

Talking About Race in the Workplace

In moments of national crisis, like the one we are now in, the subject of race is on almost everyone's mind. But talking about it, especially with people of different races, backgrounds, and viewpoints, can be extraordinarily difficult.

Why talk about race at work?

It's at work that most people are likely to find themselves with diverse groups of people and where a productive conversation about race might be most helpful. We may have coworkers who are in emotional pain and turmoil because of race-based events in the news, amplified by their own life experiences. But it can feel like a topic too dangerous to touch—the elephant in the room that, were we to acknowledge it, might rise up and hurt us.

But silence—the default response to uncomfortable subjects—can be hurtful. When White coworkers stay silent about incidents of racial violence and injustice, Black and other POC colleagues may read their silence as indifference. At a time when Black coworkers have a heightened need to feel safe and welcome in the workplace, they can feel shut out and isolated by silence.

Why it's so difficult to talk about race

Many workers and managers have had some form of diversity training, including the concepts that people see the world through different lenses and that their reactions to situations are grounded in different life experiences. When it comes to issues of race, those lenses and life experiences can be so different that people have trouble listening to and really hearing each other.

One of the biggest obstacles to open and honest conversation about race is defensiveness among White people, rooted in fear of being perceived as racist or ignorant. If you believe that racists are bad people and that racism is defined as the conscious dislike of people who are different from you, then it's natural to react defensively to any suggestion that you have bias. It's common to hear comments like, "I'm colorblind when it comes to race." Or, "But I have a good friend who is _____. " That defensiveness tends to shut down conversations and close minds.

A way to get past defensiveness is to accept that bias is a natural part of being human—to acknowledge your own biases and observe how they affect your perceptions of other people, not as a bad thing, but as a way to learn and grow.

The other big obstacle to talking about race is its close connection with power in our society. Race is a concept that has been used throughout our history to strengthen White privilege and prevent Black people from full and equal participation. It's comforting to think that our country moved past that after the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s, and that today every citizen has equal opportunities in life. But that rosy view ignores the enduring legacies of redlining, educational inequalities, obstacles to voting, and the racial aspects of mass incarceration (to give an abbreviated list).

For a White person to accept the enduring legacies of racial discrimination is to admit that they have succeeded on an uneven playing field. That can be another trigger to defensiveness.

How to talk about race at work

Having productive conversations about race requires a willingness, especially among White coworkers and managers, to get uncomfortable and at the same time to take special care to be respectful. Honest and open conversations about race can be hard and can take courage. Managers have a special role in initiating these kinds of conversations for a team, but anyone can reach out to a coworker at work to talk.

If you're ready to stretch yourself, connect at a deeper level with your coworkers at work, and help create a mutually supportive work environment, here are some suggestions for taking those first steps. (Black coworkers and managers are likely to be very aware of how deeply issues of race impact relationships in our society; they may be tired of talking about race or reluctant to have these conversations in a time of emotional pain but probably don't need help knowing where to start. These suggestions are primarily for White coworkers and managers.)

Ask for help.

Your human resources (HR) or training department may be able to facilitate a discussion with your team. Having a structure for the conversation and a moderator with experience in helping people talk about race can help make difficult conversations feel safer. Your employee assistance program can also help. It offers help to anyone in emotional pain and has specialists who can help managers prepare for difficult conversations.

Reach out.

After an incident of racial violence, some of the people on your team, including you, may be experiencing strong emotions. They may be angry. They may be concerned about what the future will hold for their children. If you see someone suffering alone, perhaps putting on their game face for meetings, reach out with your support. A basic "How are you doing?" may get a pat response. A more heartfelt outreach is probably needed. Share your own feelings about what has happened and steps you are taking or thinking about taking to combat racism, then offer support and an ear to listen.

Invite, but don't force conversation.

Show that you want to offer your personal support because you care about your coworkers as people. But, if you are White, beware of making overtures to Black and other POC coworkers simply to make yourself feel better. Well-meaning messages of compassion from White to Black coworkers with a "No need to respond" ending can be perceived as disinterest in real conversation. When you reach out, do it with a genuine interest in listening, learning, and helping.

When a coworker is willing to share their thoughts and feelings on race, practice active listening. Don't judge or get defensive. Don't interrupt. Listen and ask questions to understand, not with half your mind planning your response. There is no "solution" you can provide to the pain and anger a coworker feels about racial injustice, but listening and acknowledging those emotions can help everyone feel valued.

Pay attention to your own lens for seeing the world.

As you have conversations about race, pay special attention to your viewpoint and your assumptions, which are grounded in your own life experiences. When someone shares different views, based on different assumptions and different life experiences, be aware of how your perspective may affect the way you hear them. Be willing to look at the world from different perspectives, and acknowledge that there can be truth in different viewpoints.

Don't be afraid to make mistakes.

Conversations about race can be awkward. You're reaching across a chasm of different life experiences and different foundational beliefs. When your statements are challenged, don't take it as a personal attack. This is an opportunity for learning and growth. Expect to stumble at times. Suppress your inclination to get defensive. Keep asking questions to figure out how you tripped up or caused offense.

Don't put the burden on Black coworkers

to start or lead the conversations about race, or to educate you or others on your team. It's a common mistake to ask individuals to speak as representatives of a group. That can be a deeply offensive request. Each individual on your team is an expert on their own life experience. If they are willing, they might share insight into that. Or they may choose not to.

Make an effort to learn about the context of race.

Racial inequality and racial tensions are not new phenomena. They're troubling because they have such deep roots in our history and have proved so difficult to overcome. It can help you understand different perspectives on race and have more informed conversations if you explore the wealth of material on the subject.

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Learning more

Here is a very brief selection of resources on race and racial bias. You can find more extensive lists by searching for "anti-racism resources" on the web.

[The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America](#)
by Richard Rothstein (Liveright, 2017)

[How to Be an Anti-Racist](#)

by Ibram X. Kendi (One World, 2019)

[Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption](#)

by Bryan Stevenson (One World, 2014). Also, a 2019 feature-length film.

[Me and White Supremacy](#)

by Layla F. Saad (Sourcebooks, 2020)

[So You Want to Talk About Race](#)

by Ijeoma Olou (Seal Press, 2018)

[White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide](#)

by Carol Anderson (Bloomsbury, 2016)

[13th—a feature length documentary](#)

by Ava Duvarnier (Netflix, 2016)

cont.

One helpful way for White coworkers to gain insight into the lived experiences of racism among their Black coworkers—without asking every Black coworker to share personal stories over and over again—is to listen to first-hand accounts of Black people sharing these kinds of experiences. Here are two short pieces that include samples of these personal stories:

[Story of Access](#)

An 8-minute video documentary created by Stanley Nelson, used as part of Starbucks racial awareness training for all associates in 2018.

[Why They're Protesting](#)

The June 5, 2020 episode of the New York Times podcast, The Daily.

These two short videos are also worth watching:

[The Look](#)

An anti-racism ad created by Procter & Gamble.

[Before You Call the Cops](#)

The Tyler Merritt Project | Now This.

Adapted from:

Morgan, H. (2020, June 24). Talking About Race at Work (C. Meeker, Ed.). Raleigh, NC: Workplace Options.



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