



Anti-Racism Action Guide: How to Talk with Colleagues about Race, Racism, and Anti-Racism

In response to protests over the death of George Floyd and other Black individuals from racist violence, institutions and corporations across different sectors of the American economy have used traditional and social media to voice their support for the Black Lives Matter movement. In light of these public pronouncements, Black employees have shared their experiences of encountering racism and discrimination in the workplace, which for many, was impossible to do so before due to fear of job-related retribution. These stories, also shared on social media, have resulted in public resignations of individuals who perpetuated workplace racism and have led to parallels with #MeToo movement.

For many Americans, serious conversations about race rarely occur. If these important discussions do happen, they are likely to be held with family and friends. And the frequency of these conversations varies based upon people's racial or ethnic background; approximately two-thirds of Blacks and Asian Americans report talking often or sometimes about race compared to half of White and Latinx people (Barroso, 2019). However, race and racism are still rare topics of conversation in the workplace, and this needs to change for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) employees to feel safe, supported, and heard.

This anti-racist action guide includes a series of action items to help employees talk to their colleagues about race. Pertinent resources are also included.

WHAT TO DO NOW

Check in with Your Black Colleagues Who Likely Are Struggling Right Now

- Offer an opportunity for your colleagues to engage in discussion, but leave it open-ended so that they can easily choose to disengage if they feel overwhelmed
 - Offer an open-ended invitation like, "No need to respond, but I am here if you need to talk or want someone to listen" (Dockery, 2020)
- Acknowledge in your message a recognition that the current climate is difficult for Black individuals
 - Consider recommending a video, meme, recipe, or song that provides an opportunity for a joyful experience

- Remain open to potentially making a mistake in your attempt to start or engage in a discussion
 - Acknowledge with humility, apologize, and attempt to learn from this experience
- Practice initiating the discussion with a trusted colleague before attempting to open this dialogue with a less-familiar colleague
- Consider sending a public message of solidarity rather than a private message of support, especially if you are not as close with your colleague
 - Be mindful that it places emotional burden on already-struggling Black people when they receive multiple messages from colleagues asking, “How are you?” especially if they are not overly familiar with those well-intentioned

Support Your Black Colleagues

- Care for your team/colleagues as people, not just as co-workers
- Be respectful of people’s responses to outreach and conversation
 - Recognize that disengagement or distancing are valid self-care strategies
 - Respect people’s boundaries and ask what support looks like for them
- Communicate what changes you are personally making to change things for BIPOC, rather than conveying a general sense of hope that things will change for the better
- Encourage leadership to hire and promote Black professionals
- Remember not to inundate your Black colleagues with requests to help you understand and solve racial injustice
 - Educate yourself
 - Refer to anti-racism action guides “What Can I do as a White Person” and “Self-Exploration”

Speak Up and Have Difficult Conversations

- Recognize that saying something is better than saying nothing at all, even if you do not know if it’s the right thing to say
 - Be mindful that silence is consent to the status quo, and it is **crucial** to have these conversations to dismantle systemic racism
- Acknowledge the difficulty of the conversation and validate the other person’s feelings
- Be curious and ask questions to understand the other person’s viewpoints, such as “It seems as though you feel __,” “Out of curiosity, why do you feel that way?” or “That’s an interesting point, but I have a few questions about that”
- Help the other party speak without fear of judgment by using a compassionate tone
- View your conversation as moving the needle and getting closer to solving a joint problem
- Refer to the anti-racism action guide “Recognizing and Responding to Microaggressions”

Hold Your Colleagues and Managers Accountable and Report Instances of Racism

- Document incidents of racism and discrimination
- Determine if those affected by specific incidents of racism in the workplace would be open to informal, restorative dialogue and have a framework for such dialogues if there is agreement to such conversations - Kwame Christian Esq., M.A., the director of the American Negotiation Institute, says that, “The best things in life are on the other side of difficult conversations” and outlines a framework to help people get to that other side
 - Set some ‘rules of engagement’ so that everyone in the dialogue agrees to some basic behavior guidelines to set the conversation up for success
 - Set up the dialogue to happen in phases
 - Assign a moderator to help make sure people feel there is a neutral person to guide the dialogue
 - Allow for authentic dialogue so that BIPOC in the workplace can safely express what they are feeling and experience without fear of retaliation or negative judgment
 - Lift up Black voices, but understand that White people need to take the lead so that the burden is not on those on the receiving end of racism
 - Use persistent pressure to push others out of comfort zones and into commitment
 - Ensure positive impact by discussing tangible goals for creating an anti-racist workplace
 - Ensure that each person in the dialogue can commit to one new action to take
- Make decisions about reporting incidents of racism and discrimination if dialogue aimed at resolution is not possible
 - Consider contacting your Human Resources department or management to report racist harassment or discrimination if informal, restorative dialogue is not possible or desired by those affected by racism,
 - Note, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits racial discrimination in the workplace
 - Consider filing a complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC)
 - Note, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 requires that you report the discrimination to the EEOC before you are able to file a lawsuit in federal court, if you are considering speaking with a discrimination attorney

RESOURCES

Adeshola, A, (2020, June 1). *3 things you should not say to your black colleagues right now*. Forbes. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/adunolaadeshola/2020/06/01/3-things-you-should-not-say-to-your-black-colleagues-right-now/#70b045605a37>

Barroso, A. (2019, June 25). *How often people talk about race with family friends depends on racial and ethnic group, education, politics*. Pew Research. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/06/25/how-often-people-talk-about-race-with-family-and-friends/>).

Cadet, D. (2020, May 28). *Your black colleagues may look like they're okay- chances are they're not*. Refinery 29. <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2020/05/9841376/black-trauma-george-floyd-dear-white-people>

Christian, K. (2018). "Nobody Will Play with Me:" How to use compassionate curiosity to find confidence in conflict. American Negotiation Institute LLC.

Connley, C. (2020, June 3). *5 ways to start being a better ally for your black co-workers*. CNBC. <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/06/03/how-to-be-a-better-ally-for-your-black-coworkers.html>)

Dockery, T. (2020, June 1). *Please stop "just checking in" on your black co-workers*. Zora Medium. <https://zora.medium.com/please-stop-just-checking-in-on-your-black-co-workers-d531f8d670a6>

Liu, J. (2020, June 5). *Talking about racial inequality at work is difficult- here are tips to do it thoughtfully*. CNBC. <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/06/05/how-to-thoughtfully-talk-about-racial-inequality-with-your-coworkers.html>

Tita-Reid, N. (2020, June 8). *Beware of burning out your black employees*. Fortune. <https://fortune.com/2020/06/08/black-people-workplace-racism-diversity/>

Suggested Reading

Confronting Racism at Work: A Reading List: <https://hbr.org/2020/06/confronting-racism-at-work-a-reading-list>