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How to have difficult conversations about race at work

Principles, steps and considerations for organisations on how to have conversations about race with their employees

The importance of inclusion and awareness of race disparities in the workplace are not new subjects for most. The death of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter protests brought into sharp focus the extent of racial disparity across all walks of society, and introduced less familiar concepts such as anti-black racism, allyship, anti-racism, white advantage and black lives matter. People are now learning about the realities and lived experience of many, and as they do, they are experiencing feelings of guilt, anger, fear, confusion and sadness.

With such a far-reaching societal impact it's of little surprise that the conversation about race has made its way into the workplace. Our relationship with race is teemed with pain, inequity, injustice and discomfort, and so these conversations can evoke strong emotions. But, while they have the potential to become divisive, if handled sensitively, they can prove to be liberating, and help to connect people as they explore lived experiences, understand the historic and current context of race, whilst committing to work towards a fair and equal society together. People professionals are ideally placed to help enable these conversations. As such, this guide lays out the key advice, options and considerations for people professionals to bear in mind when having conversations about race in the workplace.

1. Things to do/consider *before* holding conversations about race

As the race conversation enters the workplace it's vital that the conversation is managed effectively, allowing for respectful expression, compassionate listening and shared

learning.

The time dedicated to preparing for your conversations about race will be a key determinant of how effective your conversations will be.

To achieve a positive outcome, organisations must take a considered, structured and compassionate approach, as outlined in the guide below, which lays out the key considerations and options to explore when approaching how to have conversations about race in the workplace.

Reflect on the culture of the organisation

Tough conversations require openness, bravery, the ability to work through discomfort, express views in a non-combative manner, and to listen and reflect without judgement. People teams should consider the organisational culture, values and whether it has experience of having candid conversations and receiving feedback.

Where open and constructive conversation is the norm, there's a strong likelihood that the organisation is ready to have conversations about race. Reminding your employees about your values, principles and organisational approach of honesty and openness would be a great idea.

Example: Our organisational values of compassionate honesty, looking after each other and listening to understand will support us all as we share and learn about each other's experience of race.

Where open conversations are *not* yet part of the organisation culture, consider some preparatory work to increase your people's readiness for these conversations. This might mean engaging the team in concepts such as growth mindset (specifically being open to learning, seeking knowledge and seeing mistakes as opportunities to learn), coaching principles, suspending judgement and active listening. Although training courses and development around these concepts would be ideal, organisations can also share articles, deliver webinars and use existing communication channels to communicate and plant seeds around these concepts, as well as adapting the approaches followed by other organisations to suit their own unique context.

See the CIPD's anti-racism hub for examples of ways in which the CIPD is continually using content and communication channels to source, encourage and build on feedback to enhance its anti-racism content:

- Webinars tackling the issues, questions and challenges people and organisations face in creating safe, inclusive workspaces

- Listening exercises to encourage CIPD members to communicate how they think the

organisation can best support black and ethnic minority people professionals

- Guidance designed to help people professionals develop an effective anti-racism strategy

- Practical advice on establishing an employee resource group (ERG) for black and ethnic minority employees, with references to the CIPD's own ERG, EmbRACE.

Make the connection to your organisation

Any initiative stands a greater chance of adoption if it's aligned to – and supportive of – the organisation's objectives and aims. As such, people professionals should consider – and then clearly communicate – how the race conversations align with and support the organisation's espoused culture, purpose, mission, values and behaviours.

Example communications message: *Our organisation's mission is to do no harm, yet it's come to our attention that a large proportion of our people may have been suffering harm in their everyday lives. We want to understand what their experience is in our organisation and then work together to address this to ensure that ALL our people feel valued.*

In addition, links should be made to the organisation's people strategy and inclusion strategy. What are the stated goals and ambitions, and how does the race conversation align with them? If these organisational strategies do not yet include race, now's the time to rectify this and use the learnings from recent global events and the internal race conversations to address any internal disparities that exist in your organisation.

Set the intention

It's vital that the intended outcomes of the race conversations are clear for leadership and people teams alike, as this will shape key decisions – such as how the conversations are to be conducted and who will participate. This will also shape the messages that the organisation communicates to its employees and will allow the organisation to assess the effectiveness of its approach to the conversations.

Consider:

- what the organisation hopes to learn
- whether the leadership team is ready to listen to and engage with feedback
- whether the leadership team is prepared to change its approach in response to feedback
- what the organisation will do with the information learnt
- how this will feed into the employee experience

- who will be involved in the conversations
- who will facilitate the conversations (this would ideally be a skilled individual with lived experience of race; consider using an external facilitator to maintain confidentiality, credibility and increase psychological safety)
- what follow-up there will be
- what further action will be taken.

Get the organisation ready

As the current deep exploration of race is new to us as a society, most organisations will have little to no race fluency right now. In order to reduce the likelihood of taking missteps it's advisable to ensure that there's a basic level of race fluency in your organisation. There are many great resources available which can support your organisation in understanding key terms and updating your people on current language and meanings. The CIPD's continually updated anti-racism hub is a good place to start.

Some key terms to understand when discussing race:

Anti-black racism: 'The specific exclusion and prejudice against people visibly (or perceived to be) of African descent – what most of us would commonly call black people,' – Runnymede Trust.

Non-racist versus anti-racist: Non-racist behaviour is actively not engaging in racist behaviour – for example, not getting involved if racist jokes are told in your presence. Anti-racist behaviour is actively challenging racist behaviour – for example, stopping the racist joke, stating that you find it unacceptable and explaining why you hold those views. See the BBC Bitesize video to understand the difference between non-racist and anti-racist.

White privilege/white advantage: The benefit in some societies or situations that a white person can have over a non-white person of similar social and economic circumstances. The CIPD acknowledges that there is limited research to explain or quantify white privilege, but recognises that it is an accepted term, and a lived experience for many. For more information on the topic, see this BBC Bitesize video.

White fragility: This describes the state in which white people are unable to cope with or process the information they receive about racism, whether that be lived experiences or racial disparity data. This results in a range of responses, including:

- Emotional: Anger, fear, feeling insulted or attacked
- Defensiveness: Arguing, dismissing, explaining or diminishing the information presented to them or the person presenting the information
- Detracting: Speaking about other discrimination, talking about reverse racism

- Disengaging: Silence, or leaving the conversation altogether.

It's important to understand white fragility as this often derails open conversations about race. While it can be difficult and uncomfortable to discuss issues of race, it's important that the conversations continue to take place. This will allow for the discomfort to ease in time and for progress to be made towards racial parity.

BAME: BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) and BME (Black Minority Ethnic) are terms widely used in government departments. The terms have come under much scrutiny, with a growing mass of opinion against the use of them. See ourFAQs about race in the workplace for more information on this.

We advise that you refer to your people by their specific ethnic identity (for example, 'our black colleagues'). It's especially important to do this if you're discussing issues that affect black employees, such as anti-black racism.

Colour-blind: This is the idea that people can choose not to see colour (or race) and therefore should in theory treat everyone in the same way. While it's easy to see good intention behind this, the outcome is that the issues of racial disparities, discrimination and racialised privilege that exist in our society are not seen, are largely ignored, and are therefore allowed to persist. Furthermore, heritage, culture and customs are often linked to race, and many feel that asserting colour-blindness means that there's a failure to see the whole person, which is another unintentional negative outcome.

Equip managers and leaders

Once conversations about race in the workplace begin, it's likely that the issue, emotions and conversations themselves will spill out into other interactions between your people. As such, it's vital to equip leaders, managers and individuals with tools to deal with this, such as:

- suggested ways to pause/reframe conversations if the context is inappropriate
- support from the organisation's employee assistance programme to manage feelings for all employees
- coaching for individuals who require further support – those affected by race discrimination and for those who feel challenged by their new learnings
- reminders and cues from safe space conversations rules and agreements (detailed below).

Communicate

The success of the conversations will depend on when and how they're communicated. Employees should understand why the conversations are taking place, and how they fit into the organisational context and the intended outcomes. Keep communications

simple, honest and direct. Communication should, as a minimum, include information on:

- the societal context of the race conversations
- the importance of these conversations for your organisation: Make links to your inclusion strategy, values and current performance. Be transparent about where you should be doing better
- how the conversations will take place: Information on how you will maintain confidentiality, who will facilitate them, where and when.
- who will be involved in the conversation – and the rationale behind this
- what you will do with the feedback from the conversations: Are you committing to changing strategies and processes based on the feedback, or are you just gaining understanding at this stage?
- why you believe your employees should engage in these conversations
- the fact that the conversation is uncomfortable for all parties. Black employees and non-black employees of colour who often fear reprisals for speaking out, and white employees who often feel fearful of making mistakes or feel attacked.
- what help and support is available for anyone who is challenged by the topic of racism.

Effective communication will set the right tone for the conversations and help everyone know what to expect.

2. Things to do/consider *when* holding conversations about race

When holding conversations about race in the workplace, a skilled facilitator will increase the likelihood of open conversations and experience-sharing. Poorly handled conversations can lead to misunderstandings and negative impacts on relationships and engagement in the organisation. Organisations can secure the support of an external facilitator with lived experience of race to support these conversations with credibility, sensitivity and confidentiality.

Safe space conversations

Conversations about emotional, sensitive or contentious issues must be held in a way that allows for open sharing, open receiving, mutual understanding, acknowledgement and then, if appropriate, shared problem solving. Conversations about race should be conducted in a safe space environment, to allow all employees to be heard, validated and to feel safe to respectfully express their experiences. Black, Asian and ethnic minority team members should feel able to safely share lived experiences and world views, while

white team members should seek understanding and share their perspectives too (this doesn't all need to necessarily take place in the same meeting). Key attributes of safe space conversations include the feeling of being free of:

- judgement
- minimisation of experiences
- consequences from expressing views.

Safe space conversations are also known as brave conversations or psychologically safe spaces – they refer to the same thing.

Creating a safe space conversation

Safe spaces are achieved by setting certain rules or agreements at the outset that govern how the meeting is conducted and how all participants act. They are designed to set the scene for discussing sensitive issues, allowing for compassionate sharing, the exploration of ideas and, ultimately, learning for all parties involved.

Key principles for safe space conversations:

- **Always maintain confidentiality.** While the content and themes can be shared outside of the meeting, agree that the discussions remain confidential and the comments and experiences will not be attributed to individuals.
- **Acknowledge different perspectives.** Recognise that individual worldviews are shaped by the experiences of the individual, many of which are determined by their culture, race, gender, sexuality, country of birth, media they consume, among other things.
- **Acknowledge fear.** It's likely that some people in the conversation will worry about reactions, responses or reprisals, so it's important that the communication and expression of views is done with compassion.
- **Acknowledge the feelings of others.** Participants in the conversation will have different perspectives, but these should not be dismissed, diminished or explained away.
- **Acknowledge that our interpretation of the actions or words of others may not be correct.** It's important to clarify meaning with compassionate curiosity.
- **Acknowledge the likely discomfort felt by those involved,** but communicate the importance of pushing through this discomfort, taking time to reflect on your discomfort and the learning that's on the other side.
- **Suspend judgement.** Don't rush to give meaning to what is expressed and shared; rather seek clarification with curious compassion.
- **Exercise humility.** Admit mistakes and accept that intent doesn't always deliver the desired outcome. Reflect on the feedback and seek to understand how to align your outcome with your intent more closely next time.

- **Use 'I' statements to describe your experience.** Speak from your perspective, own your thoughts and interpretations. Acknowledge that there will be different perspectives, and that these are also valid.
- **Accept that you have learning to do.** There is always learning from listening to new perspectives; acknowledge that this is a journey for you.
- **Know when to pause to reflect and learn.** There are times when it's good to pause for reflection and then come back to the conversation with a fresh and open perspective.
- **Seek shared meaning.** Look for the areas where you agree and start the conversation there. This is especially powerful when seeking to agree solutions and jointly solve the problem.

Potential questions and discussion starters for conversations on race in the workplace

While many of the conversations will encompass sharing of lived experience and reactions to recent racialised events (like the death of George Floyd), below are some suggested questions which can help to shape and continue the race conversations in your organisation:

- When did you first become aware of your race?
- How has your racial identity affected your life experience so far?
- How has your racial identity affected your world view?
- How has your racial identity affected your experience, as an employee, of your organisation?
- How has your racial identity affected your experience, as a customer, of your organisation? (If relevant.)
- How did the death of George Floyd affect you personally?
- How has the global reaction to the death of George Floyd impacted you?
- How have you felt about the increased focus and conversation about race in society and in the workplace?
- How do you feel we as an organisation have responded to the increased awareness of the issues of racial discrimination?
- Are you aware of any experiences of racial discrimination in our organisation, either your own experiences or those of others?
- Do you feel we do enough as an organisation to ensure equal opportunities for everyone?
- Do you feel we do enough as an organisation to build a culture where everyone can come to work and be themselves?
- What would you like to see us do more of to further black inclusion in our organisation?
- What would you like to see us do more of to further inclusion in our organisation?

- What else would you like us to be aware of?

3. Post-conversation communication and next steps

It's of course vital that changes are made as a result of the conversations, developing the next stage in learning, growth and change to progress towards developing an open and inclusive culture, where everyone has the opportunity to thrive.

The organisation will learn things that they were not aware of, and it's quite likely that the espoused values and good intentions have not been felt by all employees in the organisation. By listening to and reflecting on feedback, real change can be instigated.

Communicate

Your post-conversation communication should include the following:

- Gratitude for those who took part and recognition of the emotional energy spent by everyone.
- Key themes of the learnings gained from the conversations
- Links to your espoused values and mission as an organisation – does the feedback tell you that that you fall short of these?
- Commitments to action as a result of your learnings
- An indication of timelines of when employees will start to see the changes
- An indication of the part your employees are likely to play in the plans for change
- How you intend to keep the conversation going to continue to learn and hear the voices of underrepresented employees – periodic safe space conversations and expansion of the employee engagement survey to specifically ask questions about the impact of race in the workplace.

Conversations about race in the workplace demand investment in time and resources from the organisation and time and emotional energy from your employees – it's important to demonstrate that this investment is respected, appreciated and will lead to tangible change, and that the organisation actively demonstrates its commitment to equality and proving good work and opportunity for all.

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