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Courageous Conversation

Hosting an inclusive leadership
conversation to drive racial understanding

About this guide

MAKING PEOPLE COUNT

In light of recent events, organizations might consider hosting Courageous Conversations to focus on racial understanding. Nine hundred CEOs, including RSM's Joe Adams, have committed to having courageous conversations on race, culture, diversity and inclusion to build a more inclusive organization as members of CEO Action! For Diversity and Inclusion. Organizations are better when they seek to understand and attract, retain and grow top talent. All professionals within an organization need the skills required to optimize diversity and inclusion to enable organizational growth and success into the future.



Human conversation is the most ancient and easiest way to cultivate the conditions for change – personal change, community and organizational change, planetary change. If we can sit together and talk about what's important to us, we begin to come alive. We share what we see, what we feel and we listen to what others see and feel.

—Margaret Wheatley



Racial understanding and inclusion: Local leader discussion guide

Your organization has an opportunity to take action and engage as allies in matters relating to race. Demonstrating caring and being curious, driving collaboration and using critical thinking courageously will deepen learning, influence skeptics and foster understanding.

Ground rules

To create safe space for candor, honesty, perspective-taking and understanding, we ask all participants to accept the ground rules:

- Assume positive intent
- Consider your voice important in educating others on our journey to inclusion
- Extend empathy and suspend your reaction to the shared views and comments of others
- Be open to understanding
- If a perspective differs from yours, lean in, ask questions and seek common ground
- Give leaders feedback that will help individuals, teams and the firm grow

Four agreements of courageous conversation:

- **Stay engaged:** This means “remaining morally, emotionally, intellectually and socially involved in the dialogue.”
- **Experience discomfort:** Discomfort is inevitable, especially in dialogue about race. Commit to bring issues into the open. Not talking about these issues creates divisiveness. Through dialogue, even when uncomfortable, healing and change begin.
- **Speak your truth:** This means being open about thoughts and feelings and not just saying what you think others want to hear.
- **Expect and accept no closure:** This agreement asks participants to “hang out in uncertainty” and not rush to quick solutions, especially in relation to racial understanding, which requires ongoing action and consideration.

The conversation starts here

We all want to live in a society that appreciates diverse perspectives and backgrounds, is fair and has equal and equitable opportunity for all. Bias can cause challenges to manifest in many ways, including gender, religion, orientation, etc. Today's discussion focuses on race as one of many discussions to advance inclusion. It is an opportunity to explore our experiences of and with race and ethnicity, specifically where we are on the inclusion journey and what we aspire to for our firm, our community and ourselves.

Introductions: Getting started and why we are here

- Emphasize your organization's commitment to diversity and inclusion
- Discuss your organization's diversity and inclusion efforts and how they affect your office or group
- Explain that the objective is to drive inclusive leadership and a more inclusive organization and meeting the needs of your talent through inclusion
- Ask: What interested you or drew you to this conversation?
- Ask: What are your fears? (Being misunderstood?)
- Polling: Please describe your feelings about recent racially charged events in three words? How have recent events affected you?

Round one: Caring

Ask participants to answer one or more of the following in personal reflection:

- Have you had an experience in which someone made an assumption about you based on your race? If so, and you feel comfortable, share your experience.
- Does that experience influence your behavior today? If so, how has this affected you?

- What sense of purpose, mission or duty guides you in your life?
- What would your best friend say about who you are?
- What are your hopes and concerns for your community? The country?
- How many of these attributes do you understand about your peers, teams and colleagues – especially those of other races?

Round two: Being curious about race and ethnicity

Remember that the goal for this conversation is for all of us to listen and learn about where we have different opinions and better understand where we have shared interests, intentions and goals.

- Answer one or more of the following questions from the lens of curiosity:
- What do you think it would take to create a society that values racial and ethnic differences (or subracial and ethnic diversity)?
- Can you think of anything you are doing toward that effort? Can you think of anything you could start doing?
 - Joining an employee network/resource group, attending a diversity conference?
 - Refer to tools such as [RSM's Allies in Racial Understanding and Inclusion](#)
- When you hear people in your circles making biased comments, do you speak up? Why or why not?
- With whom are you most afraid of having conversations about race? Do you have any idea why?
- Have you ever been accused of being racist? How did it make you feel? Did it change your behavior? Why or why not?



Round three: **Collaboration** and team building

Diverse teams outperform their peers. Employees of firms that value inclusion are 45% more likely to expand client relationships and grow existing client revenue and are 70% likelier to capture a new market.¹ Though outcomes are better, working within diverse teams is harder. Answer the following questions from a collaboration lens:

- How are cultural differences represented on your teams or within your offices? Consider religions, caregivers, race, ethnicity or other backgrounds. Are some team members closer or more comfortable with each other? Why?
- How do non-white members feel about the level of inclusiveness of your team?
- Is there anything that can be done to make more people feel included?
 - Discuss inviting all team members to speak and share perspectives in meetings
 - Discuss ensuring team events are all-inclusive (not limited to golf or happy hours)
 - Discuss spending equal one-on-one time to understand team members better

Round four: **Critical thinking** – reflection and personal action

As inclusion begins with “I” it is important that we understand that everyone has bias and pre-conditioned perspectives that we bring to people and situations. However, when the bias becomes judgement and assumption in place of questions and accurate information, we miss an opportunity to learn.

- In discussions involving race or culture, who has privilege in these encounters and who is responsible for educating others?

- Is there an undue burden on people of color to manage experiences of racism for others?
- If so, does such an approach mitigate the personal responsibility of those who benefit from racial privilege?
- What training have you taken to understand bias?
- What can we learn from employee network/resource group experiences?
- What are your fears of joining an employee network/resource group or taking a unique step toward inclusion?
 - Discuss “safe space” to make mistakes for your benefit and that of the firm
 - Discuss that at critical times, people appreciate caring more. How do we do this?

Round five: **Courage** – action and next steps

Answer one or more of the following questions:

- In one sentence, share what was most meaningful or valuable to you in the experience of this conversation.
- What learning, new understanding or common ground did you find on this topic?
- Has this conversation changed your perception of anyone in this group, including yourself?
- What is one important thing you feel was accomplished here?
- Is there a next step you would like to take based upon the conversation you just had?

Optional deeper dive into current events

Some in the discussion may wish to speak to more current issues of the day. Consider adding one or more of these questions based on the tone and tenor of the discussion. Begin by reminding participants to speak seeking to understand, not from emotion:

- The NFL apologized for not listening about racism. Would anyone like to comment about race in the news? What are the actions to effect change? Was Colin Kaepernick right to use his influence to call attention to racial injustice?
- Have the protests been productive in effecting change or more awareness marching?
- Is defunding the police possible? How has funding been used to change policy and influence outcomes?
- What is different now, as some policies have not changed since the Selma marches?
- Some employees have asked, “How can we use our voices to influence policy to work better for the people?”

Call to action

When engaging in other Courageous Conversations—one-on-one or with your teams and colleagues—it is helpful to keep things in mind, such as:

1. Think about whether you are biased against other’s ideology. Think about whether your real goal is to change their outlook or to empathize with their perspectives. No one likes to be the target of an ideological conversion. You may need to choose issues that will allow for perspective-taking to build understanding.
2. Consciously open your heart and get your empathy muscle warmed up. Before starting a conversation, engage your empathy. Remember positive moments and qualities and remind yourself of goals of the conversation and things that you agreed upon. Your open mind means an open heart.

3. Stay in centered, empathetic listening mode. It will help your influence.
4. Highlight points of connection. Find how your intersectionality aligns with others. If you live in the same area of town, say it; if you also have two children, say that. Highlighting the connecting points makes it easier to see each other as allies.
5. Storytelling builds connection. Look for ideas on which you can agree, then share a personal story related to them. Try to find single agreements. Then share a personal story that brings your agreement to life.
6. Don’t give up. Even if your first conversation did not go the way you envisioned, be courageous and open to try it again. These conversations are important, so share your desire to reconvene and continue.

Closing – Thank you! Please complete the feedback form to help improve our future conversations.

¹ Harvard Business Review. How Diversity Can Drive Innovation by Sylvia Ann Hewlett, Melinda Marshall and Laura Sherbin. <https://hbr.org/2013/12/how-diversity-can-drive-innovation>

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