

MANAGERS' GUIDE TO HAVING ESSENTIAL CONVERSATIONS

Leading difficult but essential conversations on topics such as racism, social injustices, bigotry and discrimination are not easy. Even professional facilitators and DEI practitioners can feel anxious about them. For the most part, employees and organizations would like to talk about these issues but don't know where to start. Some individuals may worry that others won't understand their point of view or that they may say something that will unintentionally offend.

This step-by-step guide is an excerpt from our [Having Essential Conversations Workshop](#) and can help you begin to have a conversation, despite these very real challenges. Recognizing that talking about racism can be challenging; your goals should be creating a safe space for people to be authentic and vulnerable and to strengthen communication and levels of trust that will pave the way for future conversations.

TIPS ON FACILITATION

Talking about DEI can be complex. Very few people are experts in being able to discuss these tough issues. You are not expected to know the answers. Your role is to facilitate dialogue to increase openness, build awareness and understanding, and to do your best to engage all perspectives and mindsets.

It is important to note that during these conversations, our own values and perspectives may be challenged. They are deeply ingrained in who we are and in what we believe. But our awareness of our personal values, emotions, and control of our reactions to any opposition or individuals who think differently from us are absolutely essential in our role as facilitators. Remaining neutral and non-judgmental to create environments of openness and candor will provide a safe environment for dialogue. We must be aware of our "hot buttons," even as we remain open to different perspectives. This includes being open to question our own conventional thinking.

As a facilitator or participant, be aware of your own "hot buttons." It is important to recognize the words or topics that create visceral reactions for yourself. Be aware of those reactions, how you feel, and how you respond to your own reactions. As a facilitator, be particularly aware and ensure you remain neutral in soliciting conversation and drawing out learnings.

To create a safe/brave space for these conversations, you want to:

Clarify the purpose of the discussion

- "Recent events have impacted our society, workplace, and colleagues"
- "Opening the lines of communication will enable us to enhance understanding, strengthen support and trust for each other, and help us to remain productive"
- "The _____ (e.g. racism/discrimination/disparities) impact all of us but particularly _____ (e.g. Black/LGBTQ+ communities)"

Establish ground rules

- "I'd like to create a safe space for our team to explore, to listen, and to learn from each other."
- "Here are some ground rules I would like to start with:
 - Assume good intentions
 - Don't blame or belittle
 - Practice active listening with one person speaking at a time
 - Everyone's perspectives should be heard
 - Don't interrupt

- It's okay to make mistakes (Agree to use terms like "oops"/"ouch" if you say something you didn't mean or if it feels wrong)
- Speak from your personal perspective using "I" statements."

Set the tone. Set the context

Be authentic and vulnerable

- "I've never held a discussion like this. I don't know what to expect."
- "I may make mistakes. I'm learning as we go. Assume good intent."
- "I hope we all look at this as a learning opportunity. But I think it's important to address."

Acknowledge your reality, speak from experience

- "I don't want to assume I know everything."
- "I want to speak from my personal perspective only. I encourage each of you to do the same."
- "I feel it's important to talk about this as an organization/team."
- "This situation has made me feel _____."

Align to the business case and your corporate values

- "Here at _____ we value DEI."
- "What we have seen across the country/around the globe has deeply impacted our communities, our colleagues, our clients, stakeholders, and markets."
- Share your organization's values, mission, objectives of DEI and why it's critical to your business.

Now, you are ready to start the conversation.

Begin with a conversation starter to help everyone feel included

Possible conversation starters

- "Let's go around the room. On a scale of 1-10, with 10 being "Really Comfortable" to 1 being "Really Uncomfortable." How are each of you feeling right now?" Start by sharing your rating.
- Open the dialogue and ask: "Would anyone like to share why they rated this question this way?"
- "Let's go around the room. Share one word that describes how you are feeling about the current events."
- Comment on what you just heard, name any common themes.
- Ask individuals if they feel comfortable sharing more of what they are feeling.

Deepen the conversation

Delve deeper into the discussion and issues by probing for understanding. Lead with good intent of curiosity and listening. Here are a few sample questions. We recommend having 4-5 questions to consider. The list below are some ideas, but the ones you use will, of course, depend on the topic of your conversation.

- How comfortable do you feel talking about race or ethnic identity (scale of 1-10 or open-ended)?
- How often do you think about racism, bigotry?
- What do you wish your colleagues knew?
- What support do you need from your colleagues? Your employer?
- What do you find most difficult about having an effective dialogue?
- What can we do better as a company to create an emotionally safe and respectful work environment, and facilitate your success and sense of inclusion?
- What can you do as an employee/manager to help create a respectful and inclusive work environment?

Reflect and rephrase

- 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. Participants do not need to all agree or find an antidote to issues like racism.

- As facilitator, steer participants away from blaming or belittling statements. Encourage participants to use “I” statements. (e.g. “I felt _____ when you said _____.”)

Avoid common pitfalls:

- “I know how you feel” — while your intent may be to show empathy, it is not possible to put yourself in anyone else’s shoes/mindset. Instead, use “thank you for sharing how you feel. I can somewhat relate...”
- Expecting any participant to have the answers/speak on behalf of others. A common pitfall is to assume, for example, that Black employees should speak and can speak for all Black people or a White male should speak for all White males.
- When concluding a discussion like this, it is essential that the participants understand what the next steps are to continue to support them and to take action to affect change.

Support

Ask your team if there’s anything you or the company can do to support them.

Some examples best practice organizations are offering include:

- Time off or flexible hours to look after their mental health,
- Increase in EAP services/benefits,
- Time off for protesting and/or community service,
- Assessment of work deliverables, such as re-evaluation of deadlines to allow some breathing room,
- “Listening/restoration” circles (hosting frequent meetings dedicated to listening).
 - Take notes and ensure comments are documented.

Commitment to action

Start with yourself and then ask individuals to share with these prompts:

- One thing they learned from the discussion.
- One thing they are committed to doing as a result of the session.

Offer up some suggestions for next steps, such as:

- Have more discussions.
- Lobby your school district to review and diversify curriculum.
- Educate yourself on local policies and laws.
- Talk to your children about racism and discrimination.

Summarize commitments or actions needed by you/the organization. Assign follow up to the actions.

Thank the participants for sharing their feelings with you and the others

It takes a lot of courage to open up, so acknowledge that.

- Reaffirm your commitment to supporting them through this.
- Reiterate your commitment and summarize some of the actions needed.
- Reassure that this conversation is just the start, but you’ve made a positive step forward.
- Reaffirm next steps and close.

ADDITIONAL FACILITATION TIPS

For greater tips, tools and learning, contact Diversity Best Practices at Seramount to learn more about our workshops. Please [contact us](#) for more information on the following workshops:

- Having Essential Dialogue
- Being an Upstander
- How to Be an Inclusive Colleague
- Building Anti-Racist Behaviors

Establish strategies and learn additional tips to facilitate and lead difficult conversations. Our workshops allow participants to address challenges, gain insights on avoiding pitfalls, and obtain actionable methodologies.

Suggested reading/video prompts to use as conversation starters

The First Time I Remember Being Black Video Series: CNN asked celebrities, CNN anchors and reporters, and others to tell us when they first realized that being black affected how people treated them. All the videos are under two minutes.

All That We Share: Three-minute video focuses on what unites, rather than divides us.

Neil DeGrasse Tyson, noted Astrophysicist, discusses the barriers he faced as a Black Man to achieve his professional dreams.

Remember, No one Is Coming to Save Us: An OpEd by Roxane Gay. Although too long to read together, you can either ask people to read the whole piece in advance, or choose an especially compelling quote from it to read as a prompt.

How to be an Anti-Racist: Written by Ibram X. Kendi this is a book that takes the reader beyond awareness of racism to the step of contributing to the formation of a just and equitable society.

Me and White Supremacy: Written by Layla Saad this book takes readers on a 28-day journey of how to dismantle the privilege within themselves so they can stop inflicting often unconscious damage on people of color, and in turn help other white people do better too.

Whistling Vivaldi: How Stereotypes Affect Us and What We Can Do: Written by Claude Steele this book offers a fresh perspective on American social phenomena from racial and gender gaps in test scores to the belief in the superior athletic prowess of Black men, and lays out a plan for mitigating stereotype threats.

LGBTQ Rights Milestones Fast Facts: CNN has compiled a detailed LGBTQ milestone timeline in the United States starting in 1924 and is routinely updated.

OUTstanding LGBT+ Role Model Lists 2020: INvolve, a diversity and inclusion membership organization has curated a lists showcasing the top 100 LGBT+ Executive, 100 LGBT+ Future Leaders, and 50 Ally executives.

White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack: This toolkit by Peggy McIntosh is considered a classic in anti-racism work as an outline on white privilege.

Disability in the US: Disability Impacts All of US: The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) disability and health promotion outline for the US.

George Floyd, Minneapolis Protests, Ahmaud Arbery & Amy Cooper: This is a video hosted by Trevor Noah in his show, The Daily Show , where he shares his thoughts on the killing of George Floyd, the protests in Minneapolis, the domino effect of racial injustice and police brutality, and how the contract between society and Black Americans has been broken time and time again.

Watchmen: This show on HBO focuses on what's missing from the original comic - white supremacy and racism. Watch as Regina King's character, Angela Bar a.k.a. Sister Night, gets information out of racists. And follow as a rebooted group of villains, the racist Seventh Cavalry, wreak havoc on the city.

Pose: This show on FX has made television history consisting of the largest cast of transgender actors in series roles. Follow the actors as they spotlight the intersectionality of the LGBT community in the ballroom community of the 1980s.

ABOUT SERAMOUNT

Seramount is a strategic professional services and research firm dedicated to advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion in the workplace. Over four decades, partnering with some of the most iconic companies in the world, we've built a deep data-driven understanding of the employee experience which lays the groundwork for everything we do. Our comprehensive [DEI toolkit](#) includes actionable research and insights, membership, strategic guidance and consulting, and inspiring events, meeting each client's needs no matter where they are on their journey, and guiding them along an ever-changing landscape. Seramount has empowered over 450 organizations to realize the business benefits of diversity, equity and inclusion. Learn more at seramount.com.

AS PART OF EAB

Combining EAB's educational expertise with Seramount's data and insights on building more inclusive workplaces will help schools and employers work together more effectively to eliminate opportunity gaps. Together, we have the unique opportunity to strengthen the connection between higher education and the workforce. By joining forces with EAB, Seramount can enhance our ability to serve our corporate clients and help them identify internal barriers to building recruiting pipelines and hiring diverse talent.

To more about Seramount's DEI services and solutions, [contact us today!](#)