

Guidance for Leaders: Engaging in Race Discussions



COLORADO
State Employee Assistance
Program
CSEAP

Common Questions

What if I say the wrong thing?

Since we cannot fully understand someone's [felt experience](#) and/or [lived experience](#), we will undoubtedly be imperfect in our responses. Understand that each person's experience is unique and that personal and [historical trauma](#) can have varying impacts on individuals and communities. It's important to be socially aware by recognizing and responding to cues that suggest your response is offensive, falling flat, or is creating more pain.

We might not have all the answers but we do have control over how we respond when asked pointed questions or questions asked in a harmful or offensive manner. Be prepared with general responses to potentially difficult questions. Consider responses like:

- It seems like this is really [important to, painful for, upsetting to] you. I don't have a full response right now; can I research this further and get back to you?"
- I am willing to learn more about this; Can you tell me more?
- I want to take some more time to think this over, can we plan a time to talk more?
- Also review these suggested [strategies for responding](#) when you've been called out.
- If you offer a response that suggests you need more time, or an opportunity to research, ALWAYS follow-up with more information or a thoughtful response.

What are 'blindspots' and how do I become aware of them?

Blind spots are hidden or [implicit biases](#) that we hold as social groups. We can uncover blind spots by building self-awareness. However, becoming self-aware takes time - especially given the ingrained nature of our behaviors due to socialization, life experiences, and limited exposure to communities that are different from ours. You can become self-aware of blindspots by paying attention to internal cues (defensiveness regarding privilege, blaming the minority or disenfranchised population, identifying explanations or reasons for the behaviors of those in power or those with privilege, being resistant to changes that could lead to inclusion or opportunity for all). See DiAngelo's [work](#) on our conscious and unconscious beliefs about racism. We can become aware of blindspots by openly listening to the experiences of others.

What if someone accuses me (or I feel accused) of being racist?

There is a prominent theme of shame when having conversations about race. Feeling accused might mean you feel personally responsible to solve racism. Consider ways to depersonalize this conversation for yourself and while in your meetings:

- In Meetings: "I understand this is very important to you. I want this to be a place for me to get feedback from our team so that DPA can address these concerns systemically."
- Within yourself: "This isn't about me" "I'm only here to listen." "I'm creating a new workplace culture by being open to this conversation about race."

How do I listen without immediately offering suggestions?

Active listening is imbued with the spirit of understanding the personal and lived experience of a person or group of people. Consider the following when responding to your employees:

- Am I making this conversation about me?
- Am I trying to deeply understand what this person is telling me?
- Am I asking (instead of assuming) how to best support this person or group?
- Am I reflecting back the other person's points or feelings?
- Am I asking the other person to 'help me understand' or 'tell me more' instead of offering answers?

Read more about *active listening skills* - [4-Part NVC Process](#), [Active Listening](#), and [Validation](#).

What if someone denies that [racism](#) exists?

Statements that deny racism or racial injustice will not benefit from a 'tell me more about that' approach - especially if the purpose of your listening session or discussion is to engage employees in discussing inclusivity (or lack of) in the work environment. Try to find a 'nugget' or piece of information from which to take the conversation in a different direction. For example, if a participant states, "I don't see color ... I treat everyone the same," thank them and prompt others to talk with a statement like, "I'm interested in what others have to share." If someone says, "racism is a made-up construct," you can say, "we're here to talk about how everyone can feel included ... I'd like to hear about environments in which you've felt included." Denying someone their [felt experience](#) can be quite damaging to trust and safety in an environment - you can offer a response like, "we all have different thoughts and perspectives on race-related concerns; while we're here to listen, we're not here to deny the experiences of others."

How do I acknowledge that I have not experienced racism or *have benefited from privilege, power*?

It's as simple as acknowledging that your skin tone, education, role/status, etc. grants you opportunity, power, or [privilege](#) that others do not experience. Acknowledge that [white norms](#) in our communities and workplaces that can leave others feeling left out.

Should leaders share their own observations of or experiences with racism?

Derald Wing Sue (n.d.) suggests that leaders facilitating discussions should acknowledge their own biases (regardless of race). Leaders can model [taking risks and demonstrating vulnerability](#) when they are willing to disclose their experiences. Ultimately, leaders should stay focused on the purpose of the dialogue. If you are hosting a listening session, your purpose is to listen to others; If you are hosting a dialogue, your purpose is to encourage feedback and interaction from everyone.

What should I do after the listening sessions or dialogues?

Your initial group activity should be considered a start to a process of change. Here are some strategies for encouraging engagement after department, division, unit, or team meetings:

- Have an open door policy to continue the conversation - "If you have more to share, I'm open to a conversation (email, video meeting, etc.)"
- If you noted that specific team members did not speak up, consider sending an email to check-in. It's OK to ask if someone has anything to share that they weren't comfortable sharing in the group..
- Tell your team what is happening for you (due to your learnings from listening sessions) and what will happen next ("We've gathered feedback and will work to turn ideas into actionable steps").

Tips and Suggestions - Preparing for Your Listening Session or Discussion

General Preparation

- Consider a smaller pool of employees for more detailed or intimate conversations. For example, a Division Director might consider engaging in larger-scale listening sessions but encourage their

Deputies, Directors, or other leaders to have more focused discussions with their [teams](#). Ensure that your Deputies, Directors, and other Managers have comfort in engaging in these conversations.

- Understand your reason for the meeting or [discussion](#) prior to engaging in it. What are you hoping to achieve? What would you like the conversation to elicit?
 - If you're seeking specific information, ask [specific questions](#). However, don't make the conversation about you.

During the Meeting

- Develop [norms](#) for the conversation. This typically involves inviting participants to talk about what will help them feel comfortable or safe with the conversation. Consider posting the norms in an area viewable by all.
- Expect conflict or difficult dialogue. Know how you will respond if the conversation becomes uncomfortable. If someone provides difficult feedback, do the following -
 - Acknowledge the feedback
 - Ask for more information or clarification
 - Don't spar or argue
 - Invite other perspectives
- Expect defensiveness; Consider the idea of [white fragility](#) and how it might be influencing or thwarting the interaction. Consider strategies for [compassionate leadership](#) including managing behavior in the room that seeks to [shut down](#) other voices. Move to other voices if one person is talking excessively, is extremely defensive, or is dominating the dialogue.
- Apply components of [Emotional Intelligence](#) to your discussions. Understand how *you're* feeling before entering listening sessions or discussions; Acknowledge your feelings and don't let them get in the way of the discussion - you're there to listen and learn. Practice vulnerability by [acknowledging your own failings](#); however, remember that this meeting is about the participants. Pay attention to how others may be feeling - notice cues of defensiveness, quietness, absence, sadness, confusion, discomfort; Express gratitude to those who share, and encourage those who do not share to reach out for one-on-one conversations.

Articles & Resources

- [Derald Wing Sue: Race Talk- The Psychology of Racial Dialogues](#)
- [Wharton: How to Begin Talking About Race in the Workplace](#)
- [Characteristics of White Supremacy Culture in the Workplace](#)
- [Robin DiAngelo: Silence Breakers for Whites in Cross-racial Discussions](#)
- [9 Reasons Teams Love Empathetic Managers](#)
- [10 things you should know about white privilege](#)
- [Talking About Race](#)
- [Calling In: Strategies for Cultivating Humility and Critical Thinking](#)
- [SAMHSA](#) - information on a trauma-informed leadership (see pages 10 and 11)

Sample Meeting Plans

Listening Session

- Introduce yourself.
- Tell participants the reason for the session/meeting.
- Listen to stories or experiences.
- Offer statements of genuine validation and acknowledgement; do not judge statements of others.
 - Examples -
 - What I heard you say is Did I get that right?
 - It sounds like you're feeling ... Is that correct?
 - This makes sense to me because ...
 - It sounds like that may have felt Is that how it felt?
 - Thanks for sharing that experience with me.
- Express gratitude to participants.
- Share plan/next steps/options for those who were not comfortable speaking.

Dialogue or Discussion Session

Consider using a notetaker to track responses to prepared questions (see below).

- **State meeting goals** - Tell participants the reason for the session/meeting.
- **State meeting requests** - Share what you seek to gain or learn from the session.
- Encourage participants to offer '[ground rules](#)' or '[agreements](#)' for the discussion.
- Engage in prepared questions; Provide time limit for each question.
- Offer statements of genuine validation or acknowledgement; do not judge statements of others.
 - Examples -
 - What I heard you say is Did I get that right?
 - It sounds like you're feeling ... Is that correct?
 - This makes sense to me because ...
 - It sounds like that may have felt Is that how it felt?
 - Thanks for sharing that experience with me.
- Express gratitude for participants.
- Share plan/next steps/options for those who were not comfortable speaking.