NORMS

Norms for engaging in conversations about racism and privilege are not the same norms used when you are meeting to discuss budget or other general organizational issues. These norms are designed to intentionally counter some of the norms of dominant white culture. When norms are not explicitly talked about, they favor those who are best versed in the dominant culture. When setting up the norms for any meeting you are telling participants what is to be expected, in some cases, what are “normal” experiences they are likely to have. Norms are essential for setting the tone and letting people know what to expect in themselves and of one another.

Stay Engaged
- It’s important that you try to stay present in the room. Pay attention to when you are shutting down. Discomfort and anxiety are normal parts of courageous conversations.
- If you find yourself needing to stand up, please do so. If you find yourself drifting, use strategies that will help you stay present.
- Stay with the topic. When you feel discomfort it’s easy to take the conversation some place different. Resist the urge to change the topic to another ism. One reason it’s hard to stay on the topic of racism is because it can bring up issues of guilt, shame and anger. However difficult it may become, we want you to stay engaged in the race conversation.
- Checking out of the conversation when it becomes uncomfortable is one form of privilege protection.

Speak Your Truth
- The purpose of having these conversations is to be able to speak our truths about our experiences. If not here, where? If not now, when?
- We often avoid speaking our truth for fear of what others might say. It’s important that we create an environment where everyone is free to speak openly so that learning can occur.
- Keep in mind that people are in different places in this work. In order for us to grow, it’s important people are able to share their thoughts in a way that’s comfortable for them.
- When we share our thoughts, it often creates an emotional reaction from others. Being able to speak your truth does not mean that people will not respond emotionally. Be prepared to experience the discomfort that race conversations bring.
- Speaking our truth does not mean stomping on each other’s heads. Before speaking, think about what it is that you want others to know. How can they best hear you? Whose interests are being served? When speaking are you creating enemies or allies? When you speak, are you speaking to put others down or put them in their place, or are you speaking so that new learning can occur for others in the room?
- Remember that everyone does not communicate in the same way that you do. If
someone gets loud in the room, it doesn’t mean they are angry. If they are angry, it doesn’t necessarily mean they are angry with you. If they are angry with something you said, it doesn’t mean that that person no longer has a relationship with you. Often times these conversations bring up a lot of emotions from past and present experiences. Try and allow others to experience their emotions without your shutting down.

- One of the characteristics of dominance is to speak as if you represent all people’s perspectives, rather than your own. We call this the “universal you” as in, “You know how we enjoy chocolate?” The universal you also allows you to say something without taking personal ownership of your opinions. Try to avoid the universal you and instead speak for yourself by making “I” vs. “We” statements.

**No Fixing**

- It is human nature to want to fix other people’s pain and discomfort, particularly when they are crying or are clearly distressed. However, it’s important that we let each person in the room experience their own discomfort and not fix it for them. This is a part of their learning.

- Sometimes people will want to “fix” each other by reassuring them about their lack of stereotypes or racism. This is often the case when they share that identity with the person who is acknowledging their biases. For example, a white woman telling another white woman she’s not prejudice. If you find yourself wanting to fix someone, explore what might be coming up about your own identity.

- If you find yourself wanting to “fix” a situation or make someone feel better, pause for a moment and reflect on what is going on in you.

**Experience Discomfort**

- One way to think about this is, learn to become comfortable with the discomfort. In other words, being uncomfortable is to be expected.

- If you are not feeling any sense of discomfort in the dialogue, ask yourself are you fully engaged? Are you giving of yourself fully and taking risks?

- Many people confuse safety and comfort. You can have perfectly safe conversations where people are very uncomfortable.

- Often, people who are experiencing oppression will be blamed for making members of the dominant culture uncomfortable. You may hear, “Race wasn’t an issue before these workshops created all the problems.” Avoiding conversations for the sake of comfort serves to reinforce white privilege.

**Take Risks**

- The more you are willing to risk, the more potential you have to learn.

- By staying silent out of the fear of saying something wrong, avoiding conflict, or making someone else uncomfortable, you miss the opportunity to authentically engage with one another. You also miss out on the opportunity to grow in your understanding.
**Listen for Understanding**

- Try and understand where another person is coming from as best you can.
- Be careful not to compare your experiences with another person’s. For example, saying gender oppression is the same as racial oppression. This often invalidates or minimizes a person’s experiences.
- Listen without thinking about how you are going to respond.
- Stay present in their pain and your discomfort as you listen.
- If someone is pointing out how what you said left them feeling, try not to explain or rationalize what you said or why you said it. For example, sometimes it’s necessary to just say, “I didn’t realize what I said was inappropriate,” or, “I didn’t mean to hurt you, I’m sorry.”
- Think about your comments before saying them. Resist the need to explain. Sometimes positive intent is not enough (intent vs. impact). Be careful not to lose the opportunity to just listen. Don’t put the focus back on you.

**Expect and Accept Non-closure**

- In our society today, we often want to feel some sense of closure, regardless of the issue. There will be fortunate situations where you will be able to resolve something between you and another person but more times than not it will feel unfinished. Sometimes you will have to circle back around at another time reconcile differences and other times you will have to sit with non-closure.
- Engaging in race conversations means there will be times of no closure. This is on-going work that does not necessarily leave one walking away feeling like everything turned out the way you hoped. Be willing to take risks and accept that much of this is about changing yourself, not others.
- White cultural norms focus on the product, rather than the process. These are process conversations where greater awareness leads to future changes.

**Note:** When we explain the norms we do not open up an opportunity for participants to provide suggestions for what norms they believe we should hold in the room. We take the lead as facilitators by naming these norms for them. When you allow participants to create their own norms, you run the risk of having to tell them early in the day that what they think doesn’t apply in this situation.