



NORMS FOR COURAGEOUS CONVERSATIONS

Most of us were not taught how to talk about race, racism, and race relations growing up. We need guidance when tension exists between us to help us engage more effectively. Norms for engaging in these difficult conversations are not the same norms used when you are meeting to discuss budget or other general organizational issues. These norms are tools meant to be used when you or someone else has said or done something that has a negative impact but were unaware. They are not effective tools for the person who knows what they've said or done is hurtful and doesn't care.

Experience Discomfort

- Learn to become comfortable with the discomfort. In other words, being uncomfortable is to be expected.
- If you are not feeling any sense of discomfort in the dialogue, ask yourself, are you fully engaged? Are you giving of yourself fully and taking risks?
- Many people confuse safety and comfort. You can have perfectly safe conversations where people are very uncomfortable. Instead of seeking safety, be brave in the space and lean in to the conversation.

Take Risks

- The more you are willing to take risks, the more you will learn.
- By staying silent out of the fear of saying something wrong, avoiding conflict, or making someone else uncomfortable, you miss the opportunity to authentically engage with one another. You also miss out on the opportunity to grow in your understanding and your relationship.
- When you take risk to engage in courageous conversations about race, racism, and race relations you will eventually offend. Rather than avoiding the risk of offending which often leads to disengagement, take the risk and when you do offend, be open to hearing how what you did or said was offensive.

Stay Engaged

- It's important that you try to stay present with the person you are engaging with. Pay attention to when you are shutting down. Discomfort and anxiety are normal parts of courageous conversations.
- Stay with the topic. When you feel discomfort it's easy to take the conversation to some place different. Resist the urge to change the topic to another ism. One reason it's hard to stay on the topic of racism is because it can bring up issues of guilt, shame, and anger. However difficult it may become, try to stay with it.
- One way to stay engaged is to practice asking questions with genuine curiosity. Be curious about why the person thinks the way they do.

Listen for Understanding

- Try and understand where another person is coming from as best you can.
- Be careful not to compare your experiences with another person's. For example, saying that gender oppression is the same as racial oppression can invalidate or minimize People of Colors experiences.
- Listen without thinking about how you are going to respond.
- Stay present in their pain and your discomfort as you listen.
- If someone is pointing out how what you said left them feeling, try not to explain or rationalize what you said or why you said it. For example, sometimes it's necessary to just say, "I didn't realize what I said was inappropriate," or, "I didn't mean to hurt you, I'm sorry." Focus on your impact not your intent. Positive intent is not enough. It puts the focus back on you.

Speak Your Truth

- The purpose of having these conversations is to be able to speak our truths about our experiences. If not here, where? If not now, when?
- We often avoid speaking our truth for fear of what others might say. It's important that we create an environment where everyone is free to speak openly so that learning can occur.
- Keep in mind that people are in different places in this work. For us to grow, it's

important that people are able to share their thoughts in a way that's comfortable for them. If someone responds with emotion, become curious about why those feelings are coming up.

- When we share our thoughts, it often creates an emotional reaction from others. Being able to speak your truth does not mean that people will not respond emotionally. Be prepared to experience the discomfort that race conversations bring.
- Speaking our truth does not mean stomping on each other's heads. Before speaking, think about what it is that you want others to know. How can they best hear you? Whose interests are being served? When speaking, are you creating enemies or allies? When you speak are you speaking to put others down or put them in their place, or are you speaking so that new learning can occur for others in the room?
- One of the characteristics of dominance is to speak as if you represent all people's perspectives, rather than your own. We call this the "universal you" as in, "You know how we enjoy chocolate?" The universal you allows for you to say something without taking personal ownership of your feelings and opinions. Try to avoid the universal you and instead speak for yourself by making "I" vs. "We" statements.

No Fixing

- It is human nature to want to fix other people's pain and discomfort, particularly when they are crying or clearly distressed. However, it's important that we let people experience their emotions and not try to do something with them. This is a part of healing and learning work. If you find yourself wanting to "fix" a situation or make someone feel better, pause for a moment and reflect on what is going on in you.
- Sometimes people will want to "fix" each other by reassuring them about their lack of stereotypes or racism. This is often the case when they share that identity with the person who is acknowledging their biases. For example, a white woman telling another white woman she's not prejudice. If you find yourself wanting to fix someone, explore what might be coming up about your own identity.

Expect and Accept Non-Closure

- In our society, we often want to feel some sense of closure, regardless of the issue. There will be fortunate situations where you will be able to resolve something between

you and another person but more times than not, it will feel unfinished. Sometimes you will have to circle back around at another time reconcile differences and other times you will have to sit with non-closure.

- Engaging in race conversations means there will be times of no closure. This is on-going work that does not necessarily leave one walking away feeling like everything turned out the way you hoped. Be willing to take risks and accept that much of this is about changing yourself, not others.
- White cultural norms focus on the product, rather than the process. These are process conversations where greater awareness leads to future changes.

“Through your stumbling the world is perfected”
Sri Aurobindo

Adapted from Singleton, G.E., Linton, C. (2006) [Courageous Conversation about Race: A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in Schools](#). Thousand Oaks: Corwin Press