

How Should You Be Talking With Employees About Racism?

Diversity and inclusion experts weigh in. One throughline: It's better to grapple with the issue openly than say nothing because you're afraid of getting it wrong.

Protests over the murder of George Floyd show no signs of slowing down, and at work this week, most bosses found themselves in the position of addressing the unrest. For black leaders, our country's legacy of racism is painfully familiar, so most can talk fluently about their experiences of oppression. Some may welcome the opportunity to speak right now, but many will find the prospect of educating their white counterparts exhausting. Be aware that it's an emotionally tumultuous time for communities of color.

As for white leaders, some might have already begun their educational journey — perhaps implementing diversity initiatives at their companies — but most are realizing they still have a long way to go. Some are comprehending that they're very much at the starting point. Leaders may be grappling with how to make their employees of color feel supported, or with the fact that they have very few black employees or employees of color at all. Generally, they might be struggling to find language to address all the pain, confusion and anger, and with how to begin making genuine change within their own businesses, as well as the larger business community.

“Understanding race and race equity is a process,” says [Lisa Brown Alexander](#), president and CEO of [Nonprofit HR](#). “Most people are socialized around certain beliefs and perceptions, and it's not easy to unpack those overnight. So admitting that you're at the beginning is the first step. Admitting you don't know something is hard, but the kind of tenacity that you need to build your business is the same kind of tenacity you need for understanding race and race equity in today's climate.”

We spoke to a number of diversity and inclusion experts about how business leaders and managers should think about handling the issue of racism in the current moment and as we move forward.

Whatever you do, be authentic

Whether you're a white or black leader, the thing people are looking for right now is real, unguarded reflection. "I think now is such a time for leaders to be authentic," says [Connie Evans](#), president and CEO of the [Association for Enterprise Opportunity](#). "In speaking weekly to my own team, I've tried to be authentic in expressing my own fear and outrage, my personal fear as a black woman, and just sharing my thoughts on what's happening."

[Rumina Morris](#), a diversity, equity and inclusion expert, agrees this is certainly true for white leaders as well. "The most important thing is to come from a place of authentic leadership," she says. "The heroes are the ones who ask, 'What can I do? How can I help? Tell me more.' The ones who ask, 'How are you? How are you coping?' The ones who believe the stories and pain of black people. They grow into the idea that an inclusive workplace just makes good business sense. Employees experience better job satisfaction, and employers get better employee retention. The fear of messing this up should not stop leaders from taking a stab at it. A messy conversation is better than the deafening sound of silence."

Related: [Here's How Business Leaders Are Responding to the George Floyd Protests](#)

Address the larger context of the current moment

"First and foremost," says [Dr. Donathan Brown](#), an expert in race and public policy at the Rochester Institute of Technology, "business leaders must understand, contextualize and articulate the current crisis for what it is: an ongoing and longstanding pandemic that continues, like COVID-19, to leave a devastating death toll across communities of color throughout the United States. Whether it is unequal access to quality health care, police brutality — jogging, birding, driving or simply existing while black, business leaders must set the tone within the context that aptly captures the tensions at hand."

Don't shrink away from the conversation because you're out of your depth

“Too many business leaders are unsure about how to talk to their employees about racism, and that fear and concern is often what underlies their inaction,” says Morris. “Leaders are supposed to lead and to model for their subordinates how to navigate challenging situations and conversations with confidence and skill. But when it comes to racism, leaders can very quickly realize that they are out of their depth. Let’s face it: Most leaders are white. Race-based discussions are not typically part of their dinner conversations. They don’t have to be — at least not the types of conversations about pain and intergenerational trauma that black communities endure regularly. The discomfort results in many business leaders avoiding the discussion altogether. “

Diversity initiatives are not a substitute for doing the work yourself

“Some leaders can acknowledge they are inept in the topic of racism and will turn to ‘experts’ on the subject of diversity and inclusion,” Morris says. “They may bring on a consultant to engage with their employees across diverse lines. Some will even create a diversity and inclusion position in their organization to advance racial and cultural dynamics in their workplace. But the true leaders, the ones who really stand out above the rest, are the ones who are curious and want to understand. They are the few who are ready to acknowledge their own power and privilege. They show humility in their ignorance and grace in their listening. They ask questions, they ask for help, and they are not afraid to get it wrong. Leaders, especially those from dominant groups, must be able to talk to their employees about racism. Being ‘color blind’ only ever served white people.”

Don’t put the onus on your black employees to explain racism

“It is *never* the job of black people to educate white people on the inequalities, discrimination and daily struggles they face,” says [Lillian Humphrey](#), director of cultural diversity and inclusion at [Power Home Remodeling](#). “More generally, it should never be a marginalized group’s responsibility to teach the majority. The majority should be self-educating first and foremost. As an organization, it is important for those within leadership roles to use their power and influence to take a stand, make a statement and support the sentiments of their black

employees. As a result, if non-black employees begin to see what their leadership is doing, this will hopefully have a domino effect.”

But make it clear to black employees — and other black entrepreneurs — that you’re here and ready to listen

“There is an important role for black staff to play in small and enterprising organizations,” says Brown Alexander. “Their voices are important, so don't assume that talking with them about this issue is going to be a burden. Some may find it burdensome to educate their organizations, but others will be relieved that you took the time to ask. I would start with listening and learning and giving people a safe space to talk. Reach out to say, ‘I am sorry. I am here. Let me know if you need time off.’ And then you might get into either a facilitated conversation or some sort of survey to gather the perspectives of the staff in a safe way. My staff is about 50 percent black, and I'm having a private meeting with my black staff where they can express concerns, frustrations and experiences in a way that feels safe. And then I'm bringing together my entire staff.”

The same goes for listening to other leaders of color. “I think there's an opportunity for entrepreneurs to look at their entrepreneur community and assess whether it's diverse or homogeneous,” Brown Alexander says. “Use this as a learning moment to hear from black entrepreneurs about their experience. African American business owners have likely had challenging experiences at some level or another either with their product development, their business development, obtaining financing, maybe influencing clients or prospects. Most can talk fluently on those issues.”

Related: [Black-Owned Restaurants and Businesses You Can Support Right Now](#)

Put in place safe avenues for people of color to give honest feedback about their experiences

At Power Home Remodeling, Humphrey says, “We’ve hosted a series of initiatives and ‘Woke-ish’ sessions, which are educational meetings dedicated to encouraging employees to have difficult conversations around racial topics that might be uncomfortable to discuss. These sessions also create a safe space

where both black and non-black employees feel they have a place to speak their mind and better understand the black experience.”

Bernard Boudreaux is the deputy director of Georgetown’s Business for Impact program, and he worked for Target Corporation for over 30 years in various corporate responsibility roles. He says asking the following questions (in a safe, maybe anonymous survey format) will offer valuable insight to companies trying to understand their own workplace cultures.

Here are the questions he suggests:

1. Ask your employees what the *company* could do better to address racism in the workplace, in the local community and in the USA.
2. Ask your employees what experiences they have had within the company, if any, that made them feel that race was a factor.
3. Ask your employees if they feel leadership *within the company* — however “leadership” is defined — has exhibited racist behaviors. If so, how?
4. Ask your employees if there are any business practices — HR, operations, philanthropic, logistical, etc. — the company does that they think contributes to or enforces racist behavior or attitudes.
5. Ask your employees if they think discussing race is a “safe” topic at work.

Be sensitive to the fact that your employees of color may not feel comfortable discussing race with you

“Don’t assume that your employees feel safe or want to discuss race with you,” says Boudreaux. “And don’t ask employees questions about race, or any sensitive topic, when their supervisor is around. This is about workplace culture. Some — many — employees *need* their job, and they just want to get to work, do the job, collect their paycheck and get home safely. They don’t have the ‘luxury’ of expressing their feelings and perhaps getting fired for it. Know your workplace culture! Make sure your employees are comfortable discussing race before even going down that path. Just take a second and think about a few predominantly male, predominantly white workplace environments and then ask

yourself if you think the 10 percent of black and brown employees feel ‘safe’ discussing race.”

Don’t talk the talk if you haven’t been walking the walk

“There is something that feels very wrong about an organization that has never before spoken internally or externally about black issues and the black experience, yet now all of a sudden wants to make it seem as though they are and have been supportive,” says Humphrey.

“With many companies beginning to post on social media how they are in support of the #BlackLivesMatter movement, it’s created a ripple effect where many companies are jumping on the bandwagon to make a statement,” Humphrey continues. “For some, the intention is perceived as genuine, and for others, it can be seen simply as a marketing ploy. When sharing company messaging and making posts around the racial climate, it is crucial to ask yourself two questions: ‘What is my actual goal in communicating this?’ And ‘How do I plan to continue communicating on this topic?’ If you want to appear to be doing the right thing solely to preserve your reputation, your communication tactics will fail because you are neither speaking from the heart nor with purpose. And unfortunately, your black employees will see right through it and not only feel a lack of support but also feel disrespected.”

Recognize if you’re part of the problem and make a plan to fix it

“Many organizations don’t realize that they might be part of the problem,” Humphrey says. “If you are a part of a company that still has a race wage gap, you’re part of the problem. If you are not providing equal access to leadership opportunities to your black employees, or you are placing a focus on attracting diverse talent but aren’t putting in the work to retain that same talent, you are part of the problem. If you are part of an organization that has not been properly and consistently involved in supporting the black community, it is important to be transparent in your efforts or lack thereof. Acknowledge that you are part of the problem but are working to change that and have a plan put in place to do so. And follow through with that plan — not for the next few months, or years, but for a lifetime.”