

HAVING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS Briefing Sheet

SUMMARY

Difficult situations and conversations involving issues of diversity, equity and inclusion occur on a regular basis. While the circumstances may vary (on a worksite, in a team meeting, one-on-one between team members or in a customer-service situation, etc.), knowing when, where, why and how to have those difficult conversations can reduce legal, financial and operational risk, ease tensions, foster understanding, improve morale, increase productivity and generate greater customer and community good will. The following toolkit will provide you with guidance on how to get the conversation started and, generally, how to identify and get comfortable with difficult conversations around race, diversity, equity and inclusion in the workplace.

RESOURCES TO EXPLORE

To read:

- Catalyst: [Emotional Tax – A Challenge Companies Can't Afford to Ignore](#) (February 15, 2018)
- COQUAL (Formerly Center for Talent Innovation): [Easing Racial Tensions at Work](#) (2017) **Hyperlink reference not valid.**
- The Winters Group Inc.: [We Can't Talk About That at Work](#) (Mary-Frances Winters, 2018 – book excerpt)
- Harvard Business Review: [How to Call Out Racial Injustice at Work](#) (James R. Detert and Laura Morgan Roberts, July 16, 2020)
- Harvard Business Review: [What An Anti-Racist Business Strategy Looks Like](#) (Laysha Ward, November 30, 2020)
- Harvard Business Review: [Are Your Diversity Efforts Othering Underrepresented Groups?](#) (Lori Nishiura Mackenzie and Melissa V. Abad, February 5, 2021))
- Harvard Business Review: [How to Have Difficult Conversations When You Don't Like Conflict](#) (Joel Garfinkel, May 24, 2017)
- Harvard Business Review: [How to Have Difficult Conversations Virtually](#) (Art Markman, July 8, 2019)
- Harvard Business Review: [Create a Culture Where Difficult Conversations Aren't So Hard](#) (Jim Whitehurst, August 14, 2015)
- *So You Want To Talk About Race* (Ijeoma Oluo, 2018 book)

To watch/listen:

- TED@NYC: [The Dangers of Silence](#) (Clint Smith, July 2014) (link provided under terms of a Creative Commons license, BY-NC-ND 4.0 International)
- NPR.org: [Can We Overcome Racial Bias? 'Biased' Author Says to Start by Acknowledging It](#) (Ailsa Chang interview with Jennifer Eberhardt, March 28, 2019)
- TED – WorkLife with Adam Grant podcast and transcript: [The Science of Productive Conflict: Transcript](#) (April 13, 2021)
- Center for International Development at Harvard University: [4P Model for Strategic Leadership – 4-part podcast series](#) (Rob Wilkinson, April/May 2020)
- [Difficult Conversations](#) (Lauren Mackler, May 9, 2010)

FIVE QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. The time and timing:

- How do you recognize or identify the “moment” when it’s time to have a difficult conversation about DEI? How do you decide whether to address it then or set up a meeting?
- How do you get your leadership team to make this the first item to discuss rather than the last in a meeting when time is running out?

2. The place:

- How do you create a safe space for a difficult conversation?
- Are discussions spontaneous and in the moment or behind a closed door?

3. The participants:

- How do you ensure everyone is represented? What are the groups and subgroups?
- How do you speak about diversity when you don’t think you are “diverse”?

4. Getting started:

- How do you prepare to engage with the topic of DEI so a conversation on DEI is simply *another* conversation? Or should you not have that level of comfort?
- How do you initiate the first conversation?
- How do you make it genuine?
- How do you defuse tensions?
- How do you address examples of implicit bias that happen during the conversation?

5. Are there activities that can help prompt and structure these conversations?

- Group movie-watching with a discussion after?
- Create a vignette or scenario, with questions to discuss?

FIVE THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

1. Always be training for the difficult conversation, so when it is time, you and your team are prepped and ready and it won't feel staged or be quite so difficult.
2. How do you listen so the other person hears you?
3. How is diversity defined so you can: Be open to the conversation? Spot the issue? See the other side? See all sides?
4. Are you setting your team up for success to have conversations/making it the norm?
5. Are you making the time for these conversations and discussions?

FIVE ACTIONS TO TAKE

1. Make sure the Board discusses DEI and inventories what your organization is doing on DEI.
2. Share links to videos and articles but make sure to give context (i.e., why that video or article makes a difference).
3. Have specific meetings around DEI to focus the issues and engage the Board.
4. Bring in an outside consultant to push the issue.
5. Ask: "Why not?"

FIVE IMPEDIMENTS TO SUCCESS

1. Fear and discomfort: Many people don't want to be the first to speak up, feel they are not entitled to speak up, or don't have the tools to speak up.
2. Defensiveness: "But I am not racist" or "I have friends of all colors" or "I am White so I cannot raise the issue."
3. Resources: Organization doesn't have the money and it takes too much time.
4. Resistance: It's too hard and requires too much effort to focus on it and do it right.
5. Why revisit?: "Here we go again; we did DEI training in 2019."