4 tips for talking with your team about racial injustice and inclusion

The killing of George Floyd, and the many Black Americans before him, and the widespread protests against systemic racial injustice that have followed are too important to ignore. These events are on your team members' minds. And they're impacting the lives and emotional well-being of your direct reports — especially Black team members.

Many well-intentioned managers shy away from talking about sensitive issues like racism because they don't want to risk further alienating people who may already be hurting — or they feel work is a risky place to talk about it or they're the wrong people to lead the racism discussion. But as the leader of your team, you are the right person, and this is the right time. In fact, your silence on the matter could do unintentional harm.

"Just as you likely created space for reactions and responses to COVID-19, allow space for this," says Pamela Fuller, a FranklinCovey inclusion and bias expert and author of _The Leader's Guide to Unconscious Bias_. "Focus less on your perspective of the situation and more on acknowledging this unique time — and how challenging and emotional this experience is for your people."

Conversations may feel awkward and probably won't go perfectly. But your team is counting on you to try. Here are tips to address the subject with compassion and competence.

1. Privately check in with each team member to offer support — inviting but not expecting conversation.

Consider prioritizing Black team members and others impacted most personally by recent events. You may worry that they're too emotional or depleted to talk about how they're doing — but maybe not. Regardless, they need to know you care about what they are going through and are willing to be flexible to accommodate what they need in this moment and in the future.

Be prepared for people to react to your opening question differently than you expect — there's a lot of anger and anxiety in the world right now, and you probably won't find the perfect approach. But what's important is that you acknowledge that what is happening in the world today affects them and, as their leader, want to offer your support.

Here are a couple of openers you could try or modify, depending on the person and your relationship:

> *"I am concerned about how everyone on the team is doing during this challenging time. Would you be willing to share how are you doing?"*

Or:

> *"If you want to talk about what you are going through right now, I want to listen and find ways that I can support you."*

Listen carefully to how each person responds and ask if they want to share more. Important: This is not your opening to share your opinion on race and current events. It's about your learning what their unique experience is and how they're feeling — and delivering on what they need from you, whether that's a listening ear, an afternoon off for personal reasons, or words of support. And if the person has something they want to share with the broader team, affirm that so they feel more secure in speaking up. Part of their worry might be whether their manager has their back.

Finally, if people don't want to talk about this issue, respect their wishes. For more, see 9 tips to listen well and build empathy with co-workers.

2. Address the issues of racism and bias with your full team — and consider inviting people to share ideas for how to make your team and organization more inclusive.

Taking time in 1-on-1s to hear what individuals are going through is a critical step, but in order to begin taking action against racism and bias, it's important for you as the leader to address these issues with your broader team, regardless of its racial makeup.

If your CEO or organization has already released a statement on recent events related to racial injustice, you can use it as a tool to drive ideas and action on your team. For example, you could say:

> *"In our CEO's email last week, he said, 'We stand against racism, bias, and prejudice in all its forms, and for whatever its reasons.' I'd like to take time in our next team meeting to talk about what this means — on our team and in our company — and for people to share their ideas, if they wish, for how we can all make positive change."*

If your organization hasn't released a statement, craft a message appropriate for your team, perhaps suggesting that this moment presents an opportunity to be proactive in addressing ways to reduce racism and bias in your organization. Your goal in this early conversation should not be trying to solve the intractable issue of race relations. Rather, it's to determine a few small actions within your power and your team's power to take.

For example, maybe your team sees your company's About Us page as unwelcoming — with its sea of similar faces. Could you share that message upward to executives or HR? Or,

maybe you determine that for your team's next hire, you'll source and interview a specified number of diverse candidates. Or perhaps you push for a question to be added to your company's annual engagement survey about whether employees feel the company has prioritized inclusion. For more, see <u>6 ways to help your organization be more inclusive</u>.

And if your team wants to discuss and better understand how racism affects people and organizations, share resources with them. (Here are two you can explore yourself and consider sharing: <u>A detailed list of anti-racism resources</u> and <u>Do the work: An anti-racist reading list</u>.) If you go this route, do your own research, and be careful not to over-rely on Black team members to contribute. "Your initial instinct might be, *I'll ask one of the Black members of my team to lead a discussion about this*. While well-intentioned, there is an emotional toll to this request that can feel like an undue burden in an already exhausting time," says Fuller.

3. Ensure that team communication stays inclusive and respectful.

It's not your job to regulate every conversation on your team. But it is your responsibility to make sure your direct reports foster an environment where everyone feels included and honored for their contributions, not demeaned.

As quips and memes fly around, you can preemptively ask your team to consider their words and actions — suggesting they first consider, *How would each person on my team feel in response to what I'm about to say or post?*

And if you see or hear something disrespectful or exclusionary, address it with the person promptly. For example, if a direct report (or someone from another team) posts a disparaging meme in a team chat channel, you could say, *"This isn't helping foster the inclusive environment we all want here — please take it down."*

Or if you hear someone expressing contempt about people looting or even protesting, try asking questions to push their thinking a level deeper to consider the impact of injustice and recent events on people's lives. For example:

- *"Why do you think people are protesting now?"*
- *"How do you think looting is related to the outrage and calls for justice from those protesting?"*
- *"How are you being affected by those things?"*

Often, it takes only one person with the courage to speak up to start others reconsidering their own perspectives. And remember that creating an inclusive team environment is a long-term effort. Keep at it.

4. Make inclusion an ongoing topic of discussion on your team.

Your direct reports will be looking for evidence that you care about fairness and inclusion — and aren't just saying the "right" thing now and waiting for the situation to blow over. "Empathy and sympathy in the moment can mean a lot to individuals, but they want that same sentiment — in what you say and what you do — a year from now, so make this an ongoing discussion," says Fuller.

Use this moment as an impetus to begin a broader, ongoing effort — first by educating yourself on how you can become a more inclusive leader (try our learning track Unconscious Bias: Understanding Bias to Unleash Potential). Then consider devoting team meeting time once per month or per quarter to discussing and setting team goals in areas that foster inclusion on your team. Topics could include:

- Getting to know one another better in order to build empathy and respect. Try our Team building: Get to know your team exercise to learn more about each person's background, influences, goals, and values.
- Adopting meeting behaviors that ensure that every voice gets heard. For more, see 10 ways to make meetings more inclusive — and effective.
- Team processes to help you all seek and embrace diverse perspectives in your work. For more, see 9 ways to embrace diversity of thought — and why you should .

Taking steps to make your team more inclusive isn't just the fair thing to do — it also leads to better team performance as people feel valued for their contributions and the best ideas prevail.