Perspectives

5 Dos and 3 Don'ts on Talking with Employees About Racism

The United States is in crisis. Social media and news outlets are flooded with videos of racial violence and threats toward Black people in America. Public demonstrations against injustice are happening in at least 30 areas. Vandalism and looting by third parties has occurred during non-violent protests, leading to often disproportionate police responses. All of this is happening while COVID-19 continues to claim lives and affect minority communities even more severely than others.

As a leader, how can you talk to employees, understand what they are experiencing and provide support?

- **Do be authentic**. Right now, people want true reflection and authenticity, whether that means talking about fear, outrage, shame or any other feelings about what is happening. At the same time, you should be asking them what you can do, how you can help, how employees are doing and how they are coping. Even if conversations are rough, it's better than not having them at all. After all, an inclusive workplace makes good business sense since employees have more job satisfaction and organizations have higher employee retention.
- **Don't avoid the topic of race.** Being unsure of how to talk to employees about racism or afraid of saying the wrong things are not excuses. The conversations are difficult because they are deeply emotional. They involve talking about who we are and our perspective on what the world should be. That is inherently messy. Nevertheless, your role is to show other leaders and managers in the organization what is expected and how to reach people. Whether you are white or not, you are not trying to project your own experience on others but to connect and learn more about theirs.
- **Don't become defensive**. Maybe these discussions about racial injustice question or challenge your world views, positions or advantagse. For example, someone hearing about police brutality against unarmed Black people might ask what victims did to deserve abuse, rather than demonstrate compassion and empathy. Robin DiAngelo's research on white fragility highlights this phenomenon. Resist these kinds of reactions because they do not provide room for constructive engagement.
- **Don't generalize.** There is a tendency to make broad generalizations about groups involved in conflict, but there is diversity within groups that should be recognized. Instead of presuming that all your employees think and feel the same and using words such as "everybody", "all of us" and "none of us", allow for dissenting views. You should ask about individual experiences rather than suggesting team members represent everyone else in their identity group.
- *Do support employees*. Give Black and brown employees the space to be angry, afraid or even disengaged from work. *Don't* rely on them to educate you about what happened in order to justify their hurt and outrage. Do not expect Black and brown leaders or employees to comfort or advocate for colleagues.
- **Do realize that some employees may not want to discuss race with you.** Not all employees will feel safe or interested in talking. Furthermore, you should not pose questions in front of their supervisors. Many employees need their jobs and just want to do their work, collect paychecks and go home. They can't take the risk of getting fired for expressing their opinions.
- **Do the work.** Maybe you feel like you are out of your element. That's not a rationale for turning over discussions to human resources or outside diversity experts. Rather, do the research to fully under-

stand events using data from reliable sources. Take the initiative to search beyond social media. Be curious and try to understand. Go a step further and acknowledge your own power and privilege. Show humility in ignorance and grace in listening. Ask questions, request help and accept if you do get it wrong.

- **Do take action**. <u>Think critically about how you can use your power to effect change</u>. Employees value words of understanding and encouragement, but leaders' and organizations' actions can have a more lasting impact. What can you and your business do in the community? What would promote equity and activate meaningful change? How can you advocate for such action?

Questions You Can Ask

1. What can the organization do better to address racism in the workplace, in the local community and in the country?
2. What experiences have you had within the organization, if any, that made you feel that race was a factor?
3. Have you felt that organization leadership has exhibited racist behaviors and, if so, how?
4. Are there any business practices of the organization (e.g., operations, logistics, hiring, etc.) that you think contribute to racist behavior or attitudes?
5. Do you think discussing race is a safe topic at work?

Racism isn't just a problem of Black or brown people. It's everyone's problem because it undermines the fabric of society. All leaders must use their platforms and resources to help employees and communities overcome these challenges and build a better world.

Additional Resources

- [Don't Be Silent: Expert Tips to Defuse Workplace Tensions](#), SHRM, June 2020.
- [The African American History Museum Wants to Help You Talk About Race and Racism](#), Washingtonian, June 2020.
- [George Floyd And Racism: 5 Conversations Credible Leaders Must Have In This Moment](#), Forbes, June 2020.
- [What managers should—and shouldn't—do to address this moment of racial reckoning](#), CNBC, June 2020.
- [Several Antiracist Books Are Selling Out. Here's What Else Black Booksellers and Publishers Say You Should Read.](#)