



Tips for talking about Race Relations in Our Community

Human Rights Commission Issue Based Hearing

Understand your purpose for the conversation.

Before you dive into a discussion about a heated, personal, and complex issue such as race, it is a good idea to be clear about what you are trying to accomplish. Are you trying to learn something about the other person? Are you trying to convince them of your perspective? Are you trying to deal with some problems that have already arisen? Do you assume that you share a common experience and you want to connect with the other person around that experience? Being clear with yourself and the other person upfront can help set the tone and guide the conversation.

Be open to learning about others' viewpoints.

The goal of dialogue isn't winning a debate or persuading others. It's about learning to see someone else's viewpoint and better understanding your own. It's about learning, not winning.

Be mindful of your own assumptions, thoughts, and emotions. Being able to identify them as they arise during a discussion can help you avoid misunderstandings and prevent explosions or shutdowns. It's also important to be aware of your personal connection to the issue and understand that others may have different or no perceived personal connection to the topic. Regardless of our experiences, we can still use the conversation as an opportunity to learn about others—and those who don't initially perceive a connection to an issue may come away with new insight into how that issue affects them.

Use inclusive language.

Try "we, although different, ..." instead of "you people." It's easy to fall into the trap of "us vs. them," but doing so usually causes others to react defensively and eventually results in an explosion or shutdown.

Understand how race and class impact experience.

A White person from a lower socioeconomic background may have experienced much of the same societal oppression and discrimination as people of color. These experiences may lead them to better understand racial oppression or to deny that race is a factor. On the other hand, a person of color from an economically advantaged family may not have experienced economic racial disparities and hardships, yet may still share the experience of being targeted, discriminated against, or subjected to various micro-aggressions. The ways that race and social class intersect and impact our lived experiences is very complex. Therefore, in conversations about race, it is important to consider how social class impacts one's own and others' experiences and perspectives.

Accept and affirm each other's perspectives.

You can never know what it is like to walk in someone else's shoes. Even after extensive dialogue, you may not fully understand or agree with another person's experience or perspective. However, if you have listened carefully and tried to understand, you should at least be able to (a) accept how/why the other person feels as they do and (b) affirm their experience from their perspective.

Manage your emotional response.

Difficult conversations often bring up strong emotions, and that's okay. Acknowledge whatever comes up for you and hang in there when something is hard to hear. This is often where learning happens. On the same note, realize that others who are discussing the situation may also be experiencing a completely different set of emotions. Allow them the opportunity to express and reflect on their emotions as well.