive or take it personally when people in target groups need to talk about their anger and pain in powerful ways.
- **Willingness to be compassionate with myself and others.** I understand that I am no good to myself or others if my existence is centered in guilt, shame and anger. Compassion for myself – while owning my points of privilege and power – will allow me to provide the same for others.
- **Willingness to be patient with myself and others.** I am keenly aware that multicultural growth and change are slow and sometimes painful processes. I remain committed to my own learning and change process, and resist the urge to give up on myself or others when “the going gets rough.”
- **Willingness to be on the journey of growth, learning and change for life.** I understand that authenticity is not a one time conversation or interaction. I put myself in places which provide ongoing and lifetime opportunities for continued growth. I am committed to being “under construction” and de-construction for a lifetime.
- **Willingness to be an active listener even when I am not ready to hear.** I appreciate that active listening assists in my personal understanding, growth and learning. As I listen, I am open to accepting “gifts” from others even though they may not be gift-wrapped in ways that are most familiar or comfortable to me.
- **Willingness to remain in relationship.** I realize that most of us are not practiced or proficient in authentic relationship-building because of the pain of oppression in our lives. This is not a prescriptive process. It is fluid, continually open for redefinition, nurtured, open to tension and designed to create sustainability.
- **Willingness to be honest and trusting.** I understand that I need to work very hard and over time to build trust and honesty in relationships across differences. Oppression and “isms” have not supported the development or presence of either of these relational characteristics.
- **Willingness to be grounded in integrity.** I know that I am only as good as my words and actions. Being an individual of integrity will lead to building and sustaining trust.
- **Willingness to maintain a relationship grounded in safety and healing.** I fully understand that this is not an easy process and that there are times when I need to be aware of my personal and spiritual safety. I am also aware of what I need to heal myself as I unveil realities which redefine my world and which challenge my power and privilege – or lack thereof. A commitment to a healing process assists in my ability to continue to be fully present in authentic relationships.
- **Willingness to understand the power of language.** I know that language is a primary way in which we communicate our thoughts and ideas – and that language has been influenced by racism, sexism and systems of dominance that contain inherent biases, prejudices and power. I am open to understanding and unraveling my use and misuse of language.

- **Willingness to focus on the impact of my words and actions rather than my intentions.** Well-intentioned racists and sexists are simply that – racists and sexists. Focusing on the impact of my actions rather than the intentions, allows me to challenge my points of privilege and work toward more meaningful and authentic relationships across difference.
- **Willingness to express and nurture humor.** Humor can be a uniting and healing force. It can provide levity in times of deep emotions.
- **Willingness to allow each other wholeness in spirit.** A solidifying force in any authentic relationship is the ability to allow those to bring the wholeness of everything they are into the relationship. It is through this act of non-judgmental acceptance that healing can take place and social change is possible.
- **Willingness to be comfortable with unfinished conversations.** Authenticity will occur if individuals are willing to be in intentional, purposeful and intimate dialog which is ongoing and very rarely “finished.” With each conversation new ground is explored, new risks are taken and deeper understanding is revealed.
- **Willingness to share and listen deeply to each other’s stories.** We are made up of a multitude of stories which when told; provide insight into the depths of our souls and spirits. These stories are our lived experiences and provide the foundation of how we have walked in our world. Unveiling these stories with others provides a keen insight into who we are, our world view and a point of healing to move us forward on our journey toward wholeness of spirit and positive social change.
- **Willingness to hold both joy and pain in relationship.** I am clear that authentic relationship-building across human differences brings me pain at times as we challenge each other and ourselves. I am also energized regularly by the abundant joys that come with a truly authentic relationship across race and gender differences.

***Karen Pace** is director of Pace 4 Change [www.pace4change.com] and a program leader in the Health and Nutrition Institute for Michigan State University Extension (MSUE). She has been developing, teaching and facilitating educational programs for more than 25 years. Karen has expertise in diversity and multiculturalism, social and emotional health and well-being, community youth development, social justice education and curriculum development. Karen has facilitated hundreds of powerful educational programs for thousands of people across the state and across the country. She has partnered with Dionardo Pizaña over the past fifteen years to engage co-workers, organizational leaders and community members in discussions related to diversity, multiculturalism, authentic relationships across differences, cultural competence and other social justice topics.*

***Dionardo Pizaña** is the diversity and personnel specialist for Michigan State University Extension (MSUE). He has more than 20 years of experience developing, teaching and facilitating diversity education programs through MSUE, Adrian College and Siena Heights University. Dionardo provides strong leadership to MSU Extension’s multicultural organizational change process. He is a nationally-recognized, highly sought-after multicultural consultant, speaker and trainer and has received numerous awards that recognize his outstanding accomplishments. Dionardo has partnered with Karen Pace over the past fifteen years to engage co-workers, organizational leaders and community members in discussions related to diversity, multiculturalism, authentic relationships across differences, cultural competence and other social justice topics.*

Copyright © 2004 Karen Pace and Dionardo Pizaña. Use with Permission. Do not reprint without the authors’ permission. Contact pizanad@msu.edu or pace4change@gmail.com.