Leading difficult but essential conversations on topics such as racism, social injustices, bigotry and discrimination are not easy. Even professional facilitators and DEI practitioners can feel anxious about them. For the most part, employees and organizations would like to talk about these issues but don’t know where to start. Some individuals may worry that others won’t understand their point of view or that they may say something that will unintentionally offend.

This step-by-step guide can help you begin to have a conversation, despite these very real challenges. Recognizing that talking about racism can be challenging; your goals should be creating a safe space for people to be authentic and vulnerable and to strengthen communication and levels of trust that will pave the way for future conversations.

Tips on Facilitation

Talking about D&I can be complex. Very few people are experts in being able to discuss these tough issues. You are not expected to know the answers. Your role is to facilitate dialogue to increase openness, build awareness and understanding and to do your best to engage all perspectives and mindsets.

It is important to note that during these conversations, our own values and perspectives may be challenged. They are deeply ingrained in who we are and in what we believe. But our awareness of our personal values, emotions and control of our reactions to any opposition or individuals who think differently from us are absolutely essential in our role as facilitators. Remaining neutral and non-judgmental to create environments of openness and candor will provide a safe environment for dialogue. We must be aware of our “hot buttons,” even as we remain open to different perspectives. This includes being open to question our own conventional thinking.

As a facilitator or participant, be aware of your own “hot buttons.” It is important to recognize the words or topics that create visceral reactions for yourself. Be aware of those reactions, how you feel and how you respond to your own reactions. As a facilitator, be particularly aware and ensure you remain neutral in soliciting conversation and drawing out learnings.
To create a safe/brave space for these conversations you want to

**Clarify the purpose of the discussion**
- “Recent events have impacted our society, workplace and colleagues”
- “Opening the lines of communication will enable us to enhance understanding, strengthen support and trust for each other and help us to remain productive”
- “The ________ (e.g. racism/discrimination/disparities) impact all of us but particularly ________ (e.g. Black, LGBTQ) communities”

**Establish Ground Rules**
- “I’d like to create a safe space for our team to explore, to listen and to learn from each other.”
- “It’s important to be open, authentic”
- “We must feel safe to speak without repercussions”
- “We will review ground rules/set agreements”
- “Here are some ground rules I would like to start with:
  - Assume good intentions
  - Don’t blame or belittle
  - Practice Active Listening. One person speaks at a time.
  - Everyone’s perspectives should be heard
  - Don’t interrupt
  - It’s okay to make mistakes. (agree to use terms like “oops”/“ouch” if you say something you didn’t mean or if it feels wrong)
  - Speak from your personal perspective, use “I” statements
  - “I feel frustrated about what I’m seeing/what you said because…”
  - “I’m conflicted because I’ve tried to be an ally but it’s not been received well”
- “I hear what you are saying but my experience has been different”
- [Ask participants to add others]
- Assume a curious and positive intent. When someone says something that could be offensive, or makes someone uncomfortable, it is much easier to respond to those statements if you assume that the person did not mean to offend. Ask questions to understand the intention.

**Set the tone. Set the Context**

**Be authentic and vulnerable**
- “I’ve never held a discussion like this. I don’t know what to expect.”
- “I may make mistakes. I’m learning as we go. Assume good intent”
- “I hope we all look at this as a learning opportunity. But I think it’s important to address.”

**Acknowledge your reality, speak from your experience**
- “I don’t want to assume I know everything”
- “I want to speak from my personal perspective only. I encourage each of you to do the same”
- “I feel it’s important to talk about this as an organization/team.”
- “This situation has made me feel______________”

**Align to the business case and your corporate values**
- “Here at [ABC company] we value DE&I.”
- “What we have seen across the country/around the globe has deeply impacted our communities, our colleagues, our clients, stakeholders and markets.”
- Share your organization’s values, mission, objectives of DE&I and why it’s critical to your business.
Now you are ready to start the conversation.

**Begin with a conversation starter to help everyone feel included.**

**Possible Conversation Starters:**

° “Let’s go around the room. On a scale of 1-10, with 10 being “Really Comfortable” to 1 being “Really Uncomfortable”. How are each of you feeling right now?” Start by sharing your rating.

° Open the dialogue and ask. “Would anyone like to share why they rated this question this way?”

° “Lets go around the room. Share one word that describes how you are feeling about the current events.”

° Comment on what you just heard, common themes.

° Ask individuals if they feel comfortable sharing more of what they are feeling.

° Consider using a quote or short reading that is relevant to the topic as a jumping off point.

**Deepen the Conversation.**

Delve deeper into the discussion and issues by probing for understanding. Lead with good intent of curiosity and listening. Here are a few sample questions. We recommend having 4-5 questions to consider. The list below are some ideas but the ones you use will, of course, depend on the topic of your conversation.

° How comfortable do you feel talking about race or ethnic identity (scale of 1-10 or open ended)?

° How often do you think about racism, bigotry?

° What do you wish your colleagues knew?

° What support do you need from your colleagues? Your employer?

° What do you find most difficult about having an effective dialogue?

° Have you experienced any barriers to success related to your race, religion or sexual orientation?

° Have you witnessed prejudice or discrimination at work? What happened? What could have been done differently?

° Do you feel comfortable being yourself at work?

° Are there aspects of your identity that you keep to yourself, separate from the workplace and your work team?

° Have you ever felt isolated because of your race, religion or sexual orientation?

° What can we do better as a company to create an emotionally safe, and respectful work environment and facilitate your success and sense of inclusion?

° What can you do as an employee/manager to help create a respectful and inclusive work environment?

° How often do you feel you are walking on eggshells when it comes to navigating diversity, specifically gender or race differences at work? Do you have a specific example to share? What’s causing the ‘walking on eggshells feeling?’

° What are conversations you don’t think you can have candidly in a mixed race (co-ed, diverse) setting in your organization? What are you most afraid of regarding having honest and open discussions on race (or gender, disability, LGBTQ+, inequity, etc) ?

° What would need to happen for you to have those conversations candidly in a mixed/diverse setting?
Reflect and Rephrase

After a few people have shared, ask others to reflect on what they’ve heard and share what they related to or what stood out to them. Participants do not need to all agree, or find an antidote to issues like racism.

° As facilitator, steer participants away from blaming or belittling statements. Encourage participants to use “I” statements. (e.g. “I felt _____ when you said ____.”)

° Avoid common pitfalls:

° “I know how you feel” – while your intent may be to show empathy, it is not possible to put yourselves in anyone else’s shoes/mindset. Instead use “thank you for sharing how you feel. I can somewhat relate…”

° Expecting any participant to have the answers/speak on behalf of others. A common pitfall is to assume, for example, that Black employees should speak and can speak for all Blacks or a white male should speak for all white males.

When concluding a discussion like this, it is essential that the participants understand what the next steps are to continue to support them and to take action to affect change.

Support.

Ask your team if there’s anything you or the company can do to support them.

° Some example of best practice organizations are offering:

° Time off or flexible hours to look after their mental health.

° Increase in EAP services /benefits

° Time off for protesting, community service

° Assessment of work deliverables, such as re-evaluation deadlines to allow some breathing room.

° "Listening/restoration” Circles (hosting frequent meetings dedicated to listening)

Take notes and ensure comments are documented.

Commitment to Action

Start with yourself and then ask individuals to share

° One thing they learned from this discussion

° One thing they are committed to doing as a result of this session

Offer up some suggestions such as:

° Have more discussions

° Lobby your school district to review and diversify curriculum

° Educate yourself on local policies, laws

° Talk to your children about racism, discrimination

Summarize commitments or actions needed by you/the organization. Assign follow up to the actions.

Thank the participants for sharing their feelings with you and the others.

It takes a lot of courage to open up, so acknowledge that.

° Reaffirm your commitment to supporting them through this.

° Reiterate your commitment and summarize some of the actions needed

° Reassure that this conversation is just the start, but you’ve made a positive step forward.

° Reaffirm next steps and Close
Additional Facilitation Tips

- Listen more, speak less once the dialogue starts. This is the chance for you to hear from your employees. (e.g. practice active listening. When there is a pause, stay quiet for a few beats and see if they want to speak some more.)

- Establish strategies for everyone to participate, and to be heard.
  - “I’ve never thought of that before – could you explain why you think that?”
  - “We haven’t heard from everyone/all of you”
  - “Let’s hear from others to make sure everyone gets a chance to speak”

- Monitor the “stress”/“tension” of the group. Announce a strategy for brief “breather breaks” or “hitting the restart button”, if the conversation veers into spaces that are too conflicted or unproductive.

- Ensure ground rules are followed (if needed, consider selecting a couple of participants/HR to be responsible for helping everyone abide by the ground rules.)

- Look to your HR and Employee Resource Groups to help plan and support these discussions.

- Consider using readings, text or video to ground the conversation. This ensures a consistent starting place for everyone and a place to come back to for the facilitator throughout the discussion.

- Create a follow up process to receive suggestions for actions participants might suggest as a result of these conversations and, more importantly, a process to respond to them.

- It’s okay to be vulnerable and share your feelings. This often sets the safe space for others to do the same. This is where the real learning often happens.

- Avoid the common pitfall of the “Spotlight Effect.” It is not the job of underrepresented or historically marginalized individuals to educate others or be the spokesperson for everyone who represents a certain dimension of diversity. Be careful not to place undue emphasis on any one individual.

Suggested reading/video prompts to use as conversation starters

**CNN’s The First Time I Remember Being Black**
Video Series
CNN asked celebrities, CNN anchors and reporters, and others to tell us when they first realized that being black affected how people treated them. All the videos are under two minutes.

**All That We Share**  Three-minute video focuses on what unites, rather than divides us.

**Neil DeGrasse Tyson**, noted Astrophysicist, discusses the barriers he faced as a Black Man to achieve his professional dreams.

**OpEd by Roxane Gay: Noone Is Coming to Save Us**
Although too long to read together, you can either ask people to read the whole piece in advance, or choose an especially compelling quote from it to read as a prompt.