

# GUIDE *to* RESPECTFUL CONVERSATIONS



The first step to eliminating racism and inequality is to talk about it openly and honestly, which you're about to do. Talking about racial inequality can be challenging.

Remember that we all have multiple identities (race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, class, ability, etc.) and that we also don't always know another person's identities and experiences from their physical appearance. If you're comfortable, it can be helpful to share some components of how you identify and to invite others to do the same.

People will have different reactions to the difficult conversations you'll be facilitating. Know that being uncomfortable isn't always a bad thing, especially if you're used to feeling comfortable. Your goal as the host should be to create a space where individuals can express their opinions honestly, and where the feelings of the group are valued and protected.

Here are some suggestions about how to create that space.



### **APPOINT A FACILITATOR**

A facilitator opens and guides the discussion – they don't dominate it. If things get out of hand, or if voices are being blocked out, the facilitator intervenes.

### **ACKNOWLEDGE THAT YOU AND OTHERS MIGHT HAVE MOMENTS OF DISCOMFORT**

In many cases, it helps to say out loud what others might be feeling: "For people who don't usually talk about racial justice or speak about racism in racially diverse groups, this might make you or others feel uncomfortable, and that's ok."

### **ESTABLISH GROUP GROUND RULES**

These could be formal, such as "whoever holds this spoon speaks," or "if you agree, snap your fingers." These rules could also be informal, including "whatever is said in this room, stays in this room."

### **DO NOT TOKENIZE PEOPLE**

Individuals can only speak to their own experiences. Do not look to others to speak on behalf of their race, gender, ethnicity, or other groups they may identify as being a part of.

### **PROVIDE SPACE FOR EVERYONE TO HAVE A VOICE**

Individuals who are most comfortable expressing their opinions out loud can dominate conversations. The facilitator should respectfully invite others to share their opinions if a few voices begin to dominate the conversation.

### **BE RESPECTFUL OF INTROVERTS AND OF SILENCE**

Make sure the facilitator is noticing who is not speaking. Encourage those individuals to contribute, but do not force them. Similarly, if the conversation reaches a point of silence, do not push people to speak. Be respectful of reflection.

# IF THE DISCUSSION *becomes* HEATED or UNCOMFORTABLE

## AVOID "RIGHT" AND "WRONG"

While some opinions are commonly accepted as "right," it is unproductive for conversations like these to cast someone's statements or beliefs as "wrong."

## IF IT WILL HELP, TAKE A BREATH (OR TWO) BEFORE RESPONDING

It is critical to allow yourself time to process your reactions to a statement or a text and get to the root of what caused those reactions. Deep breaths release endorphins in the brain and can allow people to center themselves.

## BE INTENTIONAL ABOUT YOUR LANGUAGE

Think about the language you are using, not just in terms of intent, but also in terms of impact. If someone says something you hear as offensive, consider that they may not realize they have said something hurtful. If someone calls you out for saying something offensive, remember that your intent can be different than your impact.

## KEEP POWER DYNAMICS IN MIND

Remember power dynamics change based on individual's identities. Be cognizant of the fact that some voices and identities have been given privilege while other voices and identities have been discriminated against.

## WE ALL MAKE MISTAKES

You might make mistakes when speaking about racial justice. If you hear something that has offended you, say "ouch" to demonstrate its impact. Explain why a comment has offended you. Then the person who said the comment has the opportunity to say "oops," sharing that they made a mistake. This framework is an opportunity to acknowledge that mistake and continue the conversation.

## USE FACTS GRACIOUSLY - NOT TO SHUT DOWN A CONVERSATION

Remind people that this is a conversation. Everyone's personal experience matters. Recommend that people share information to deepen the discussion, not to shut down the conversation.

## IF YOU'RE OFFENDED, CONSIDER SOME OPTIONS

### *Remove yourself from the conversation.*

Do what you need to do to take care of yourself. If you do not feel like you can continue to engage in the conversation, step away.

### *Move back and listen.*

Take on the role of an active listener. Challenge yourself to concentrate completely on what other people are saying without interrupting and instead of crafting a response.

### *Call people "in", not "out."<sup>1</sup>*

When you are holding someone accountable for an offensive or ignorant statement, think about how to address the hurt they caused and still engage them in the conversation.