



Supervisor NEWSLETTER

Employee Assistance Program
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Guidelines for leading a crucial conversation

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As we watch the news and read social media about protests across the world, it may feel timely and important to talk to your teams about racial injustice and discrimination. There is never a bad time to address this topic, or to start the process of reflecting on your company's practices and how you can best support your diverse workforce.

As you prepare to have these conversations with your employees, keep in mind the importance of setting agreements for your group, and for sticking to guidelines that can help keep the conversation focused and constructive. The below information is a useful reference for facilitating any and all courageous conversations.

Four Agreements for Beginning the Conversation

Glenn Singleton, Courageous Conversations Protocol, 2006

- 1. Stay engaged** – Engagement requires that participants continually come back to these challenging conversations, rather than merely conversing once and retreating back into silence.
- 2. Experience discomfort** – Discomfort is inevitable and participants must make a commitment to bring issues into the open.
- 3. Speak your truth** - Move away from just saying what you think you should say, and speak instead with honesty and authentic self-reflection.

- 4. Expect and accept non-closure** - Courageous conversations are unlikely to be resolved in a neat and expedient manner. Conversations must be ongoing and should leave room for continued thought, growth, and evolution.

Guidelines for facilitating a courageous conversation

- **Listen** - Show humility in ignorance and grace in listening. Do not respond immediately if you feel that you or the organization is being criticized. This is a response of defensiveness that can be very damaging. Just listen and hear what people are saying. Don't fear confrontation and get defensive; reframe conflict as a solution-seeking act. Leaders are typically talkers, as they are asked to lead and make decisions and problem solve as part of their position. This is not one of those times. Your job in this moment is to listen openly, without judgement and defensiveness.
- **Address the current crisis** (currently, worldwide protests for racial justice and COVID-19) – Set the tone within the context that aptly captures the tension at hand.
- **Be authentic** – Don't avoid talking about race and other topics just for fear of messing it up. A messy conversation is better than deafening silence. Be honest with what your limitations are and what you can offer as a facilitator. Let your team know you are here to support them any way you can, and that you are here to listen and try to understand how you can do that better.
- **Validate and facilitate the discussion of feelings** – Create conditions that make the expression and presence of feelings a valid and legitimate focus of experience and discussion. Don't be afraid to recognize

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and name tension and the feelings emanating from the discussion.

- **Control the process and NOT the content** – By dealing with statements strictly on the content level, you are allowing sidetracking, diluting, diminishing, and ignoring.
- **Validate, encourage, and express admiration and appreciation** – When employees speak when it feels unsafe to do so, they are demonstrating courage, openness, and willingness to participate in this difficult dialogue. Don't be afraid to let your employees know that you see them. Example: *"Sam, I know this has been a very emotional experience for you, but I value your courage in sharing with the group your personal thoughts and feelings."*
- **Keep the conversation on track** – Do not allow people to sidetrack the discussion with other topics. Avoidance takes many forms; be careful of unintentionally colluding with a participant in avoiding talking about race. If an employee seems to be sidetracking, bring the conversation back by asking how that information relates to the topic at hand (in a caring and curious manner).
- **Be curious and try to understand** – Ask questions, ask for help. Asking questions shows a willingness to learn and understand. Come into the meeting open to learning about others' experiences and what they want from a supportive workplace.
- **Self-educate** – As a leader, you are responsible for learning about your own identity and how that plays into everyday interactions. You need to be proactive in finding resources to help educate yourself about the topic that you are trying to support your team around.

- **Follow-up with employees after the meeting** – Especially check in with BIPOC (Black and Indigenous People of Color) employees and others who appear to have been strongly affected by the discussion. Do not wait to check in with your employees; do it immediately after the meeting. Your lack of urgency may appear to indicate that you do not value their feelings and their experiences.

Ongoing process and dialog

The significance of starting these conversations with your staff cannot be overstated. You are sending the message that these issues are important to you and that you are choosing not to be silent. However, the greatest disservice we can do for our teams is to sever this conversation after one discussion. This needs to be a process where the dialogue is continuous and, if necessary, action is taken within the company to indicate your commitment to supporting every single one of your employees.

As a leader, you are responsible for facilitating this process, and creating an open and safe space where others feel welcome sharing their honest feelings and experiences. Remember to always be authentic; be honest with what you don't know and when you need to self-educate; and, most importantly, listen to understand, not to respond.

Contact our EAP experts at (800) 777-4114 and ask for a Clinical Account Executive to initiate a consultation. We are here to guide and support you as a leader and a colleague.