

UNIVERSITY of  
**HOUSTON**

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CENTER for DIVERSITY & INCLUSION



**THE CONVERSATION**

TIPS ON HAVING CONVERSATIONS ABOUT RACE

**The country's national climate has brought us to a reckoning moment in history, where we as a nation must grapple with America's gravest ill, racism. For Black people and other communities of color dealing with the effects of systemic racism are a part of everyday life.**

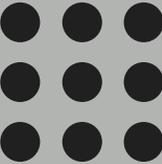
**As the country and world reckons with the response to 400 plus years of genocide, slavery, disenfranchisement it is incumbent that we have honest conversations in all industries about race and its impact not only on individuals, but also its impact on institutional culture.**

**We as leaders in higher education at the University of Houston have the responsibility to move forward conversations about race. We are the one of the nation's most diverse campuses situated in the nation's most diverse city, it is our responsibility to ensure that we our doing the work to ensure that in all areas we are promoting a culture of diversity, inclusion and equity in all facets of the university life, not just in words but also in action.**

# TIP #1

## PREPARE FOR YOUR CONVERSATION

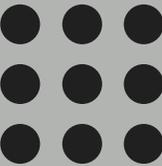
- Doing just a little bit of **prep work** before starting a race-based dialogue **goes a long way** toward establishing your positive intention and authenticity. You do not need to be a critical race theory expert. Simply reading a few credible online articles, or watching a couple of films or documentaries, can put you in a better position to have a conversation. Coming to the conversation with a foundational understanding of history and the modern day impact of racial dynamics in our country, will help your colleagues to trust you, and maybe bring some guards down. This important step of preparation will lead to a **more productive conversation** as well as some **critical learning** for you as a leader. *Resources will be at the end of this guide.*
- When facilitating a conversation about race leaders must understand themselves as racial/cultural beings. Leaders cannot be effective facilitators unless they are **aware of their own worldview**, including their **values, biases, prejudices** and **assumptions** about human behavior. For example, what does being White, Black/African American, Asian American/Pacific Islander, Latino/Hispanic American or Native American mean to them? How does their racial identity affect the way they view others and the way others view them? Understanding oneself as a racial/cultural being goes hand in hand with how well-grounded and secure one will be in a racial dialogue.
- Leading conversations about race and racism at work **will likely be uncomfortable for all parties** involved and **requires courage**. It's normal to feel discomfort as you reflect on your own experiences with racial inequality and deepen your understanding of racism. But the more you practice facilitating difficult conversations, the more you'll be able to manage the discomfort. The conversations may not necessarily get easier, but your ability to press toward more meaningful dialogue will expand. Stay engaged; the journey is worth the effort. **Many leaders avoid talking about race and racism** in the workplace. **It's uncomfortable**, may lead to conflict, and calls for skills few possess. Often, this avoidance comes down to a **fear of misspeaking**, "sounding racist" or unintentionally doing harm. A major part of preparing to have a conversation about race and racism is to **first deal with our own fears and biases**.



# TIP #2

## CHECK YOUR PRIVILEGE

- If you are a department head or director leading the conversation, **acknowledge the privilege and power in your positionality**. It is also vital to check your privileged identities. Becoming **actively mindful** of one's privilege develops a new and hopefully continued heightened awareness about the advantages that shape one's worldview, actions, and assumptions. It is **hard, uncomfortable, and often painful**, but it is not nearly as painful as living with the pain caused by the un-examined privilege of others. This starts by accepting that privilege is **not an accusation, but a reality**.
- When somebody asks you to 'check your privilege' they are asking you to pause and consider how the advantages you've had in life are contributing to your opinions and actions, and how the lack of disadvantages in certain areas is keeping you from fully understanding the struggles others are facing and may, in fact, be contributing to those struggles



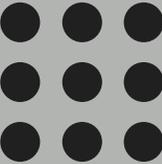
# TIP #3

## ACKNOWLEDGE AND BE OPEN TO ADMITTING YOUR RACIAL BIASES

Facilitators and leaders must be **able** and **willing** to **acknowledge** and **accept** the fact that they are products of the **cultural conditioning** in this society, having **inherited** the **biases, fears** and **stereotypes** of the society.

When leading a conversation on race, most facilitators are **wary** about communicating their **own prejudices** and will respond in a cautious fashion that may be less than honest. **Publicly** and **honestly** acknowledging **personal biases** and weaknesses to **self** and **others** can have several positive consequences:

- Freedom from the constant vigilance exercised in denying one's own racism or other biases.
- Modeling truthfulness, openness and honesty to staff about race and racism.
- Demonstrating courage in making yourself vulnerable by taking a risk to share with staff their own biases, limitations and attempts to deal with their own racism.
- Encouraging others in the group to approach the dialogue with honesty, seeing that their facilitators are equally flawed.



# TIP #4

## SET CLEAR GOALS FOR THE CONVERSATION

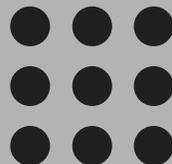
Formal conversations about racial justice are a lot more likely to be productive if they have a **clearly defined purpose**. The goal might be, for example, to invite employees to share their personal experiences and anecdotes about how bias manifests at their organization, or to revisit hiring procedures in order to weed out practices that invite or perpetuate bias. Whatever the goal, the discussion **should explicitly center on racism and race issues**.

To create a safe space to share and receive information on a sensitive topic, like race, you must first clearly establish why you want to engage colleagues on the topic. Now is not the time for any assumptions. While many recognize this moment as a reckoning point and opportunity for growth; **not everyone feels that way**. Therefore, in order to start a productive and healing conversation, take time to **explain your goals**. **Clearly** stating your intention for starting the dialogue requires **vulnerability** and **transparency**. Leading with that level of openness can yield a very positive, and even transformative result. Setting a goal before scheduling a formal discussion will also help leaders figure out the most suitable forum. Below are some questions to consider.

- What outcomes do you hope to achieve?
- What outcomes does your staff hope to achieve?
- What problem(s) are you trying to solve, if any?
- What does a successful conversation look like to you?
- What are my limitations (emotional capacity, time constraints, space etc.)

**\*Venting** and **processing** are legitimate goals.

**\*\*It will be felt by your staff, if you are only having the conversation simply because it is mandated or suggested.**



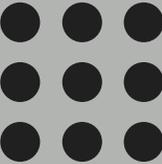
# TIP #5

## ESTABLISH RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

- When going through unpredictable viewpoints and volatile emotions, it's important for **everyone** in the dialogue to **agree** to some basic rules of engagement to set the conversation up for success.
- Leaders can help their team feel less anxious and more comfortable about engaging in conversations related to race, equity, and inclusion. One way to do this would be to **discuss agreements prior to engaging** in difficult conversations about race. For instance, managers can invite employees to generate two or three agreements they would like to observe in order to engage effectively in conversations about their racial differences.

Some sample agreements are below:

- *Respect*
- *Controversy with Civility*
- *Use "I" statements*
- *Own your intent and impact*
- *Take risks: Lean in to the discomfort*
- *Share the air time*
- *Actively listen*
- *Name and notice group dynamics in the moment*
- *Respect confidentiality*



## TIP #6

# ACKNOWLEDGE AND VALIDATE EMOTIONS, FEELINGS AND LIVED EXPERIENCES

Validating and facilitating the discussion of feelings is a **primary goal** in having a conversation about race. As the leader of this conversation it is vital to **create conditions** that make the expression and presence of feelings a valid and legitimate focus of the conversation.

The first goal of listening has to be making sure the other person actually **feels heard**. The experience of being heard and understood is what **builds trust**. This goes beyond simply hearing and tracking what another person says. It's checking in to **ensure you understand** the emotional experience of the person, and following up with action if necessary. When engaging in difficult emotionally charged dialogue **assume good intent**.

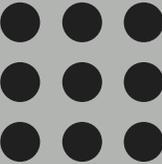
As the leader of the conversation, **your feelings and emotions** are **valid** as well and must be taken into consideration. As aforementioned, **preparation** before the conversation is essential. In your preparation consider asking yourself these questions as you think about how your emotions and feelings will be impacted by the conversation.

- *What will I do or say if I get offended or upset?*
- *What is the worst thing that can be said to me and how will I handle that?*
- *How will I reframe the conversation if another person gets offended or upset without sidetracking the conversation?*

# TIP #7

## BE MINDFUL OF THE EMOTIONAL LABOR YOU ASK OF BLACK TEAM MEMBERS

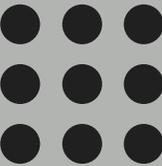
- It's **unfair** to ask Black employees and other people of color, who are already coping with the effects of racism and inequality in their daily lives, to **simultaneously figure out** how to make their organization more diverse and inclusive.
- **Do not force conversation.** Some of your Black colleagues may not be in the space mentally or emotionally to have a discussion about race. Studies show that sometimes even talking about police brutality can be triggering. Recognizing this is important because it makes you aware that what may seem like simple news items to you could gravely affect your coworker or friend.
- If diversity, equity and inclusion are things your company/office/center/department etc. claims to value, then **referring to your strategic plan** for guidance can be one way to avoid placing undue burden on Black staff.
- **Bring in paid diversity and inclusion consultants**, who are specifically trained to help companies address institutional problems.
- People of color have been fighting racism their whole lives. The fact that many white people are waking up to this just now may cause an unnecessary weight on people of color, especially on the job. People of color are **exhausted**. As we start to wake up to where our country is, we have to recognize how exhausted the oppressed are. As a leader, **help your white team members get the information** from the multitude of resources so that the **burden** is not on those on the receiving end of racism.



## TIP #8

### DO NOT ALLOW THE CONVERSATION TO BE SIDETRACKED

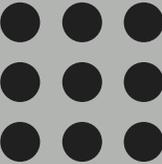
- In most settings, talking about race is **often uncomfortable** for the facilitator of the conversation and participants alike.
- Avoidance takes many forms, and a facilitator may **unintentionally collude** with the participant in avoiding the race discussion for many reasons, the ultimate result being **diversion from discussing race**.
- The race conversation is **often sidetracked** with the conversations about other identities such as (gender, sexuality, class etc.). Those identities and the intersection of those identities with race **are important**, however many times they are used as a way to veer the conversation away from race specifically.
- **Resist the urge to change** the conversation and develop a strategy to steer the conversation back on track, by reminding the participants of the **goal** of the conversation.



# TIP #9

## ACKNOWLEDGE THE INSTITUTION'S TRACK RECORD.

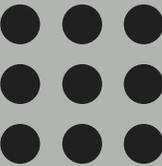
- A lot of organizations are far from where they need to be with regard diversity, equity and inclusion. Leaders should be upfront about where they've fallen short, and take responsibility for those failures. Leaders should also commit, in clear and specific language, to approaching things differently going forward.
- This acknowledgement is not just for the institution, but also for the center, department or unit you lead. Acknowledge and address **ways you have made strides** in the areas of diversity and inclusion, the **ways in which you have failed including inaction**, and how you plan to move differently in the future.



# TIP #10

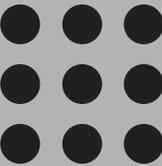
## ACKNOWLEDGE THE WORLD BEYOND THE UNIVERSITY.

- Indeed, research on mega-threats (highly publicized acts of violence against people from marginalized groups) confirms that such events are **likely to trigger heightened levels of fear, anxiety, grief, and anger in members of the targeted group**, inevitably spilling over into their working lives.
- Another important way to encourage ongoing dialogues about race is for leaders to keep acknowledging world events as they impact people, your colleagues and the people you lead.
- **It's not a possibility for some people to leave what's happening in the world at home**, if some of your staff members are dealing with it, your responsibility as a leader is to at the very least acknowledge it.



# TIP #11

## EXPECT AND ACCEPT NON-CLOSURE



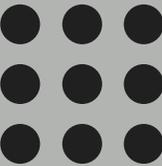
- Non-closure means that conversations about race are unlikely to be resolved in a neat and expedient manner.
- Conversations must be ongoing and should leave room for continued thought, growth, and evolution.



# TIP #12

## END WITH SOME SORT OF CALL TO ACTION/ PRIORITIZE CONTINUOUS WORK AND EDUCATION ON RACIAL JUSTICE.

- To ensure this is not a one-off conversation end the conversation with some sort of call to action. That could be anything from committing to an anti-racist training program to taking the time to genuinely listen to someone you've not really heard before.
- A flurry of meetings about race and diversity in June, followed by radio silence from July on, isn't going to solve problems with systemic inequalities at any organization. Instead, leaders should be looking to create an environment where leaders and colleagues are engaged in ongoing dialogues with one another, both formally and informally, about the problems they encounter at work and ways that the university/department/center can change to not only be diverse, but also inclusive and equitable to all. The more consistent these conversations happen, the more comfortable they become and the more diversity and inclusion becomes part of the culture.
- Creating a culture of inclusivity also necessitates building individual relationships. When colleagues talk to one another regularly—not just about race—they're a lot more likely to be open and receptive in conversations.



# Sources used to currate this list

- **Teaching Tolerance**  
(<http://www.tolerance.org/sites/default/files/general/TT%20Difficult%20Conversations%20web.pdf>)
- **Leading Difficult Staff Conversations About Race Blog**  
(<https://blog.sharetolearn.com/leaders-link/talking-about-race/>)
- **Discussing Racism In The Workplace: Using Positive And Persistent Pressure To Enable Honest Dialogue**  
(<https://www.forbes.com/sites/hvmacarthur/2020/06/09/discussing-racism-in-the-workplace-using-positive-and-persistent-pressure-to-enable-honest-dialogue/#67917cb9358a>)
- **Race talk and facilitating difficult racial dialogues**  
(<https://ct.counseling.org/2015/12/race-talk-and-facilitating-difficult-racial-dialogues/>)
- **How to Begin Talking About Race in the Workplace**  
(<https://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article/begin-talking-race-workplace/>)
- **Yes, You Must Talk About Race At Work: 3 Ways To Get Started**  
(<https://www.forbes.com/sites/ebonikwilliams/2020/06/16/yes-you-must-talk-about-race-at-work-3-ways-to-get-started/#76a27f363985>)
- **How to have more productive conversations about race in the workplace** (<https://qz.com/work/1867066/how-to-have-productive-conversations-about-race-at-the-office/>)



# Educational Resources

## Books

- So You Want to Talk About Race – Ijeoma Oluo
- The Racial Contract – Charles Mills
- How to Be an Antiracist – Ibram X. Kendi
- The Fire Next Time – James Baldwin
- Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome – Dr. Joy DeGruy
- Just Mercy – Bryan Stevenson
- The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness – Michelle Alexander
- When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America – Ira Katznelson
- White Fragility – Dr. Robin DiAngelo

## Films/Documentaries

- I Am Not Your Negro – Amazon Prime
- Trail by Media: 41 Shots/Amadou Diallo (Episode 4) – Netflix
- 13th – Netflix
- Just Mercy – Hulu
- Black Power Mixtape: 1967-1975 – Netflix
- Dear White People – Netflix
- King in the Wilderness – HBO
- When They See Us - Netflix

## Podcasts

- [1619 \(New York Times\)](#)
- [About Race](#)
- [Code Switch \(NPR\)](#)
- [Intersectionality Matters! hosted by Kimberlé Crenshaw](#)
- [Momentum: A Race Forward Podcast](#)
- [Pod For The Cause \(from The Leadership Conference on Civil & Human Rights\)](#)
- [Pod Save the People \(Crooked Media\)](#)
- [Seeing White](#)

## Professional Development

- Black Minds Matter (public/free online course - <https://coralearning.org/bmm/>)
- National Conference on Race and Ethnicity (NCORE) - <https://www.ncore.ou.edu/en/>
- Social Justice Training Institute (SJTI) - <https://sjti.org/>

# Educational Resources

## Articles/Misc Resources

- **Racial Equity Tools Glossary**  
<https://www.racialequitytools.org/glossary>
- **Anti-Racism Packet**  
[https://docs.google.com/document/d/16tuiRYmXO7-O4A52A0oUBy3l5TBgbLifJ7TZlhEjHqY/preview?pru=AAABcqM5j9M\\*97CsDjz6Y3pKUQThLpserg](https://docs.google.com/document/d/16tuiRYmXO7-O4A52A0oUBy3l5TBgbLifJ7TZlhEjHqY/preview?pru=AAABcqM5j9M*97CsDjz6Y3pKUQThLpserg)
- **Anti-Racism Resources**  
[bit.ly/ANTIRACISMRESOURCES](http://bit.ly/ANTIRACISMRESOURCES)
- **Civil-Rights Protests Have Never Been Popular – Ta-Nehisi Coates**  
<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/10/colin-kaepernick/541845/>
- **Letter from Birmingham Jail – Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.**  
[https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles\\_Gen/Letter\\_Birmingham.html](https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html)
- **The pandemic has exposed the bitter terms of our racial contract**  
<https://amp.theatlantic.com/amp/article/611389/>
- **A Timeline of Events That Led to the 2020 'Fed Up'-rising**  
<https://www.theroot.com/a-timeline-of-events-that-led-to-the-2020-fed-up-rising-1843780800>
- **How White Managers Can Respond to Anti-Black Violence**  
<https://insights.som.yale.edu/insights/how-white-managers-can-respond-to-anti-black-violence>
- **UH Center for Diversity and Inclusion – Resources**  
<https://www.uh.edu/cdi/resources/virtual/>



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