



Difficult Conversations

Getting Over Your Fear of Talking About Diversity

Advice for leaders who are afraid of saying the wrong thing.
by **Daisy Auger-Dominguez**

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While 27 percent of chief diversity officers find themselves still having to make the case for diversity, inclusion, and belonging in the workplace, the good news is that the majority of top leaders already understand how critical these efforts are. Indeed, in my work in talent and diversity at Google, Disney, and other large firms, I've found many leaders eager for actionable frameworks and advice to create more inclusive cultures. But again and again I find one thing plaguing their attempts: fear.

These leaders are so terrified about messing up and saying the wrong thing to all their stakeholders —employees, board members, funders, clients, customers — or the wider world via social media — that they're paralyzed into inaction. Take my experience at Google in the summer of 2015, at the height of the Black Lives Matter movement. Black employees led walkouts to shine a light on the marginalization and structural inequities they faced in the workplace. Several of my white manager-level colleagues approached me to express their anxiety about how to effectively engage with their employees of color about the protests. Should they say something? Do something? How could they, as white leaders, speak about anything related to the Black experience without offending anyone? Would I look over messages they were drafting for their teams before they sent them? They needed

encouragement, permission, and advice before they could do the work of inclusive leadership.



Video Available Online

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But it is critical that leaders not put this work on employees of color but rather be visible doing this work themselves. When they don't, they lose their teams' trust and belief in their willingness to lead fairly — and they also set a poor example. I've led inclusion strategy and learning discussions at startups after which founders express dismay that their leadership teams did not participate more actively. If you want your team to stand up for inclusion, *you* need to stand up.

Don't let fear hold you back from this full engagement. Here's what I tell leaders who are afraid of taking a misstep when trying to solve for diversity, equity, and inclusion in their workplaces.

Ask Better Questions

Genuine inquiry can promote trusting relationships and a safe, respectful, and supportive work environment even in times of complex change. And because you don't have to pretend you're more knowledgeable about these topics than you already are, asking questions can also help you overcome uncomfortable silences and awkward exchanges regarding power and privilege.

This doesn't mean tasking others with achieving your own goals: "How do we move the needle on our diversity and inclusion gaps?" Instead, seek to understand what challenges your employees face every day, especially any practices and behaviors that are causing them pain. Ask questions like:

- What are the biggest barriers to your success and what role can I play in helping to remove them?
- Do you feel safe enough to take risks at work? To contribute? To belong to the community?
- What percentage of your time is spent on addressing exclusion or microaggressions against you or others?
- Whose voice or what perspective is missing from this conversation?
- How can I help amplify your voice and that of other underrepresented voices?

If you're afraid of making a vocabulary blunder — using the wrong terminology for someone's race, for example, or misgendering people — just ask about their pronouns or what role race plays in how they experience the workplace. Most often you will find that your employees will welcome feeling seen and valued. For those who have been unduly bearing the burden of marginalization and exclusion, though, some questions may trigger deeply held emotions. In those cases, honor whether they want to engage in your questions or not. You can also offer another opportunity to speak if they don't want to do so in the moment.

Show courage not just in what you ask but in how you listen. Suspend your judgement, reduce your instinct to respond reactively, and take time to deeply reflect on what your people are telling you. Demonstrate your interest in the other person's answers, and check to make sure you're understanding them.

As a leader you need to be careful in the words you use, but don't let your fear replace your curiosity.

Read Up

There is no playbook for standing face-to-face with inequity, injustice, and oppression while running a business or organization. But there are many resources that can help you better understand the dynamics

and the voices at play. Educate yourself on the issues women, people of color, people with disabilities, LGBTQ+, religious minorities, and other marginalized groups face, and the compounding effects of intersectional identities.

There are many books on these topics and the best entry point depends in part on your own experiences. But a few go a long way. To improve your knowledge and ability to engage in racial dialogue, I suggest Ijeoma Oluo's *So You Want to Talk About Race*. (I focus on race in these recommendations because I find it to be the most challenging topic for leaders to address — and that it's often the root cause of other abuses of power in the workplace.) To better understand the experience of women of color in the workplace in particular, see Minda Harts's *The Memo: What Women of Color Need to Know to Secure a Seat at The Table*. For an exploration of identity, gender and race, read Jodi Patterson's *The Bold World*. And for a more general look at how to lead in an inclusive way, take up Dolly Chugh's *The Person You Mean to Be: How Good People Fight Bias*.

Lean into the Uncomfortable

As a leader in today's world, you are grappling with complex change on many levels while trying to understand human dynamics that can feel untranslatable, conflicting, and painful. But that's okay.

The only way to address the challenges associated with racism, sexism, and other forms of injustice in the workplace is to be open to experiencing this discomfort in an honest and forthright way. Push yourself to communicate candidly about difficult topics. Accept that you are never going to be perfect. Apologize and admit your mistakes and blindspots, express gratitude when someone corrects you, listen to those who have been injured or silenced, and commit to doing better. Then pick yourself up, go out there again, and do better.

Your actions as a leader are doubly powerful. In addition to standing up for others yourself, you signal to others that it is also safe for them to do so.

Just Get Started

There are no shortcuts nor silver bullets for enabling inclusive workplaces. But you need to start somewhere. Whether it's launching team conversations about white fragility, holding all-hands meetings calling out racially charged incidents when they happen, or introducing yourself with your pronouns, you can send a powerful message as an ally in a position of power and influence when you're the one who takes up the work.

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Daisy Auger-Dominguez is Chief People Officer at VICE Media and author of the newly released *Inclusion Revolution: The Essential Guide to Dismantling Racial Inequity in the Workplace*. Daisy has led human capital practices and diversity, equity and inclusion at Moody's Investors Service, The Walt Disney Company, and Google, among other organizations.