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How To Talk About Race In The Workplace

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A GUIDE FOR INCLUSIVE LEADERS AND
HR MANAGERS

How To Talk About Race In The Workplace

So, your company wants you to talk about race? You are not alone. Since the summer of 2020, countless companies have spoken out publicly against racism and other injustices after the murders of Breonna Taylor, Ahmadu Arbery, George Floyd, and Rayshard Brooks, and the racist encounter between Amy Cooper and Christian Cooper (no relation) in Central Park.

Many managers feel ill-equipped to offer sage advice on 'what to do' when it comes to diversity and inclusion (D&I) in their organizations. As a result, D&I initiatives often never make it past the C-suite. The RACE Framework was adapted for use by middle managers in corporate environments who would like to begin talking about race in the workplace.

The RACE Framework

R – Reduce anxiety by talking about race anyway.

Both managers and employees feel uncomfortable talking about race at work. They have been counseled through various compliance trainings not to mention or take into consideration someone's race at work (i.e., to be "colorblind"). They also fear being called racist.

Managers can help employees feel less anxious and more efficacious about engaging in conversations related to race, equity, and inclusion. One way to do this would be to discuss norms prior to engaging in difficult conversations about race. For instance, managers can invite employees to generate two or three norms they would like to observe in order to engage effectively in conversations about their racial differences. The themes I have encountered most often when doing this activity are, building a safe or brave space, practicing respectful engagement, and listening actively and being constructive. Managers can also ask employees to generate two or three observable strategies that they can use to enact these norms. For example, building a safe or brave space might entail making commitments to keeping conversations confidential by not sharing the names of people contributing to the conversation and what they said outside of the conversational space.

A – Accept that anything related to race is either going to be visible or invisible.

I am a Black/African American female professor who works at an elite business school. I cannot help but "see race," including my own. The visibility of my race in my daily experiences guides my willingness to talk about race. However, not everyone identifies with their race or conversations about race in the same way. Whether your race is visible or invisible to you and others, I think it is important to reflect on the following: What do we gain/lose when race is invisible? What do we gain/lose when race is hyper visible?

Managers can help employees find the space in between the extremes of invisibility and hypervisibility and normalize race as a dimension of diversity that is meaningful in the workplace. One way to do this would be for managers to share some of their positive and negative experiences around the visibility of their race at work. Then, managers can invite employees to do the same.

C – Call on internal and external allies for help.

Like many other racial minorities whose race is visible to others, I am often seen as the go-to expert on matters of race and diversity in the workplace. Fortunately, I am an expert on these issues as are many racial minorities in companies today. However, it is important that white managers regardless of their expertise also learn to facilitate conversations about race as well if they are charged with contributing to an anti-racist change agenda at work.

Managers can cultivate a network of relationships with a diverse set of internal (other managers) and external allies (professors, former colleagues, clients) who are invested in diversity, equity, and inclusion. Managers can share tips and resources with members of their network, which will enable them to have the latest insights on how to facilitate conversations about race in the workplace. Managers can also encourage employees to develop a diverse network of internal and external allies as well and lean on them for help when needed.

E – Expect that you will need to provide some "answers," practical tools, skill-based frameworks, etc.

Creating practical tools and skill-based frameworks is important for helping employees feel that including race in conversations about diversity, equity, and inclusion is do-able.

Managers can adapt publicly available resources (for example, lessons learned about having difficult conversations from research on Intergroup Dialogue). However, they may need to develop their own concrete and accessible "how to" frameworks. For example, I have developed a framework using the word LEAP to teach others about allyship behavior.

It is normal for managers to question whether they are doing "the right thing" when it comes to addressing issues of race and racism in the workplace. Yet, to eradicate systemic racism, it is important for managers to empower employees and provide them with resources for having productive conversations about race. Grounding these conversations in evidence and good intentions is better than not talking about race at all.

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