



# How to Help Staff Talk About Race Inequities and Injustice

by Lee Gardenswartz, Ph.D. and Anita Rowe, Ph.D.

**C** OVID-19 quarantine measures requiring much of the workforce to work remotely have prevented staff from having everyday, face-to-face interactions. In most cases where staff have been in communication it has been via phone calls, emails and zoom meetings. No one knows whether these restrictions will be lifted in the next few months. In this environment of separation, isolation and personal stress, we now have another challenge -nation-wide protests about discriminatory policing and racial inequities throughout society.

People need to talk, both about their feelings and to each other, if we are to heal as a society. Yet, how do we do that in a climate of heightened emotionality where the risk of escalation and polarization is great and where communication is limited? Some feel they are walking on eggshells, while others want to vent. Some are fearful of opening up sensitive topics while others are hoping it will just go away. Some want to learn while others feel put upon when asked to share or explain.

Here are a few suggestions that may be helpful in giving staff the opportunity to discuss issues of race, injustice and inequity as a step toward understanding, healing and change. The purpose of these conversations is to build understanding and empathy and also reduce anxiety.

## **1. Create a structure for sharing that allows people to feel safe. Having ground rules such as the following is a start.**

- Presume good will
- No blaming
- Speak for yourself in sharing your own experiences

- Listen and ask questions but avoid talking back
- No problems solving

**2. Provide prompts that lead to sharing not pontificating and diatribes. Here are a few examples:**

- My first experience with racism was...
- My biggest hope regarding the anti-racist protests is...
- My biggest fear during the protests was...
- I've personally seen/experienced racism/injustice/inequity when...
- When I see/experience injustice or inequity, I...
- What I need to learn more about racism is...
- I realize I have privilege in these areas...
- What I need most from my coworkers now is...

**3. Recruit a facilitator for the discussions, someone who has experience in guiding the conversation and enforcing the ground rules while remaining neutral.**

Staff from your DEI, HR, L&D or training departments may be able to help.

**4. Make sure participation in discussions is voluntary.** Invite staff but avoid pressuring people to engage in sessions where personal sharing is expected.

**5. Grab the moment when spontaneous discussions can emerge.** If someone makes a statement or asks a question that seems to be an entry point, avoid shutting it down. Instead, ask a question that encourages others to engage.

- Wow, that's a powerful statement. Do you want to talk more about that?
- How have you been affected by these recent events?

**6. Recognize and acknowledge any of your own discomfort in talking about these sensitive issues.** We recently learned from a colleague that discomfort is an opportunity for learning and growth. Keep working on being comfortable with discomfort. It's here to stay.