Engaging in Conversations About Gender, Race, and Ethnicity in the Workplace

Jack feels uncomfortable having conversations with Maya beyond simple small talk. He doesn't want to accidentally say the wrong thing or offend her. Particularly with all of the events in the news lately, he feels like he could easily and inadvertently say something insensitive.

Yasmin is frustrated when her colleague Jamar raises concerns about biases in their performance review system. What does he know about bias?

Bryce is reluctant to offer performance-related feedback to Reina because he has a hard time relating to her.

When Jill sends Sheri an email "joke" about current race relations, Sheri doesn't think it's funny. But she worries about making a big deal about it. She and Jill have always been friends.

Have you ever experienced any of these situations in the workplace? Or have you been confronted with the need to have a difficult conversation—but not known how?

Having meaningful conversations about gender, race, and ethnicity in the workplace—communicating across differences—is important. To do so successfully, we need to acknowledge—and work through—roadblocks (i.e., beliefs, attitudes, or experiences) that can stifle progress. Continue reading to better understand some of these roadblocks and find practical approaches you can start using today.

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Talking About Our Differences Is Difficult

We all have multiple identities (gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc.) that affect our life experiences, how we perceive the world around us, and how we are perceived by others. Our backgrounds and cultures shape our identities, values, and beliefs, and they influence which topics we feel are suitable for discussion.

Discussing how some aspects of our identities differ from other people's—and ways we may experience privilege and disadvantage—can feel uncomfortable, accusatory, and potentially threatening.

Because of this, having conversations about issues related to gender, race, and ethnicity is difficult.[1] In the workplace, people often struggle with how or even whether to raise these issues, which are potentially taboo.[2] While people may have good intentions, they may not know how to start a conversation or address a topic that is potentially uncomfortable. Why?[3]

- Gender inequities, racial/ethnic tensions, and everyday bias are embedded in human history and everyday interactions. They determine the relative value of our multiple identities.

- These tensions and issues are amplified in current events, news coverage, and social media—and may feel even more polarizing.

- Taking the perspective of someone who is different from you requires openness and courage—and some level of vulnerability.

- Our fears and desire to find exactly the right words can reinforce our silence.
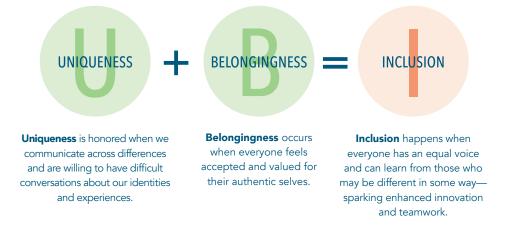
Talking About Our Differences Is Beneficial

There are many benefits to talking about gender, race, and ethnicity in the workplace. Catalyst research shows that employees reported feeling included when they feel both valued for their uniqueness and a sense of belonging. When employees feel more included, they reported being more team-oriented and innovative.[4] The potential to create a culture of inclusion is diminished every time we shy away from genuine conversations about the very things that make us unique.

Imagine having to hide or cover an aspect of your identity—by altering your appearance, not showing emotion about recent news events, or avoiding certain behaviors—out of fear of reinforcing a stereotype.[5] Would you feel valued or accepted for your authentic self—and feel a sense of belonging?

Openness and the ability to have difficult conversations are needed to effectively communicate across our differences and build inclusive workplaces. Setting the foundation for developing authentic relationships, fostering collaboration, and constructively resolving conflict all help individuals share ideas, different viewpoints, and "outsider" perspectives that lead to complex discussions that can benefit business.

UNIQUENESS + **BELONGINGNESS** = **INCLUSION**

Uniqueness is honored when we communicate across differences and are willing to have difficult conversations about our identities and experiences.

Belongingness occurs when everyone feels accepted and valued for their authentic selves.

Inclusion happens when everyone has an equal voice and can learn from those who may be different in some way—sparking enhanced innovation and teamwork.

Conversation Roadblocks and How to Surmount Them

Roadblocks are assumptions, attitudes, or experiences that can stifle our ability to talk about our differences. They often have an underlying motivation such as fear, resistance, emotional fatigue, lack of knowledge, or perceived inability to make a difference, reflecting the risks or high stakes involved.

Three themes describe these roadblocks:

- There Isn't a Problem (i.e., attitudes about whether issues of gender, race, and ethnicity warrant concern).

- There's No Benefit to Talking (i.e., judgments about whether it's worth the effort to discuss these issues).

- There Will Be Negative Consequences to My Actions (i.e., experiences that influence whether someone speaks up or remains silent).

But we can't let these roadblocks prevent us from having the conversations that will produce the inclusive and supportive environment we'd like. Learning how to surmount these obstacles takes practice, attention, and most importantly, intention.

For each roadblock that we describe on the following pages, we also list actions you can take to start doing things differently now. The actions are divided into two categories:

- **Start a Conversation:** Sometimes it's hard to know how to broach a subject related to gender, race, or ethnicity. Use these conversation starters to open the door to somebody else's perspective.

- **Pay Attention:** Simply building a better awareness of how you experience your own gender, race, and ethnicity, and looking out for how others might experience theirs, can give you insight into these issues and help you understand why it's so important to discuss them.

In order to be successful, it's also helpful to follow some basic **Conversation Ground Rules**, which are described starting on page 21. With this mindset in place, you will be more likely to have conversations that increase mutual respect, insight, and knowledge.

Roadblock: "Gender differences don't matter—we view women and men equally."

"People are indeed caught—generally unconsciously—between acknowledging that gender discrimination can happen and the wish to construct a workplace in which gender discrimination does not matter."

—Elisabeth K. Kelan[6]

When discussing gender differences at work, people may state that their workplace operates as a meritocracy. Meritocracy implies that there is a level playing field where employee merit (intelligence, skills, ability, and effort) determines success. While we may want to believe that gender differences don't matter, there is significant evidence[7] across fields and industries that gender biases, discrimination, and sexism still exist.[8] In fact, recent numbers show us how women, in particular, are disadvantaged: in US S&P 500 companies, women hold only 19.9% of board seats and comprise only 26.9% of new board seat appointments.[9]

Sometimes, we also hear people state that since they haven't personally experienced or witnessed exclusion based on gender, race, or ethnicity, then it doesn't exist in their workplace. But this sense of distance does not take into account the unique experiences other people may have. In many cases, there is a "think leader, think male" stereotype that can disrupt our ability to build inclusive workplaces and gender bias can become embedded in work processes and systems.[10]

Take Action

💬 START A CONVERSATION

- *Follow the Conversation Ground Rules described on page 21 to set yourself up for successful exchanges with other people.*

- Ask my colleagues (of all genders) if they have ever experienced or witnessed biased behavior. What did it look like? What was said?

- Ask my women colleagues if they think there are any unwritten rules or social norms that they have to abide by or pay attention to in our workplace that don't apply to men colleagues in the same ways (e.g., how they're expected to look, talk, or act).

⚙️ PAY ATTENTION

- Do I feel more comfortable when gender differences are not acknowledged?

- How do I challenge—or perpetuate—gender stereotypes in my thoughts and actions?
  For example, *"Are there words I use to describe the behavior or performance of women that I do not use to describe the behavior or performance of men?"*

- How do I demonstrate my interest in learning more about my colleagues' experiences?
  For example, can I ask, *"I recognize that this has been my experience at our company. What has your experience been?"*

- Whom do I invite to a working lunch? Whom do I recommend for stretch opportunities when they arise? If it's more often men than women, how can I challenge myself to be more equitable?

💡 CONVERSATIONS IN ACTION

Kimberly-Clark Corporation's culture of accountability (COA) makes diversity and inclusion an employee, leader, and business imperative across the organization.[11] COA is integrated into day-to-day activities through storytelling. For example, every team meeting starts with a story demonstrating one of the company's value- and action-based "One Kimberly-Clark Behaviors" in action (e.g., recognizing leadership behaviors in different contexts). Storytelling allows employees to see what leadership behaviors look like in action and how they are lived.

Roadblock: "We don't see color— only people."

"It's a natural tendency, proven time and again in research: When you see a new person, one of the first things you notice is his or her race. In business life, however, we typically pretend we don't notice—a behavior that's called 'color blindness'—because we want to reduce our odds of exhibiting prejudice or engaging in discrimination, or of seeming to do either."

—Michael I. Norton and Evan P. Apfelbaum[12]

It is not racist to see a person's race or ethnicity—it is in fact a normal tendency.[13] A person's race/ethnicity is a "complex fusion of factors including social values, skin color, cultural traits, physical attributes, diet, region of ancestry, institutional power relationships, and education."[14] Ignoring differences—and similarities—across gender, race, and ethnicity can lead to confusion and misunderstanding.

For example, researchers found that white people who endorse colorblind beliefs engage in more biased behaviors, leading non-dominant ethnic groups to be less engaged with their work.[15] Furthermore, at least some of these ethnic groups express distrust and feel threatened by organizations where they are underrepresented and the leaders promote colorblind ideologies.[16] On the other hand, white people can feel excluded from multiculturalism—a pluralistic ideology that recognizes and celebrates differences.[17]

Avoiding conversations about race to maintain neutrality will not create an ideal work environment for *all* employees. People's different backgrounds should be honored, and celebrating differences should be encouraged. An all-inclusive multicultural approach offers promise: that the organization can create an employee community where everyone feels both a sense of uniqueness and a sense of belongingness.[18]

Take Action

🗨 START A CONVERSATION

- Ask my colleagues who have a different racial, ethnic, or cultural background than mine if they feel our workplace honors their identity and experiences.

- Ask my colleagues if they think people would feel more included if we talked about our differences.
  For example, *"I've noticed that this organization touts being 'colorblind' as a good sign of inclusion. Let's test this idea by asking people if they would feel more or less included if we did talk about our differences, even though we might not know how to do so yet."*

- Ask my colleagues how they think we can build trust and authenticity in our workplace by having conversations across race/ethnicity about racially biased behavior.

⚙ PAY ATTENTION

- Have I ever felt invisible because of some aspect of my identity (gender, race/ethnicity, age, religious background, sexual orientation, etc.)? If so, what was the impact on me personally?

- Have I ever felt the need to "cover" a part of my identity?

- How might my colleagues share feelings of invisibility when they hear others say "we don't see color" or "we are colorblind"?

- Which do I think would make for a more connected and team-oriented culture: one that claims not to notice differences? Or one that intentionally encourages curiosity about how to leverage different insights, experiences, and viewpoints to reach its goals?

💡 CONVERSATIONS IN ACTION

The Emerging Leaders Program (ELP) at Goldman Sachs[19] aims to develop the ability of managers to understand and empathize with the specific challenges that diverse professionals may encounter in the workplace. A core component of ELP is a coaching session led by an external facilitator to identify and close gaps in perception by improving communication, heightening disclosure, and utilizing trust. These coaching sessions were described by some as "transformative" for enhancing inclusion and expanding diversity across the talent pipeline and within senior leadership.

Roadblock: "Race and ethnicity are not relevant in certain places."

With increasingly global work environments, issues of gender, race, and ethnicity do matter across cultures.[20] We must pay attention to cultural differences and be sensitive to history and nuances. For example:

- Religion is an overlooked part of training in diversity and inclusion initiatives, even as religious diversity is increasing as a result of employee and employer migration.[21]

- In countries such as Denmark, where there is a "lack of a Nordic vocabulary for the term race"[22] or in "ethnically homogenous" countries such as Korea,[23] discussing how ethnic differences intersect with gender (among other factors) helps us better understand experiences of inclusion and exclusion.

- Tensions around immigration and nationality have spiked around the world. Issues such as global terrorism and the Syrian refugee crisis demand conversations that encompass religion, ethnicity, gender, and nationality.[24]

- Bias and discrimination based on skin tone is an ongoing concern in many global areas, including India and the United States.[25] Researchers found that in the United States, skin tone creates a social stratification, where lighter-skinned women experience more educational, occupational, or economic gains than Asian, Latina, and black women with darker skin.[26] This can affect discrimination in recruitment/hiring decisions and create economic disadvantages for women not only in the United States but in regions around the world.[27]

Take Action

START A CONVERSATION

- Talk to my colleagues about what the most salient issues are for different ethnic groups in our country, in our organization, and in our work team.

- Ask my colleagues if they feel different from team members because of their own race and ethnicity.

- Encourage one-on-one or group discussions about traditionally "unspoken" issues related to race or ethnicity in the culture in which I am working.
  For example, "I'd like to talk about how we can make our team meetings more inclusive and build trust among teammates. What are one or two issues we need to put on the table, but are usually overlooked or considered undiscussable? Why do we find these issues undiscussable? Why are they important?"

- Create opportunities for learning about different cultural traditions or experiences from your colleagues.

PAY ATTENTION

- How do my cultural background and experiences shape how I perceive the world (values, beliefs, sense of fairness) and how others may perceive me?
  How do I think my experiences would be different if I were working in a different country or region?

- What do I want my colleagues to know about my day-to-day experiences as a member of my racial/ethnic or cultural group(s)?

- How might racial homogeneity in a particular place make differences feel even more salient?

- What are the best ways to learn more about the experiences of different racial/ethnic or cultural groups in the country where I work? Within my organization? Among my team members?

- Under which circumstances do I feel more or less comfortable discussing issues of gender, race, and ethnicity? Are there any common features across those instances? What would it take to make me feel more comfortable?

Roadblock: "Talking about our differences can only further divide us."

Current events often highlight social injustices against racial/ethnic or religious groups, as well as issues of sexual violence, victim blaming, and shaming. Social media and news outlets amplify awareness and dialogue about these inequalities and injustices as they occur around the world.[28] What we see and hear in mainstream society often focuses on individual bias and "bad behavior," rather than broader systemic or societal problems.[29]

These messages may reinforce a common misconception: that talking about these issues will fuel interpersonal conflict and create divisions among social groups in the workplace and in communities. They create fear that more harm will occur than good. Indeed, talking about gender, race, and ethnicity may feel uncomfortable— even gut-wrenching at times—and it requires some risk-taking.

However, we must not let our fears and discomfort get in the way of using one of our most powerful tools—our voices—to build inclusive work environments so that everyone feels valued, respected, and heard. For inspiring examples of how several organizations helped individuals talk about differences, see the Conversations in Action sections throughout this document.

Take Action

💬 START A CONVERSATION

- Ask my colleagues what fears or misconceptions prevent them from having discussions about differences. Do they assume that differences will be divisive?

- Ask my colleagues if they think that not talking openly about our differences perpetuates assumptions, stereotypes, and biases or not.

- Ask my colleagues how they think we can make progress on these issues. For example:

  Invite my colleagues to talk about the many ways we are all different—and how our unique differences should be acknowledged and valued.

  Ask my colleagues to think about times when discussing "difference" (in any sense) has led to a positive outcome.

  Share resources for having difficult conversations in the workplace in a healthy way. (See the section titled "Learn More" on page 25 for starter resources.)

⚙ PAY ATTENTION

- What topics are "off limits" in the workplace?

- Who gets penalized or rewarded for talking about difficult issues at work, and by whom?

- Have I ever tried to have a conversation across differences and it failed? Did I feel defeated or disheartened? Did I acknowledge my role in things not going as expected? Did I learn from the experience and commit to continued practice?

- Have I ever tried to discuss difference and had a positive experience? What actions or experiences led to the positive outcome? How could I encourage more of those types of conversations?

💡 CONVERSATIONS IN ACTION

Through its "Race Summits," BP America, Inc. addressed inclusiveness by encouraging dialogue between cross-sections of employees, opening up new lines of communication and stimulating employee discussion about race.[30] An independent survey estimated that in one year, between 8,000 and 13,000 employees in BP had engaged in a conversation about race as a result of the Summit activity.

Roadblock: "Talking won't solve anything."

"Critical dialogue has the power to unite our workplaces and create environments where everyone feels free to share diverse perspectives and bring their full selves to work."[31]

Sometimes people can perceive that talking about gender, race, and ethnicity is not productive. That is, many individuals are not equipped to have deep conversations about sensitive issues, and thus it is difficult to discuss these topics in a meaningful way.[32] Understandably, this can cause frustration, but it should not suppress dialogue.

Organizations must develop preventive strategies to help employees learn how to communicate effectively across differences—how to handle emotions and be humble enough to learn from those with different perspectives. Speaking up, rather than remaining silent, is essential. Oftentimes, valuing different perspectives and learning about people as individuals can challenge biases and help resolve potential conflict in a positive way.[33]

We all have a responsibility to equip ourselves to have meaningful conversations in search of a more inclusive environment. Also, remember that practice makes progress.[34]

Take Action

💬 START A CONVERSATION

- Ask my colleagues how we might be able to build trust and gain insights into one another by talking about our differences.

- Ask my colleagues if they've ever been able to work through differences with another person, and how.

- Ask my colleagues to identify "off-limits" issues— then discuss how not talking about these issues can derail inclusion.

⚙️ PAY ATTENTION

- What power dynamics between individuals, teams, departments, etc., prevent me from having or encourage me to have meaningful conversations about gender, race, and ethnicity?

- When conversations about differences in background or experience become heated or uncomfortable, do I shut down? Do I speak up? How do I avoid assigning blame? How can I use listening as a tool to help bridge differences?

- What circumstances encourage me to speak up or stay silent?

- Knowing that dialogue fuels action, what is one thing I can do differently to hold myself and others responsible for communicating across differences, even when things feel hopeless?

THERE WILL BE NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES TO MY ACTIONS

Roadblock: "People think I'm overly sensitive, and I feel that my experiences are minimized."

"I've been called 'too sensitive' for my entire life—you could say that I'm now desensitized to it! As someone socialized as female who felt deeply not only my own pain, but also the pain of others, I was an easy target. I was taught that my tears and so-called 'hypersensitivity' were shameful, and that I should learn to control it, learn to fight back….As I've gotten older, I've noticed the ways in which my or others' supposed state of being 'too sensitive' has been used to justify daily microaggressions and overt instances of oppression."

—Michal 'MJ' Jones[35]

A sure way to shut down a constructive conversation is to suggest someone is being "too sensitive" and make assumptions about the validity of their feelings. These sentiments disempower and shame people. They diminish their experiences, feelings, and sense of worth, particularly when taking gender, race, and ethnicity into account. They assume that the conversation isn't even worth having. This can affect those in both dominant and non-dominant groups.

In these moments, a constructive conversation can quickly turn into an emotionally charged exchange. Defensiveness is high, tensions can rise, and resentment starts to brew. Instead of sharing and learning from someone different from you, it is easy to inadvertently reinforce exclusionary behaviors.[36]

Take Action

💬 START A CONVERSATION

- Ask my colleagues if they have ever felt that their experiences were minimized.

- Ask people who are different from me how they experience their own gender, race, or ethnicity—and then really listen to the answer.

⚙️ PAY ATTENTION

- Am I attuned to the unique perspectives and experiences of other people?

- What can I do to step into another person's shoes and learn more about their experiences?

- How can I give equal weight to people's different experiences—while also honoring experiences of discrimination, prejudice, and disadvantage?

- What steps can I take to help others build skills in active—and compassionate—listening?

- In what ways can I serve as an ally and help bridge differences during difficult situations?

Roadblock: "I will say something inappropriate—or worse, be viewed as racist or sexist."

Words are powerful. The fear of saying something inappropriate about a person's gender, race, and ethnicity (among other factors) may stifle dialogue—especially if you fear that people will view you as racist or sexist.[37] Sometimes this fear emerges because you once tried to communicate with someone different from you, and things did not go as expected. That negative experience can make it hard to have a difficult conversation in the future.

Fear of saying the wrong thing stems from the "politeness protocol."[38] This mindset proposes that "potentially offensive or uncomfortable topics should be avoided, ignored, and silenced or spoken about in a very light, casual, and superficial manner."[39] But we should not let fear or the potential of saying something unintended interfere with having difficult conversations. There may be consequences, and those should certainly be considered, but they shouldn't stifle open communication.

Even with the best of intentions, you can say or do things that are offensive and hurtful. If this happens, apologize. Engage in further conversation to better understand why the situation was perceived in a negative way, and learn how it feels to be in another person's skin. Taking a bold step to foster dialogue about gender, race, and ethnicity requires recognition that our words do matter. We also need to take responsibility for the potential impact of what we say and how we speak about our differences—while also paying attention to the possibility that things may not go as expected.

Take Action

💬 START A CONVERSATION

- Ask a colleague: *"Can I count on your help to give me honest, constructive feedback if I use words that are hurtful or offensive to you, in the moment or later?"*

- Invite colleagues to create "difficult conversation" guidelines to help one another share authentically and speak up when hurtful or offensive statements are made (whether in the moment or at a later time).

⚙ PAY ATTENTION

- What fears stop me from speaking up or having conversations about gender, race, and ethnicity?

- Are my words authentic, thoughtful, and carefully chosen, yet not so stilted as to stifle open discussion?

- How can I demonstrate positive intent?

- How can I practice humble listening to create opportunities for open discussions?

- Am I okay with making and learning from mistakes, and am I committed to practicing having difficult conversations? Do I encourage others to do the same?

💡 CONVERSATIONS IN ACTION

In the Starbucks #RaceTogether initiative, baristas in certain stores across the United States wrote the words "race together" on coffee cups to encourage discussions about race. The program generated backlash for what critics described as a superficial gesture to engage customers in dialogues about race. A bold idea that was about conversations between baristas and customers received 2.5 billion negative impressions via social media in less than 48 hours. While the actions may not have been received in the way intended, they did generate discussion and debate, and we can learn from Starbucks' experience.

We can use dialogue on gender, race, and ethnicity in the workplace and in our daily lives. We must focus on role modeling transparency, a willingness to accept potential criticisms, and a desire to spark positive change. Based on this experience, Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz shared the organization's vision to connect this initiative to longer-term activities that seek to build "new partnerships to foster dialogue and empathy and help bridge the racial and ethnic divides within our society that have existed for so many years."[40]

Roadblock: "It's not safe to speak up."

It happens all the time: a colleague doesn't share a personal story about an aspect of her identity because it doesn't feel safe; other colleagues are not part of the "in" group because of their gender, race, or ethnicity. Perhaps, you've felt it too—when you struggled to say something when a colleague was put on the spot related to an aspect of his or her identity (e.g., *"You're a woman, I know how you're gonna vote!"; "What's up with that tattoo?"*). Maybe you were reluctant to reach out to the colleague afterward to learn if she was offended, and maybe you did not feel comfortable speaking up to the person who made the comment.

Speaking up and talking about our differences can be tricky, difficult, or taboo. People hesitate to speak up because they fear repercussions (e.g., job loss, loss of opportunities, eroded relationships, performance-related penalties).[41] In some work settings, speaking up or engaging in difficult conversations can have real and negative consequences: being excluded, isolated, or even punished.

Yet everyone needs to feels safe speaking up in the workplace. Remember, this includes not only women and people from non-dominant racial/ethnic groups, but also dominant group members who no longer want to stand by as passive witnesses to exclusionary behaviors, bias, or discrimination.

Take Action

START A CONVERSATION

- Ask my colleagues what it would take for them to feel safe sharing their opinions and ideas.

- Ask my colleagues to talk about and set ground rules for everyone to feel safe and feel stretched to take risks and practice engaging in difficult conversations.

- Ask a team member who has been silent during a meeting if he or she would like to contribute a different perspective.

- Ask my colleagues and leaders if there are particular issues that they do not feel safe discussing.

PAY ATTENTION

- What does it take for me to feel safe speaking up? What support do I need?

- Have I ever remained silent or hesitated to engage in a conversation that addressed issues of gender, race, or ethnicity in the workplace?

- If I witness exclusion and do not speak up in the moment or later, how is my ability to feel comfortable in the workplace affected?

- How might my silence or hesitance in the moment or later unintentionally stifle inclusion and affect a sense of being valued and belonging—for me or my colleagues? What are one or two things I could do differently in a similar situation?

Conversation Ground Rules

What can you do to overcome roadblocks and engage in difficult conversations about gender, race, and ethnicity in the workplace? Start by following some fundamental ground rules for all conversations—whether with a colleague, in a team, or in larger group settings.

1. **Assume positive intent.** To truly have constructive conversations across differences, embrace a mindset that something good will happen as a result. This requires assuming positive intent from everyone—you must consciously choose to believe that people act and speak to the best of their ability and for the benefit of others. By assuming positive intent, we put our own judgments, viewpoints, and biases aside and focus on what the person actually means. This may also mean presuming that others can be responsible for their choices and behaviors, and holding them accountable for assuming positive intent from us and others.[43]

Indra Nooyi, Chairman and CEO of PepsiCo, reflects:[44]

"In business, sometimes in the heat of the moment, people say things. You can either misconstrue what they're saying and assume they are trying to put you down, or you can say, 'Wait a minute. Let me really get behind what they are saying to understand whether they're reacting because they're hurt, upset, confused, or they don't understand what it is I've asked them to do.' If you react from a negative perspective—because you didn't like the way they reacted—then it just becomes two negatives fighting each other. But when you assume positive intent, I think often what happens is the other person says, 'Hey, wait a minute, maybe I'm wrong in reacting the way I do because this person is really making an effort.'"

Assuming positive intent is not easy. Do not assume that the person you are speaking with understands your intentions. We must pay attention to non-verbal cues (e.g., facial expressions, body language, and silence) and ask whether our words are having the desired impact. Be open to being challenged, accept the other person's understanding, and retry if necessary.[45]

2. **Engage in dialogue—not debate[46]:**

"It is counterproductive to deliberately add people to an organization because of their diversity and then consider discussion of that diversity off-limits."[47]

Engaging in a debate (back-and-forth exchange with contrasting viewpoints) may be counterproductive for promoting inclusion across gender, race, and ethnicity in the workplace. Debates can quickly turn into arguments and result in negative feelings and

Conversation Ground Rules

(CONTINUED)

stalled progress. Instead, dialogue fuels deep understanding and action. Dialogue is open-ended, where people express and learn from one another's experiences, viewpoints, and perspectives. Shared learning is the goal, and it results in deeper connections with people who may be different from us. This is a hallmark of inclusive work environments, where people feel valued and heard.[48]

3. **Demonstrate cultural humility— hold yourself and others accountable to do the same.**

   "Cultural humility is the difference between telling you what I 'know' about your people, your life and your experiences, and asking you to share your story in a way that feels honoring, heard, and healing."[49]

   To foster inclusion, we must commit to ongoing learning, mitigating bias and inequities, and holding ourselves and others responsible for actions. These are the core elements of cultural humility,[50] and are critical regardless of your position of power or dominant/non-dominant group status. As such, demonstrating cultural humility requires you to:

   - Not make assumptions or snap judgments about any aspect of a person's identity (gender, race, ethnicity, culture, nationality, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, and ability, among other dimensions).[51]

   - "Maintain an interpersonal stance that is other-oriented (or open to the other) in relation to aspects of cultural identity that are most important to"[52] the people you are interacting with.

   This means holding yourself and others accountable for self-reflection, learning, and continually analyzing your assumptions, behaviors, and experiences. At the same time, interrupt when you see others engaging in biased behaviors by constructively calling out their missteps and suggesting alternative ways of thinking.[53] Interrupting biased behavior can happen in the moment or later— show humility by stepping back and thinking through how you want to follow up.

4. **Be open, transparent, and willing to admit mistakes.** Sharing and deepening understanding of colleagues' experiences at work will help reinforce open and honest communication and cultivate inclusion. Yet, we all can inadvertently make mistakes or say something we regret. We need to have the courage and personal sense of accountability to admit and learn from mistakes.

   We can't let potential for mistakes lead us to remain silent or not engage in dialogue about our differences. We must pledge to practice—jumping into potential discomfort and taking action to start meaningful conversations across difference. When we commit

Conversation Ground Rules

(CONTINUED)

to learning, miscommunication is approached with openness and positive inquiry.

Your ability to be open and transparent can vary based on your organization's dynamics and personal situations, so it's best to assess the circumstances first. When considering the timing or situation, equip yourself with the resources, tools, and knowledge to have courageous conversations. Take a risk. Learn from your efforts—and mistakes. And invite others to do the same. Your example will inspire others to step out of their comfort zones.

5. **Embrace the power of humble listening.** Inclusion requires *really* listening rather than only hearing what some one is saying. In this way, listening requires humility and a willingness to pause and put your own ego, assumptions, and viewpoints aside to reflect on and learn from someone else's experiences.[54] Attend to others with empathy by reflecting on what they are experiencing, asking clarifying questions, and gaining a deeper understanding.

There are unexpected benefits from listening to other people's stories. In particular, researchers show that "listening to personal stories…can help people 'perk up' and be a little less likely to 'change the channel and move on' when faced with the complex issues of today."[55] If you aren't sure you are really listening and understanding another person's perspective, continue the conversation by asking clarifying questions.

6. **Create trusting and safe spaces— where a little bit of discomfort is okay.** Although uncomfortable, engaging in dialogue across and about our differences can accelerate progress—if done correctly. What is deemed safe may look different to an individual with a different cultural background, experiences, and expectations. Sometimes ground rules to "share freely" can mislead individuals to think their viewpoints, opinions, or perspectives will not be challenged. Researchers found that, in practice, sharing examples about safety may inadvertently resonate more with dominant group members than with others.[56]

Authentic communication should be framed as a strength, rather than a challenge. At the same time, we must set clear expectations that some discomfort is part of the process. For example:

- Among colleagues: "To be more effective, I would like our team to move beyond only talking about project goals. I am taking a risk in saying this, but we have some differences that I'd like to understand. It's not going to be easy. But I want to learn…"

- In a one-on-one conversation: "Let's each share our perspective, where we are coming from, and how our personal backgrounds and life experiences shape the

Conversation Ground Rules

(CONTINUED)

way we view this work. We may not always agree, but I want us to understand each other."

7. Commit to having conversations that matter by speaking up to bridge gender, racial, and ethnic divides. Each of us has a role to play in creating inclusive work environments. Start with an unwavering commitment to having conversations where people can feel valued and respected for their differences. Be willing to speak up as a champion for inclusion in the face of difficult situations or exclusionary behaviors, bias, and discrimination.

Catalyst research shows that leaders who employ behaviors of empowerment, accountability, courage, and humility help team members feel psychologically safe at work.[57] This feeling of psychological safety is foundational for engaging in conversations about gender, race, and ethnicity in the workplace. When individuals feel psychologically safe,[58] they:

- Are willing to take risks despite potential discomfort or consequences that may occur.

- Speak up about difficult issues.

- Trust their colleagues will not intentionally undermine their work efforts.

- Experience a sense of trust that their mistakes will not be held against them.

Open and honest dialogue can help foster genuine relationships and trust in the workplace. It can also show compassion and a desire to take the perspective of someone who is different from you. Together, we must hold ourselves and others accountable for shared learning and growth—everyone in the workplace has a responsibility to build inclusive environments where we all feel valued, heard, and connected.

Take Action

📖 LEARN MORE

Equipping yourself and others with the tools to engage in conversations about gender, race, and ethnicity requires continuous learning. Here are some additional resources that may be useful to help you create inclusive workplaces through dialogue.

- Harvard Business Review—The Cost of Racial "Colorblindness"

- YouTube—The Costs of Racial Colorblindness

- Ted Talk—Mellody Hobson: Color Blind or Color Brave?

- CatalystX Course—Inclusive Leadership Training: Leading With Effective Communication

- African-American Policy Forum Report—A Primer on Intersectionality

- Women of Color Policy Network Report—Leading at the Intersections: An Introduction to the Intersectional Approach Model for Policy & Social Change

- Catalyst Tool—First Step: Gender Identity in the Workplace

- Catalyst Infographic—What Is Covering?

- Catalyst Infographic—What Is Unconscious Bias?

- Catalyst Infographic—How to Combat Unconscious Bias as an Individual

- Catalyst Infographic—How to Combat Unconscious Bias as a Leader in Your Organization

- MARC—Men Advocating for Real Change

- Catalyst Report—Navigating Organizational Cultures: A Guide for Diverse Women and Their Managers

- Resources—The Human Library[59]

Endnotes

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