



Race



How Managers Can Promote Healthy Discussions About Race

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Tim Wolfe, former president of the University of Missouri system, did not lose his job because of racist incidents on campus. He lost his job because he didn't talk about them.

Unwilling to acknowledge protesters during the [homecoming parade](#) and unable to effectively respond to questions about [systematic oppression](#), Wolfe was seen by students as uninterested in addressing their concerns — concerns they had attempted to raise with him time and again.

Wolfe's ouster and similar stories underscore how the ability to discuss race and racism is vital to being a leader today. While such dialogues can provoke anxiety or discomfort and can be difficult to navigate, they are essential — and beneficial — even before an incident occurs.

Many white people may avoid conversations about race out of fear of “saying the wrong thing.” And many people of color in predominantly white companies may avoid these conversations out of fear of being seen as a complainer — or worse. But pretending the elephant in the room isn't there won't make it go away.

Today, minorities make up 37% of the United States population and will climb to 57% by 2060. The U.S. Department of Commerce projects nonwhite ethnic groups will represent 85% of U.S. population growth between 2011 and 2050. As these changes transform the workplace, being comfortable talking about race will become increasingly important.

Here are three steps — based on both my academic research and my consulting work — that managers can take to increase discussion, decrease fear of saying the “wrong thing,” and avoid sidestepping conflict:

1. Make inclusion a long-term investment. Standalone trainings and one-off dialogues — though currently considered best practice — are too quickly forgotten and too easily written off as “nice to do,” limiting a company's ability to foster sustained workplace climate change. Positive change comes from customized trainings and regular discussions that are informed by and interwoven with business strategy (and presented consistently over time).

When conversations about race occur within a larger investment in inclusion, those discussions gain a context that helps employees understand why they're valuable and where they fit into the overall business strategy. Cordoning off diversity and inclusion efforts in a single department signals those issues aren't priorities, making challenging conversations easier to avoid. Successful customized training sessions that are embedded and sustained over time involve cohort-based experiences, immersion opportunities, coaching, book clubs, and small study groups that convene for at least a quarter or, at best, a year or longer. And unconscious-bias training – which has gotten very popular recently — is important, but it's only one piece of the puzzle.

Just as becoming a skilled manager didn't happen in one workshop, becoming a competent participant in or a facilitator of racial dialogues also takes time and development. One company my firm worked with in the insurance sector engaged in customized diversity and inclusion training over the course of three years. Over time, this investment led to a significant overhaul of its evaluation metrics to ensure equity, as well as an increased capacity for difficult dialogues about race and other inclusion topics.

2. Embrace and reframe conflict. Company-wide discussions about race have the potential to be tense, and getting defensive is the quickest way to halt progress. Because fear of being seen as “confrontational” for either white or minority employees hinders open dialogue, conflict needs to be reframed as a solution-seeking act necessary to progress.

Instead of getting surprised by conflict, expect it, and lean on management and facilitation skills that include listening, being color-cognizant rather than color-blind, responding non-defensively, being

open to learning, and self-reflecting about how personal and social identities can influence these interactions.

Research shows employees are more productive and exhibit stronger problem-solving capabilities when they work in [diverse groups](#). Potential conflicts can become opportunities for growth and improved performance when management fosters an environment where discontent can be heard rather than treated as adversarial. Programs like [Courageous Conversations](#), [Third Sector New England](#), and the [Diversity Awareness Partnership](#) help company leaders navigate these difficult discussions.

3. Be proactive about inclusion efforts. Every manager should be willing to proactively ask employees to talk about how they feel race has influenced their experience at the company, rather than wait for a crisis situation to emerge before tackling these issues. Preemptive discussions allow managers to direct the conversation in constructive ways and can help prevent future conflicts from spiraling out of control.

Some relevant questions to ask employees might include:

- Have you experienced any barriers to success at this company related to your race?
- Have you noticed any other obstacles in the way to your success?
- Is there anything we can do better to facilitate your success and sense of inclusion.
- In terms of mentorship and promotion, do you sense that those happen without bias?

While there is no one set of concrete steps for creating an inclusive environment in every company, there are concrete steps you can take in your company. If you don't know what they are, seek out ideas. Ask those you lead, of all races, whether they feel comfortable bringing their

whole self to work, if they know about or experience unconscious bias, how they feel race has influenced their experiences at the company, and what changes might help make your workplace more inclusive. If employee resource groups exist, ask for feedback about retention or mentoring.

And be prepared for some harsh truths. Racial discrimination, tokenism, and the sense of isolation are common concerns. But if you don't hear, acknowledge, and understand them, you can't do anything about them.

Retention and engagement of all employees, but in particular employees of color, can improve the bottom line. A study by McKinsey & Company found that organizations ranked in the top quartile of racial diversity are 35% more likely to earn above-average financial returns.

Practice is key, and convening the conversation can go a long way toward improving climate. Yet, while it literally pays to be racially diverse, you can't leverage what you don't talk about.

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