Navigation Guide

for Difficult Conversations about
Race in Troubling Times

To facilitate conversations following the Joint Federal Financial Agencies OMWI Event Beyond Words: Race, Work, and Allyship amid the George Floyd Tragedy

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Opening

Whether we have personally experienced racism or not, the question of equal justice in our society is front and center once again in our national dialogue. Increasingly, Americans agree that our current state is inconsistent with the promise of our country. An overwhelming number of Americans believe in the concept of equal justice for all, and yet we’ve experienced decades of alarming interactions, especially between the police and African Americans and other brown people, inequities in our justice system, employment, housing, education, and healthcare. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially on Black and Native American communities, has reinforced this concern. Years of organizational focus on diversity, inclusion and equity, conversations in the community about healing race relations, and organizations committed to a more just society haven’t resolved the problem. People are tired, and yet the various factors that we are presently experiencing have combined to have this be a moment of change. Racism is not just something Black people or people of color suffer under – it disconnects all of us from our humanity.

I am only one; but still I am one. I cannot do everything; but still I can do something; and because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do the something that I can do.

- Edward Everett Hale, 19th century social reformer and minister

This enormous societal issue cannot be resolved by someone else. Each of us has a clearly delineated role to play. It is time now for us to step forward and find that expression of solidarity, ownership and personal responsibility.

The time for saying “I know this is a problem and I don’t know what to do” is over. This digital guide, with many links to additional references, is for everyone in the federal government, regardless of institution, racial and ethnic identity, political orientation, or level, to offer guidance for having difficult, but meaningful, discussions to generate positive actions you can take. Please note that at time of publication, all the links are current although that can change based on the site’s owners.
Creating Safe Spaces
One on One Conversations

We all recognize that people have different personalities, experiences, and needs. This is clearly a time when you'll want to reach out to Black colleagues, employees, and friends, in particular. African Americans have clearly been a focus of the protests. But, it is important to consider that groups have been negatively impacted by these events and are in need of support. In addition to African Americans, Latinx have suffered disproportionately higher infection rates of COVID-19; harassment and hate crimes against people of Asian descent have also increased dramatically since last year. Being aware of and sensitive to all these specific populations is important as you enter into being a more conscious manager, coworker, and friend to explore different avenues of support.

If you are a White manager in your organization, it's important to ask yourself, "What is the right action for me to take?" Given that talking about issues related to racism can be confronting, we are frequently silent because we don't know what to do or say. To start, have a quick read from Michael Kraus at the Yale School of Management on how you might get started. The Wharton School provides another article for talking about race in the workplace using a model called P.A.C.E. Additionally, provide information about counseling resources available through the Employee Assistance Program (EAP).

Frequently, well-intentioned White people have asked Black people to talk about their history, what it means to be Black in America right now, explain Black culture, etc. During these times, they are likely experiencing many people coming to them and asking if they're okay. For some this might be positive, for others, it could take a heavy emotional toll. If you follow social media, many African Americans are saying that they "just need a minute" to process for themselves what's been going on, before sharing with others. And there is a wide interpretation for what that means. Here's one woman's experience. Others want to be seen in their pain and are aware of the silence about these incidents in the workplace. Put the same personal note into practice for everyone else who may be impacted by recent events!

So, what do you do?

* Send a personal note or a call, telling them that you're paying close attention to what's happening in the world today. One way to language this is potentially:
Given recent events, I wanted to check in and see how you're doing. I don't know how this might be impacting you, or what it's bringing up for you, but I wanted to reach out and say I'm here if you'd like to talk or if you need anything.” You might say: Let them know that you're doing your own work on how to respond (regardless of your identity!)

- That you're here for them if they need anything at all - someone to chat with, needs around time off or how what's happening applies to their work

- That you're going to schedule something for whomever wants to participate to support each other and explore what you'll do as a collective and as individuals.

It's important to note that everyone processes at their own pace. Some people you reach out to may share openly about what they're feeling, or you may encounter a colleague who's still processing and doesn't know what to say or, doesn't feel safe and/or ready to share with you. Be mindful of your own need to potentially fill the silence with your own thoughts and feelings, noting that this is rarely helpful, especially if you feel inspired to challenge their commentary. It's never okay to try to talk someone out of their experience, however it is okay to listen and just get where they are coming from. Give your colleague space and options. Be very careful to not make the conversation about you unless you have a strong shared experience.

Listening Sessions

A listening session is used to gather up people and ask about how they are feeling and experiencing issues of race or difference in the workplace. This is not a "learning" session, although learning always happens when people share authentically about themselves and how they see the world. The purpose of a listening session is two-pronged: give people an opportunity to share, and collect information confidentially to inform organizational decision-making. It's helpful to end a listening session asking for individual action or commitment as a way to confirm that everyone must have a role in dismantling systemic racism and in creating a more inclusive and equitable organization.
Questions to consider asking in a listening session:

- How are you experiencing/feeling about what’s happening right now?
- When you think about your racial identity, reflect on how that has impacted you in your work experience. (Note that people who are White might need a little time with this question if they haven’t been on a path to exploring their own racial perspectives)
- How often do you think about racial or ethnic identity?
- What are some examples of when your race influenced you on the job in terms of access to opportunities?
- Have you ever experienced a situation where your racial/ethnic identity seemed to contribute to a problem or uncomfortable situation?
- What have you observed about issues of race in this organization?
- What can we learn from what’s going on in the world to cause our agency/institution to be safer for people of color and other minorities, more inclusive, and equitable?
- How can we act courageously, both individually and collectively?
- What specific courageous actions will you take to move your organization forward?

Some principles to consider if you’re facilitating a listening session, or a one on one conversation about race.

1. Create a safe space by establishing confidentiality and stipulating that participants can share themes, but not who said them. Ask everyone to agree to this before proceeding. Let them know that there is no “one way” to do this, and that depending on their life experience and nature, they will address this issue very differently.

2. Listen deeply and really work to hear what each other has to say, as if what they are saying is true for them. We often want to talk someone out of their experience, especially if it conflicts with our own. Resist this and sit in the discomfort that someone else has a different experience than you. It’s an expression of accepting
that someone else's reality is different, and equally as legitimate as yours. You will
definitely not agree with all views, and if someone presents what can be interpreted
as a racist view, with the intention to be inflammatory or provoke others on the call,
you can say that you understand that this is their view, but it's not helping move the
classification forward (restate the intention).

3. Expect and accept that things may not be wrapped up nicely "with a bow." These are
difficult conversations that will evolve over time. Expect that you might experience
discomfort. These are important principles when talking about race. It's a very big
topic, and it isn't going to be resolved in one dialogue session, or two or even three.

4. On the topic of race, it's so easy to trigger and react to one another. It can help to
even to encourage people to give each other some leeway to work through their point of
view. Focus on more listening and less opining.

5. You may want to give people time to collect their own thoughts and take some time
to write/reflect before speaking.

6. In facilitating this kind of dialogue, allow yourself to get comfortable with silence.
Sit with it. Honor it. Trust in your capacity, the team's capacity to evolve.

7. If you are a manager, let your team know this is the first step in the process and that
it will be part of an ongoing conversation (don't say this unless it's true!)

It may be beneficial to create safe spaces for small group discussion for employees who are
impacted by various forms of racial trauma. These should be professionally facilitated by
trauma therapists or skilled facilitators.
Navigating Group Conversations
We don’t always know what to do with our thoughts and feelings about this topic, especially in difficult moments in time. One important step you can initiate is to gather together a group of colleagues to have a conversation about race. Holding an effective group conversation on race is especially important, but it isn’t particularly easy. Some of you will feel compelled to give it a try, so thanks for your commitment and your courage! Others may wish to get support from your Office of Diversity and Inclusion or Human Resources. Please take the sensitivity of these issues very seriously. The first rule of thumb should be “do no harm.” If, however, you do feel prepared to facilitate a conversation, here are some principles:

**Create an intention.** Establish why you’re holding the session. Is it to let people have a safe space to share how they’re feeling? To identify where in this team or organization you can take anti-racist actions? Whatever the intention, being clear will help you to manage the group if it gets off track in any way.

**Establish some ground rules for the conversation in advance.** You can always point back to them if the call/meeting devolves.

**Expect conflicting views.** It is important to understand that conflict is part of the solution, so it is important to allow conflict to emerge, as long as it is civil dialogue. Your job is to acknowledge that there are different views, and you’ll capture the different perspectives in your note-taking. There are fairly consistent narratives about race. If and when you encounter these, note that these are learned as standard messages in some communities. These are belief systems that many grew up with. When you hear these spoken in a session, acknowledge that they’re learned, but they don’t support the dismantling of racist institutions. Thank the individual for sharing their perspectives, ask someone on the call if they want to offer a counterpoint, and ask the person who shared the narrative to really listen to what others are sharing as another viewpoint. Some of these potential narrative themes are:

- “Racism is a fact of life as long as there are people from different ethnicities trying to work and live together, so why bother to even talk about it.”
- “We’ve made so much progress from the 60’s, it will just keep diminishing until it’s gone.”
- “Talking about race itself is divisive, so let’s just talk about how much we have in common.”
• "The whole diversity conversation enables people who can’t make it on their own and don’t have enough drive."

• "We all should be more color-blind and let people’s skills and personalities be what differentiates them."

When you encounter these or related themes, thank the participant for sharing and note that it’s understandable where these belief systems come from, however they may not forward the conversation for racial equity right now.

Expect to not know how to respond. We’ll all make mistakes in conducting difficult conversations. It is okay to say “I don’t know how to respond to that comment, but it sounds very important. Let me note it and perhaps we can talk off-line.”

**Ground Rules**

The following ground rules are from dialogue groups stimulated by Robin DiAngelo’s book on White Fragility from the Iowa State University Book Discussion Series. These are well thought out and should be referenced if used.

- **Recognize:** We recognize that we must strive to overcome historical and divisive biases, such as racism and sexism, in our society.

- **Acknowledge:** We acknowledge that we are all systematically taught misinformation about our own group(s) and about members of other groups. This is true for everyone, regardless of our group(s).

- **No Blame:** We agree not to blame ourselves or others for the misinformation we have learned, but to accept responsibility for not repeating misinformation after we have learned otherwise.

- **Respect:** We agree to listen respectfully to each other without interruptions. Only one person speaks at a time. However, this does not mean we should ignore problematic statements. See information here on calling in and calling out. Both approaches are valid and can be done with care and respect, with the goal of helping each other learn. We acknowledge that we may be at different stages of learning on the content and discussion topics.
• We agree that no one should be required or expected to speak for their whole race or gender. We can’t, even if we wanted to.

• Trust: Everyone has come to the table to learn, grow, and share. We will trust that people are doing the best they can; we all make mistakes and have bad days; when these occur, let’s challenge and encourage each other to do better. We acknowledge once again that we may be at different stages of learning on the topic.

1. Share the Air: Share responsibility for including all voices in the discussion. If you have a tendency to dominate discussions, take a step back and help the group invite others to speak. If you tend to stay quiet, challenge yourself to share ideas so others can learn from you. If you are exceedingly quiet, do expect that the facilitator will call on you in meetings to participate.

2. Not Experts: The facilitators are not experts. They are here to help facilitate the process. They and everyone in the group are here to learn. We also recognize that everyone has an opinion. Opinions, however, are not the same as informed knowledge backed up by research. Depending on the topic and context, both are valid to share but it’s important to know the difference. To engage in deep learning, we will want to lean more toward informed knowledge and gain practice reflecting and speaking thoughtfully on difficult topics.

• Ask for help: It’s okay not to know. Keep in mind that we are all still learning and are bound to make mistakes when approaching a complex task or exploring new ideas. Be open to changing your mind and make space for others to do so as well.

Conversation Starters

There is much learning to do about race, racism, and Whiteness, which includes white privilege and white supremacy. Dr. Eddie Moore, Jr., a motivational speaker, consultant and founder of The Privilege Institute has gathered many resources to forward learning on these topics, called the 21 day Racial Equity Habit Building Challenge. Each is identified by format and length of commitment (reading, podcasts, videos, ways to connect, and other categories), and is followed by how to hone your awareness, which groups to consider following.
Do consider learning with your colleagues. Invite a handful to take the challenge with you. As you progress through the learning, consider the following self-reflection questions as a way to expand your own learning.

- What came up for me when I (read, watched, listened…) was…
- When I was growing up, I learned …. and here’s how that is changing (or not) and why
- I feel confused and uncertain about…
- What is emerging for me is that I want to/commit to…

Sharing about what you’re learning about yourself contributes to building trust and openness, especially when you are in a racially mixed group.

Dr. Moore, Jr has provided some general inquiry questions about our world (questions in italics have been modified for organizational context). Consider bringing these questions to your colleagues to personally explore your relationship to people who are different from you, especially in your organizational context.

☐ Who is and is not represented in ads?

☐ Who are your ten closest friends? What is the racial mix in this group?

☐ As you move through the day, what’s the racial composition of the people around you?

☐ On your commute? At the coffee shop you go to? At the gym? At your workplace? At the show you go on the weekend?

☐ What percentage of the day are you able to be with people of your own racial identity?

☐ Notice how much of your day you are speaking about racism. Who are you engaging with on these issues? Who are you not? Why do you think this is?

☐ What are the last five books you read? What is the racial mix of the authors?

☐ What is the racial mix of the main characters in your favorite TV shows? Movies?

☐ What is the racial mix of people pictured in the photos and artwork in your home? In your friend, family, and colleagues’ homes?

☐ Who is filling what kinds of jobs/social roles in your world? (e.g. Who’s the store manager and who’s stocking the shelves? Who’s waiting on tables and who’s busing the food?) Can you correlate any of this to racial identity?
• Who do you notice on magazine covers? What roles are people of color filling in these images?

• If you’re traveling by car, train, or air, do you notice housing patterns? How is housing arranged? Who lives near the downtown commerce area and who does not? Who lives near the waterfront and who does not? Who lives in industrial areas and who does not? What is the density of a given neighborhood? Can you correlate any of this to racial identity?

• Who is and isn’t represented in the leadership of your organization?

• What have you noticed about who gets the high visibility job assignments around you? Regardless of response, why do you think this is?

• Does your organization effectively use internships or other exposure opportunities to increase racial diversity?

• Do you notice who sits at the table, and who sits against the wall or stands during large meeting?

• Why do you think this is?

• What do you think could be your role, regardless of level, position, function or racial identity, to move your organization to be more equitable and inclusive?

At some point when you have a good foundation of trust, you can migrate the conversation to address how others see themselves by using one or more of the following questions from the National Day of Racial Healing. More on setting up a safe space and intention is covered in this article, as well as previously in the section entitled: Listening Sessions. Some questions to consider:

• How often do you think about your racial or ethnic identity?

• What aspect of your racial or ethnic identity makes you the proudest?

• In what ways does being White/Latino/Hispanic/African American/Black/Asian/Native American/American Indian/Pacific Islander impact your personal life? Your professional life?
- Have you ever experienced a situation where your racial or ethnic identity seemed to contribute to a problem or uncomfortable situation?

- Does racial or ethnic identity enter in your process of making important or daily decisions? If so, how?

  - Have you ever felt "different" in a group setting because of your race/ethnicity? How did this affect you? How often/deeply do you interact with people of a different racial/ethnic identity other than your own? What is the nature of these relationships and interactions?

- Have you ever witnessed someone being treated unfairly because of their racial or ethnic identity? If so, how did you respond? How did it make you feel?

After a few people have shared, ask others to reflect on what they've heard and share what they related to or what stood out to them without blaming, shaming, or rescuing.
Tips To Become More Anti-Racist: What To Stop Doing
When people begin to become more aware of some of the problematic and ingrained behaviors from the past, especially White people, they begin to look to what to begin doing to support the dismantling of systemic racism. This is important, and covered in the later section called Allyship. In the meantime there are some important actions to STOP doing that will be just as contributory. Here’s what we can all stop doing:

Don’t use the term ‘diverse’ candidates as synonymous with “people of color.” Diversity includes all people, not just people of color. When we use this language, we’re reinforcing the notion that minorities are different from the normative group (White people). Try instead to use language that identifies the different groups you are actually referring to. (e.g. “We need more candidates/leaders/employees who are Black/African American, Hispanic, Asian, LGBTQ, people with disabilities etc.”)

Don’t say “I don’t know what to do.” We are living at a time when we all have huge encyclopedias in our cell phones! There is so much material on how to be an ally right now. Social media is exploding with lists on actions we can take to be effective allies. Saying you don’t know what to do or asking “Can you tell what I can do?” puts the onus on someone else to do the heavy lifting for you. We all have to be responsible, now. This guide has hundreds of actions you can take to be an ally, and to be anti-racist.

Don’t perpetuate white silence. Given the demographics of this country, white silence has been one of the most powerful detractors from real progress in social justice. White people can feel badly; be scared; think that killing Black people is awful; that an all-male and/or all White leadership team shouldn’t be allowed to continue; that the educational panel didn’t have any people of color or women; that the new class of interns is all White or the myriad other examples of conscious or unconscious biased actions. Everyone has a responsibility for bringing attention to this, and for acting commensurate with the stated values of the organization, and the Federal Government.

Don’t shy away from language like “whiteness,” “racism,” “white supremacy” and “allyship.” There was a time when education, talks, and references to these topics might have been seen as inflammatory, or generating negative responses, especially from White people. Our times now are requiring us to sit in the discomfort that these notions could cause, and to be willing to address our own growth and responsibility.
Don’t talk only about the “Black community” or any other community. Racism impacts all of us, when we divide ourselves it’s easy to perpetuate racist behavior. A reminder from the opening paragraph: Racism is not just something Black people or people of color suffer under—it disconnects all of us from our humanity.

Don’t be defensive if you get feedback or feeling guilty if you make a mistake. As you try engaging with others, perhaps for the first time, be prepared to make mistakes. You might say things you regret, or say things that don’t land well with other people and cause consternation. When this happens, please be compassionate with yourself and use it as a learning opportunity. And when someone else points out something that you said or did that didn’t land well with them, invite the feedback openly, without taking offence or becoming defensive. The same is true if you’re the one on the receiving end. This is a time to “call in” your colleagues, rather than “call them out.” Calling in means bringing them back into the fold with compassion and empathy, knowing that they’re trying. Sometimes people do need to be “called out” for saying/doing something intentionally mean-spirited or racist. Try to discern the intent.