



Reach your potential

Race and Diversity Conversations for Organizations

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Introduction:

It is time for civil and healthy conversations about race, justice, equity, diversity and inclusion in America. The 2020 shootings of Tanisha Anderson, Rayshard Brooks, Michael Brown, Michelle Cusseaux, George Floyd, Tamir Rice, Breonna Taylor and scores of others have prompted the awareness of racial injustice in America. These injustices have created a wave of civil unrest against systemic racism towards Black people in the United States. The killing of George Floyd triggered a nationwide movement called “Black Lives Matter”. We have seen peaceful protests and even riots over the past few months which signal that there is a real problem with racism in America. These recent events have shown that race is a topic that has been long overdue. This topic is a difficult conversation to have because it is one that is highly sensitive and emotional. It is important to understand that the United States has a deep history of racism and oppression. Though some progress has been made, explicit and implicit racism still exist. Angela Davis said it best when she said, “In a racist society, it is not enough to be non-racist. We must be antiracist.” Davis contends that we must break down implicit biases, deconstruct preconceived notions about race, and educate ourselves on matters pertaining to race. These are the steps that must be made toward being an active advocate against racial injustice.

The unrest around race has prompted many organizations in the United States to evaluate their systems, yet leaders of these organizations do not know where to begin in making sure that their organizational cultures exhibit justice and equity. Many organizations are in the process of launching JEDI (justice, equity, diversity, inclusion) or REDI (race, equity, diversity, inclusion) initiatives. Some organizations have created a new department or division called “Office of Diversity and Inclusion” and have hired directors of those departments to address the issues in their organizations. Leaders are ready to engage in conversations, be advocates of justice, and champion change. Conversations are critical when tackling the issue of racial injustice. We need to be cognizant and informed of the fundamental issues related to it. Creating purposeful dialogue on race helps to be better equipped in fighting injustices. Systemic change is necessary in creating the equality that marginalized communities deserve, and educated conversations can be the first steps in making that change. These conversations cannot be organic. They have to be intentional because people need psychologically safe spaces to process the issues. Anglo organizational leaders do not feel safe initiating these conversations out of fear that they are not educated on the issues related to race plus they do not have the experience of injustice. Black leaders are inhibited out of fear of being perceived as self-serving or even militant. In spite of the inhibitions and fears, these conversations are needed. This can best be done by a professional facilitator who can guide the discussion around racial injustice. This is an important role because an expert facilitator will understand the issues that need to be discussed and can manage the high levels of emotions that surround these issues. Facilitators can create those safe places because of their skills in leading people to share their thoughts, feelings and experiences, while encouraging others to listen with an open mind and demonstrate empathy.



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The Problem:

The problem to understand and address is structural racism. Structural racism is a term that refers to all the factors that produce and maintain racial inequities in America today. We find these in most organizations. They can be explicit or implicit, but in most cases, they are implicit. Many organizations do not even see these biases in their structures and systems. That is why conversations are needed. Listening with empathy allows people to reveal their thoughts, feelings and experiences and exposes injustices that need to be changed. Structural racism is rooted in certain aspects of our history and culture that have allowed the privileges associated with “whiteness” and the disadvantages associated with “color” to endure and adapt within our systems. Norms, behaviors and practices become imbedded in organizational culture and systems, and often are not challenged. The Aspen Institute, in their Community Change Project on Racial Equity and Community Building identified institutional norms that create inequity. We will consider those norms.

Institutional Policies

These are rules or laws that directly allocate resources within organizations. These policies indirectly influence the distribution of resources. Policies are principles adopted by organizations that drive their actions. Often there is implicit biases in these policies and they can be very subtle. That is why institutions need to evaluate their systems to ensure that policies are fair and equitable.

Institutional Practices

Policies drive practices. Institutional practices are the cultural norms, decision-making standards and operating procedures of organizations. They can seem race-neutral, but can generate racially biased outcomes. Leaders of organizations may fail to see these biases, which is why organization audits are important. An outside view can help organizational leaders uncover these unfair practices.

Cultural Representations

These representations are perspectives and viewpoints that are unfounded. They are the frames, popular images and stereotypes of people of color. These images are often seen as unbiased and harmless but can be damaging to creating and achieving a genuine culture of equality.

Progress and Retrenchment

This aspect describes the dynamics of the struggle for racial equity. Historically, racial equity has gained some ground, but has been threatened, undermined and eroded by efforts to reinforce white privileges in other areas. Organizations must guard against this inclination and tendency.

The topic of racism has a legacy that is very complex, brutally ugly and deeply personal. Many organizational leaders do not want to address those issues in the workplace because those discussions can become emotional. Discussions around race, equity and justice often are discouraged because of the perception that they can be divisive or unproductive. Diversity and inclusion initiatives and tools

did not start in 2020 with the Black Lives Movement, the protests or even the riots. Organizations have used these tools since the 1990's. Unfortunately, those efforts have proven to be insufficient.



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The tools and practices that were prevalent in the 90's were insufficient for racial equity work because they focused on "Velcro-ing" new guidelines, practices and programs onto the existing structures and culture of the workplace in an attempt to help employees of color better fit in and succeed. In addition to being insufficient; they were also racist practices in nature. Rather than solving the problem, these approaches simply placed a band-aid on the problem. Instead of trying to change some people to fit the organization, the focus must be on transforming the organization to fit ALL people and employees. In other words, the culture and its values must be changed. Employees need the opportunity to work with the dignity of having their histories acknowledged and their life experiences valued.

The Approach:

For organizations to build a more inclusive culture, it is important to look at norms, values and practices in the institution that do not set the tone for equity. Leaders of organizations must commit time and resources to employees in helping them to learn about "people of color", understanding histories, breaking down personal biases, building empathy and respect for others and getting comfortable with vulnerability. This means that we cannot sweep race issues under the carpet. We need to have conversations in the workplace about these issues, but they must be intentional, organized and facilitated properly.

Dwight Smith, with Net Impact wrote a blog and offered these suggestions for having a meaningful conversation about race:

1. Approach the conversation with respect.
2. Put aside your own preconceptions.
3. Examine your motivations.
4. Embrace the discomfort of not knowing.
5. Find out what you don't know.
6. Listen and be open to questions.
7. Internalize what you've learned.
8. Commit yourself to change.
9. Acknowledge your privilege.
10. Get comfortable with your story.

The Discussion Forum:

It is important that all participants come to the meeting with the ten suggestions offered by Smith above. The facilitator is the key to having an effective and meaningful discussion that is both honest and healthy. He/she will state the purpose of the meeting, stress the relational uniqueness of everyone

present and invite people to freely share and listen to others. The facilitator will also set norms for the meeting to ensure that the conversation remains rational, even though the topic could be sensitive and emotional.



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Suggested Questions for Discussion

1. How do you feel about the racial situation in American today? Do you feel we are making progress or are we moving backward?
2. Do you feel that it is not enough to be non-racist, but to also be anti-racist?
3. You don't know what you don't know until you know it. What do you need to know about "people of color"?
4. How do you feel about the term "color-blindness"?
5. Where do you see explicit bias (may need some explanation) in our culture? What needs to be done to change it?
6. Where do you see implicit bias in our society? What needs to be done to change it?
7. What area have I experienced "white privilege" while others were disadvantaged?
8. What policies, practices and systems in our organization show bias and inequity?
9. What does our organization need to do to shift the culture to be more diverse and inclusive?
10. What does our organization need to do to promote justice and equity beyond our own organization?

Reading List

- "How to be an Antiracist" by Ibram X. Kendi
- "White Fragility" by Robin DiAngelo
- "Beloved" by Toni Morrison
- "The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness" by Michelle Alexander
- "Women, Race, & Class" by Angela Davis
- "Me and My White Supremacy: Combat Racism, Change the World, and Become a Good Ancestor" by Layla F. Saad
- "Slavery by Another Name" by Douglas A. Blackmon
- "Your Silence Will Not Protect You" by Audre Lorde
- "Why are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria" by Beverly Daniel Tatum
- "White Rage" by Carol Anderson
- "Eyes of Justice" by James Cabezas