

Creating space for difficult conversations



Conversations around diversity and inclusion have been happening in and around workplaces for years. Starting conversations on racism, discrimination, and how your coworkers feel about how they are being treated can be challenging and uncomfortable-- but they are necessary.

If your employees do not feel safe, they will most likely not share their true experiences and feelings. Whether you are a leader or a colleague, consider how your actions could lead someone to believe you are insensitive to their struggles.

An employee or coworker not expressing their feelings and fears does not mean they do not exist.

Q: How should I address such a sensitive topic? Is it even appropriate to be talking about this at work?

Though you may feel that racism is not a problem in your organization, some human experiences **are not** universal.

Being open to hearing how people around you may have been affected is an important part of having a conversation that will yield positive results for yourself and the people you work with. Talking about race can and will be challenging, but here are reasons why it's necessary:

- ▶ Our thoughts about race impacts our decisions and understandings. This can be unconscious and people may do it without realizing. It is hard to understand the severity of these biases until you are confronted with them and encouraged towards honest introspection.
- ▶ We need to break out of the fear of these discussions to listen and learn.
- ▶ The more it is discussed, the less fear people will have in saying the wrong thing.
- ▶ These discussions will allow everyone to recognize and explore their own biases and prejudices, and then be able to minimize condemning others.
- ▶ It gives individuals a chance to hear other's experiences, feel empathy, learn from their stories, and promote change within.
- ▶ It can help eliminate stereotypes.
- ▶ It fosters an environment of learning and growing from mistakes, rather than "cancellation" or shame.

Starting Tough Conversations (Tips for Leaders)

Before starting these conversations, **especially if you are a leader**, consider how your own implicit biases can be affecting how you are responding to the events happening right now.

Implicit bias refers to the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions and decisions in an unconscious manner.

Harvard has a free and confidential series of assessments you can take to determine bias based on race, sexuality, age, gender, etc. here:

<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>

If you have many employees, try breaking into groups of 8-10 employees to ensure everyone can get a chance to speak. Here are some tips for creating a safe environment:

- ▶ Reinforce the purpose.
The purpose may be to explore, listen and learn from each other. As a manager, help keep the conversation on the intended path.
- ▶ Set agreements.
These are boundaries and expectations. Examples can be to respect each other, actively listen, encourage others, and not interrupt.

- ▶ Use phrases such as “I have never thought of it that way, can you explain what made you think that?” Or “I feel frustrated when this is said because ...”
- ▶ If you feel the conversation has become aggressive or volatile, try to determine if it could be a result of people feeling attacked or targeted. If so, think about how to properly support while still addressing any concerns being voiced towards them.
- ▶ Be careful to not be dismissive of people because they are “just angry”, anger could be a sign of frustration that they are not being properly heard.
- ▶ Opening the conversation.
This will help everyone get to know one another. Use open ended questions that pull from employee’s experiences, such as “tell me a story of a time you felt loved.”
- ▶ Deepen the conversation.
Once you feel that the conversation is moving along and employees are feeling comfortable sharing, try using a phrase such as “How often do you think about your racial or ethnic identity?” or “What aspect of your racial or ethnic identity makes you the proudest?”
- ▶ Close the conversation.
When it is time to wrap up the conversation, thank the employees for sharing and being vulnerable during the discussion. Consider going around and have everyone share how the group was for them and what they may have learned. Talk about the possibility of scheduling another conversation if it seems that is the consensus.
- ▶ Amplify Black and other POC voices in your space.
- ▶ Redirect employees from blaming or belittling others.

Active Listening

'Active listening' means, as its name suggests, actively listening. That is fully concentrating on what is being said rather than just passively 'hearing' the message of the speaker. It is a skill that can be acquired and developed with practice and involves listening with all senses. As well as giving full attention to the speaker, it is important that the 'active listener' is also 'seen' to be listening - otherwise the speaker may conclude that what they are talking about is uninteresting to the listener.

Active listening not only means focusing fully on the speaker but also actively showing verbal and non-verbal signs of listening. By providing this 'feedback' the person speaking will usually feel more at ease and therefore communicate more easily, openly and honestly. Listening is the most fundamental component of interpersonal communication skills.

- ▶ Listening is not something that just happens, that is hearing. Listening is an active process in which a conscious decision is made to listen to and understand the messages of the speaker.
- ▶ Listeners should remain neutral and non-judgmental, this means trying not to take sides or form opinions, especially early in the conversation. Pauses and short periods of silence should be accepted.
- ▶ Listeners should not be tempted to jump in with questions or comments every time there are a few seconds of silence. Active listening involves giving the other person time to explore their thoughts and feelings; they should, therefore, be given adequate time for that.

Non-Verbal Signs of Listening

Smile:

Combined with nods of the head, smiles can be powerful in affirming that messages are being listened to and understood.



Eye Contact:

It is normal and usually encouraging for the listener to look at the speaker. Eye contact can however be intimidating, especially for more shy speakers – gauge how much eye contact is appropriate for any given situation.



Posture:

The attentive listener tends to lean slightly forward or sideways whilst sitting. Other signs of active listening may include a slight slant of the head or resting the head on one hand.



Mirroring:

Automatic reflection/mirroring of any facial expressions used by the speaker can be a sign of attentive listening. These reflective expressions can help to show sympathy and empathy in more emotional situations. Attempting to consciously mimic facial expressions (i.e. not automatic reflection of expressions) can be a sign of inattention.



Distraction:

The active listener will not be distracted and therefore will refrain from fidgeting, looking at a clock or watch, doodling, playing with their hair or picking their fingernails.



Verbal Signs of Listening

Positive Reinforcement:

Although some positive words of encouragement may be used, they should not distract from what is being said or place unnecessary emphasis on parts of the message.

Casual and frequent use of words and phrases, such as: 'very good', 'yes' or 'indeed' can become irritating to some. It is usually better to elaborate and explain why you are agreeing with a certain point.

Remembering:

Remembering details, ideas and concepts from previous conversations proves that attention was kept and is likely to encourage the speaker to continue. During longer exchanges it may be appropriate to make very brief notes to act as a memory jog when questioning or clarifying later.

Questioning & Clarification:

By asking relevant questions the listener also helps to reinforce their interest in the matter, as well as to build or clarify what the speaker has said. It can help to ensure that the correct message has been received.

Reflection:

Reflecting is closely repeating or paraphrasing what the speaker has said in order to show comprehension. It is a powerful skill that can reinforce the message of the speaker and demonstrate understanding.

Summarization:

Repeating a summary of what has been said back to the speaker is a technique used by the listener to repeat what has been said in their own words. Summarizing involves taking the main points of the received message and reiterating them in a logical and clear way, giving the speaker chance to correct, if necessary.

Empathy (noun)

em·pa·thy

Definition of empathy

1 : the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another of either the past or present without having the feelings, thoughts, and experience fully communicated in an objectively explicit manner, also: the capacity for this

2 : the imaginative projection of a subjective state into an object so much so that the object appears to be infused with it

Practicing empathy will help foster an environment that your friends, colleagues and family members can feel comfortable expressing their true thoughts and emotions in.

How empathic are you?

Take the quiz:

https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/quizzes/take_quiz/empathy

6 Habits of Highly Empathic People

Habit 1: Cultivate curiosity about strangers

Highly empathic people (HEPs) have an insatiable curiosity about strangers. They will talk to the person sitting next to them on the bus, having retained that natural inquisitiveness we all had as children, but which society is so good at beating out of us. Respecting the advice of the oral historian Studs Terkel: “Don’t be an examiner, be the interested inquirer.”

Habit 2: Challenge prejudices and discover commonalities

We all have assumptions about others and use collective labels—e.g., “Muslim fundamentalist,” “welfare mom”—that prevent us from appreciating their individuality. HEPs challenge

their own preconceptions and prejudices by searching for what they share with people rather than what divides them.

Habit 3: Try another person’s life

HEPs expand their empathy by gaining direct experience of other people’s lives, putting into practice the Native American proverb, “Walk a mile in another man’s moccasins before you criticize him.”

Habit 4: Listen hard—and open up

There are two traits required for being an empathic conversationalist. One is to master the art of radical listening. “What is essential,” says Marshall Rosenberg, psychologist and founder of Non-Violent Communication (NVC), “is our ability to be present to what’s really going on within—to the unique feelings and needs a person is experiencing in that very moment.” The second trait is to make ourselves vulnerable. Removing our emotional walls and revealing our

feelings to someone is vital for creating a strong empathic bond. Empathy is a two-way street that, at its best, is built upon mutual understanding—an exchange of our most important beliefs and experiences.

Habit 5: Inspire mass action and social change
Empathy will most likely flower on a collective scale if its seeds are planted in our children. Canada's pioneering Roots of Empathy, the world's most effective empathy teaching program, has benefited over half a million school kids. Its unique curriculum centers on an infant, whose development other children observe over time in order to learn emotional intelligence—and its results include significant declines in playground bullying and higher levels of academic achievement.

Habit 6: Develop an ambitious imagination
A final trait of HEPs is that they do far more than empathize with the usual suspects. We tend to believe empathy should be reserved

for those living on the social margins or who are suffering. This is necessary, but it is hardly enough.

We also need to empathize with people whose beliefs we don't share or who may be "enemies" in some way. If you are a campaigner on global warming, for instance, it may be worth trying to step into the shoes of oil company executives—understanding their thinking and motivations—if you want to devise effective strategies to shift them towards developing renewable energy. A little of this "instrumental empathy" (sometimes known as "impact anthropology") can go a long way.

The 20th century was the Age of Introspection, when self-help and therapy culture encouraged us to believe that the best way to understand who we are and how to live was to look inside ourselves. But it left us gazing at our own navels. The 21st century should become the Age of Empathy, when we discover ourselves not simply through self-reflection, but by becoming interested in the lives of others.