



Guidelines for Authentic Conversations About Race

Achieving the goal of race equity, of truly removing the fortified racial barriers our country has built over time, requires dedicated people using effective tools at every stage of their work for social change. Advancing race equity is critical to achieving your organization's overall mission and is everyone's responsibility.

Candid conversations about race are not easy. They often elicit feelings of grief, anger, frustration and a fear of being judged or misunderstood. But authentic conversations about race are crucial. They allow perspectives to be exchanged, insights to be shared and beliefs and assumptions to be addressed in positive ways. Authentic conversations create understanding, growth and empathy. Most importantly, they are the first step in generating ideas and solutions for ending the unfairness that cause tremendous obstacles for the children, families and communities at the heart of the work for social change.

Having authentic conversations about race requires the following:

Bring your best self. This requires self-knowledge and self-awareness. Self-knowledge allows you to see what causes you pain and conflict and enables you to embrace your contradictions and inconsistencies. It allows the space to work on things about yourself that you are not happy with. In turn, self-knowledge helps to prevent you from projecting your negative aspects onto other people. Bringing your best self also requires that you have a positive attitude, are willing to deeply explore your perspectives and remain open to the perspectives and experiences of others.

Be an active listener. Active listening involves paying full and careful attention to the other person, looking him or her in the eye, avoiding interruptions, reflecting your understanding, clarifying information, summarizing the other person's perspectives and sharing your own. Remember that most people need time to open up and might not be willing to immediately share their personal stories, hopes, fears and/or concerns.

Be kind and generous. Being kind is a vital way of bringing meaning to our own lives, as well as the lives of others. Kindness is about caring genuinely for others around you, wanting the best for them and recognizing in them the same wants, needs, aspirations and even fears that you may have. Being kind and generous allows us to communicate better with others, to be more self-compassionate and to be a positive force in other people's lives.

Stay engaged. Staying engaged requires you to be morally, emotionally, intellectually and socially involved in the conversation. Staying engaged means that you are listening with curiosity and willing to deepen your understanding. Staying engaged might also require you to sustain the conversation even when it gets uncomfortable or diverted.

Be open and suspend judgment. Listening with an open mind includes being receptive to the influence of others. You can suspend judgment by becoming aware of preconceived notions and listening to everything someone has to say before jumping to conclusions. Most importantly, suspending judgment also means listening to what the speaker has to say for understanding, not just to determine whether the speaker is right or wrong.

Speak your truth. Speaking your truth in authentic and courageous conversations about race requires a willingness to take risks. It means that you will be absolutely honest and candid about your own thoughts, feelings, experiences and opinions and not just saying what you perceive others want to hear. Speaking your truth will require you to speak from the “first person” and use “I” statements.

“Lean in” to discomfort. Leaning in to discomfort will require you to let go of racial understandings and stereotypes that you may be holding onto in order to move forward. Leaning in means that you will avoid judgment, assume positive intent and be open to the kernel of wisdom in each individual’s experiences. Leaning in to discomfort will require you to sit through moments of embarrassment, confusion, anxiety and/or fear.

Enable empathy and compassion. Empathy and compassion allow you to understand the other person’s point of view. When you are empathetic, you are more understanding, patient and kind. Expanding your capacity to feel empathy will also allow others to enter your circle of human concern.

Expect and accept that there may not be closure. It is not likely that you will resolve your personal understanding about race or another person’s racial experience in a single conversation. The more you talk about race with another person, the more you learn and the more they will learn. Authentic and productive conversations about race are continuous and always evolving.