

Guide for having difficult discussions about race & identity



About

Why you should use this resource: This document outlines principles and practices to help facilitate discussion of interpersonal conflicts related to race and identity with your colleagues and team. By learning and practicing how to have these difficult conversations productively, you'll build understanding and community among your colleagues, as well as be better equipped to build equity and inclusion into your work.

Who this is for: This resource can be useful for anyone — especially business school students, product managers, and others in leadership roles — as a tool to mitigate harmful behavior and build a sense of community within your institution, organization and/or team. This tool is a great starting point for people who may be new to having these conversations or can serve as a refresher for those with more experience.

When you should use this: Ideally, use this before a conflict arises so that you can work proactively to avoid issues. You can also use this tool after an issue related to race has come up to help in resolving the issue.

What you will have after using this guide: You'll gain an understanding of good practices on how to talk about issues related to race among your colleagues and team. This can result in an environment that practices inclusion and supports belonging.

For the guide on having difficult discussions related to race that are more about product design, please see our [Guide for having difficult discussions about race & identity in AI/ML research and development](#).

What can this tool do for you?

This tool is designed to help you and your colleagues navigate real, tough conversations about race that may come up in your organization. Consider the following scenario:

Mikey shares a story about a time that they were denied an opportunity because of their race. Another colleague, Sarina, questions whether or not this was due to race, and it is apparent that Mikey is upset.

- Because you have used this tool to **learn** about others' lived experiences, you can point Sarina to resources providing information about the reality of racial discrimination in the US.
- You have **reflected** on your own experience and how it is different from others' experiences,

so it's easy for you to accept that even if you haven't experienced this specific type of discrimination, you understand that others may have.

- You've **practiced** what to **say** and what to **do** in these difficult conversations. You use an "I" statement to highlight the impact of what's been said, "I think that what Mikey said was really important. For me, it feels important to recognize that we all have different experiences, and I want to thank Mikey for sharing that painful experience."

Steps you can take anytime

Learn about others' lived experiences by listening to and believing what they share. Listen to your colleagues and friends when they share their experiences with you, but also put in the work to learn more about these issues on your own. Think about the types of media you consume — are you listening to speakers from one group more than another? Be open to hearing and accepting that others might have different experiences, and those experiences might challenge your understanding of how the world works.

- For a list of movies, videos, podcasts on race — and diversity, equity and inclusion more broadly — check out UC Berkeley's list of [resources](#) along with the [Race Inclusion Initiative Library](#) from Berkeley Haas School of Business.
- Search for recommended reading that highlights a diversity of experiences through lists like Seattle Public Library's [Celebrate Diversity reading list](#).

Reflect about your own background and work to identify the biases that you have. We all have biases, and it is important to make our invisible or subconscious biases visible if we are going to address them. Connect what you have learned through listening to others' perspectives back to your own experiences. Reflect on how your perspective has changed, or why it has not. Gaining a strong sense of self-awareness can help you in difficult situations and allow you to separate your intentions from your impacts. Write or journal on the following:

- What is my racial background? What privileges have I faced given this background? What barriers have I faced given this background?
- How have I experienced or seen people of different racial backgrounds experience bias in my workplace or institution?
- How might people of other racial backgrounds face different challenges (or opportunities) within the workplace or institution? How might multiple identities (such as race, gender, area of origin, and socio-economic status) intersect and create unique impacts?
- When have I been resistant to changing my behavior (especially when that behavior has negatively impacted others)? Why have I been resistant to making that change? What next steps can I take to make positive changes in how I manage my biases?

Practice what you can say and do during a tough situation. At the moment an issue surfaces, it can be difficult to think of what to say or decide what to do on the spot. So, think about how you might address difficult topics ahead of time and practice different responses. Read and practice the following steps and tips, or do a role play with your team (for role play / case study scenarios (such as our Case Study: Creating a responsible personalized AI finance tool).

Steps to take in the moment

When you hear or say something that is hurtful, it can be difficult to react quickly. First, try to

remember that there is a difference between *intent* and *impact*. Whether the *intent* was good or bad, the *impact* is real and should be honored. It's important to remember that even actions with good intentions can have harmful impacts, but by talking through what has happened, it is possible for both parties to express their needs and reach a solution. In this document, we consider *harm* as a broad term, which includes actions that cause individuals to feel overtly harmed as well as actions (such as microaggressions) that cause feelings of discomfort or uneasiness because of an individual's membership in a minoritized group. The tips below can help you respond if you've been harmed or are a bystander, and they can also help you understand how to work towards a resolution if you've harmed someone else.

While it's important to address issues that arise, it's not always possible or desirable to address them right away. The person harmed might not feel safe, or might fear negative consequences — especially if the person doing harm is in a higher position of power. It can be useful to take a moment to assess the situation and think about the best way forward (including what modality to use, whether digital communication, face-to-face, etc.). It's okay to be strategic about how and when you address these topics, but they should be addressed and not ignored.

Say Something.

	WHEN SOMEONE HAS HURT YOU OR YOU'RE A BYSTANDER	WHEN YOU'VE HURT SOMEONE ELSE
<i>Ask for clarification (this can provide a chance for the harmful action to be acknowledged in a non-threatening way)²</i>	Use a probing question, like: I'm not sure I understand what you're saying by that. Can you say more about what you meant? Can you clarify that for me?	Acknowledge the harmful impact: I'm sorry. I see how my statement had that impact. Thank you for sharing that with me.
<i>Highlight the impact (this can help separate impact from intent, and allow us to address negative impacts)</i>	Use "I" statements: I don't think you meant it this way, but I feel hurt by that statement because... / I have a different perspective... / For me, this feels... ³	Respect what has been shared with you: Thank you for telling me that. I see that my statement has had that impact.
<i>Participate in ongoing learning</i>	Encourage the person to explore resources on the topic: What you're saying reminds me of a podcast that you might find interesting...	Be open to learning more: I'd love to learn more about what you've shared. Can you point me to any resources?

Do Something.

If you don't feel like speaking up is the right thing in the moment, you can still seek and give support through your actions.

- *Try using eye contact.* As a bystander, you might make eye contact with the person who has been harmed so they know that you see the negative impact too. If you've been harmed, use eye contact to reach out to allies who may be able to provide support. Do this as appropriate, noting that for some people and cultures, eye contact may or may not feel helpful. Eye contact may also differ between modalities (such as face-to-face vs. online).
- *Create a safe space or way out.* If you or someone else is in a harmful situation, your first responsibility is to protect yourselves. You can try to find a way to leave the situation or to help others leave. If you've harmed someone else and they need to take time away, let that happen.
- *Send a private message or schedule a meeting to talk.* In digital environments, the above techniques might not be effective. Think about other ways of reaching out, such as a private message. Each context is different, so think about what actions might be feasible within a given environment.

Steps to take after the fact

Reach out.

Whether you've been harmed, done harm, or witnessed harm, reaching out after the fact can potentially help the situation.

- If you've been harmed: Use the same tips as described above, but take the time you need to think about how you want to address the situation. You might want to reflect on your positionality and consider what strategies might be most effective for your particular situation. This could involve recruiting a third party or a team at your organization that focuses on these issues.
- If you've done harm: Focus on the *impact* of your statement, reflect on how you can avoid a negative impact in the future. Let the person that you've harmed know that you recognize that your actions had a negative impact and, if possible, start a conversation about what you can do together to move forward.
- If you've witnessed harm: Reach out to both parties. You might want to talk to each party separately first to understand more how it has impacted them and to understand what they might hope for in a resolution. Letting a person who has been harmed know that they were not alone — you also saw that the behavior was harmful — can be important. Also, letting the person who did harm know about the impact of their actions in a non-threatening way may allow them to feel more comfortable talking about what happened and learning how to avoid it in the future.

Listen.

While discussing difficult issues, make sure that everyone is able to share their own perspective and experiences. This is not a simple task, and it may not be possible for everyone to be able to fully share their perspectives freely until large, structural changes have been made. However, we can still take steps — both as individuals and as organization — to make spaces more equitable. Affirm that you have heard and appreciate what others share, and encourage others

to do the same. Even when others express opinions that are different from yours, remember that engaging in these conversations can be difficult. Stating your appreciation of what others have the courage to say can help promote deeper discussion.

Interested in learning more?

This document was informed by our playbook, [Advancing Language for Racial Equity and Inclusion](#), and the following guides for having difficult conversations:

Singleton, Glenn E. (2015). *Courageous Conversations About Race: A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in Schools*. Thousand Oaks, California: Corwin.
Sue, Derald Wing. (2015). *Race Talk and the Conspiracy of Silence: Understanding and Facilitating Difficult Dialogues on Race*. Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

This guide was developed by Julia Nee, Genevieve Smith, Ishita Rustagi, and Alicia Sheares with the Center for Equity, Gender & Leadership (EGAL) at the UC Berkeley's Haas School of Business.

For more information, please reach out to egal@berkeley.edu.

Endnotes

- 1 Note that it is important to focus not only on barriers we have faced, but privileges we have. It can be easy to avoid acknowledging privilege in favor of focusing on barriers, but confronting privilege is a key aspect of self-reflection.
- 2 When and How to Respond to Microaggressions. (2020, July 03). Retrieved from <https://hbr.org/2020/07/when-and-how-to-respond-to-microaggressions>
- 3 Yoon, H. (2020, March 03). How to Respond to Microaggressions. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/03/smarter-living/how-to-respond-to-microaggressions.html>