



The 8 R's of Talking About Race: How to Have Meaningful Conversations

By: [Dwight Smith](#) | June 18, 2015

"A conversation that leads to something other than frustration requires preparation, a systems analysis, and potential solutions that reach beyond changing individual mindsets or behavior." -Rinku Sen, Race Forward

*"...to go beyond race, we have to go through race." -Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, author of *Racism without Racists**

You'd be hard-pressed to browse a Facebook timeline or turn on the news these days and not be confronted by racial inequities. Now, more than any time in my lifetime, conversations about race have forced their way into the national consciousness. But talking about race is complex and multi-layered – U.S. history is steeped in centuries of racism, and, despite significant progress, explicit and implicit racism still exist. The result? Conversations about race are more prevalent than ever, but they're often seen more as an unwelcome intruder than a familiar guest.

Nothing bridges the divide of race and culture like informed dialogue that's grounded in shared understanding. In my interactions with our network, it's become increasingly

clear that people of color and white folks alike are fed up and more ready than ever to engage: in conversation, in protest, in revolution, or all the above. When it comes to tackling the issue of racial inequity, we have to combine that eagerness with preparation.

This post contains some of my recommendations for all of us who are eager to better understand and address racial inequity. I asked a few friends, colleagues, and experts to weigh in as well. These steps aren't exhaustive, but they're all necessary precursors to effective dialogue.

Respect, Reflect, and Resign

Approach the conversation with respect.

It is vital to approach the topic of race with respect. Respect for its weightiness and nuance. Respect for centuries of pain and oppression. Respect for multiple perspectives and narratives: those that have been lifted up and those that have been pushed to the background. Respect for the person(s) you are engaging with. Race, racism, and the racial inequity it breeds are topics of discussion that can polarize a space very quickly. Coming from a respectful place goes a long way to diffuse potential discord before it arises and preserve space for meaningful dialogue.

Put aside your preconceptions.

This doesn't mean personal experiences aren't valid -- it simply acknowledges that personal experience can't possibly give the complete view of such complex issues. It also creates space to see the reality and validity of other experiences.

Chris Russell, a product manager in San Francisco, provides a valuable insight here: "The fight for equality and equity requires an understanding of why systems (some seemingly arbitrary and antiquated) were initially established and whether there's a need for them to be modified or removed... You'd only be able to make a connection like that with a sensitivity toward and an understanding of pain and history."

Examine your motivation.

Bayard Love of [The International Civil Rights Center and Museum](#) asks, "Why are you engaging in this conversation about race? If it's just curiosity, a pet project, a desire to 'fit in' or not look silly, or to feel less guilty, you might want to reconsider. If you are ready to be part of change, and you want to understand racism better so that you can be a part of that change, then come on!"

Yodit Kifle, Corporate Citizenship Specialist at Johnson & Johnson, also brings an interesting perspective: "It's easy to feel disconnected from this history when you feel as though it has no direct tie to your reality. It's interesting that even for me – as an Ethiopian – there was a time when I didn't truly connect with this history of slavery and

racism. I've realized that, at the end of the day, a love for humanity means a respect and honor for all pain and a oneness of purpose toward dismantling ignorance and pursuing justice. The moment you are here in the U.S., your reality is connected to a racial construct."

Embrace the discomfort of not knowing.

On our way to new knowledge, we have to resign from a place of comfort and embrace the discomfort of not having all the answers. We don't know what we don't know. This is true in life and especially true when it comes to race. Software engineer Noah Kaplan says: "Recognize that you don't have all the sides to a story or know everything. Be comfortable with the feeling of not understanding or knowing enough yet. Be comfortable changing your mind. Don't let it hold you back -- let it push you to learn more."

Research and Relearn

Find out what you don't know.

Developing a strong understanding of race requires a combination of individual and group learning. We can all accomplish a lot on our own through offline and online resources. Articles, white papers, books, academic studies, webinars, and video series are out there just waiting to be discovered (we've put together a short resource list at the end of this article). And then there are workshops, conferences, meetups, and casual conversations with friends and colleagues. Those conversations can be tough, but there's no growth without stretching, as Chris points out: "The best conversations and comprehension can arise from holding past learning up to new ideas or new knowledge."

My colleague, Paula Luu, agrees: "I think we need to have water cooler conversations, and it's okay for us to have those conversations whenever and with whomever. But if we only have those types of conversations, we're only learning about the personal side of race and racism. We have to get educated about how we got here to effectively plan how we're going to move forward."

Listen and be open to questions.

The simple proverb "listen to understand and then speak to be understood" rings true. Genuine listening takes patience and effort. Spending the least amount of time listening necessary to come up with a solution or response doesn't work in addressing racial inequity. Real listening often results in questions, and Yodit encourages us to embrace this approach: "Never be afraid of questions. They aren't disrespectful. Asking questions shows a willingness to learn and to understand. Those who remain ignorant because they fear questions damage this dialogue."

Reset and Reboot

Internalize what you've learned.

New information has to pass through the gauntlet of your prevailing worldview. According to the [Frameworks Institute](#), facts alone do not often change people's views. It's necessary to "change the frame so that people can hear the issue in a new way. Facts then provide important support to the new frame, when the facts are linked to broader values and meaning..." It's so easy to hear something new, to even be convinced of its veracity and how it should impact our daily lives, and yet three days later return to the same mindset we held before.

Commit yourself to change.

One easy way to start internalizing this practice is by identifying whatever race-based bias you might implicitly hold – we all have implicit bias – and setting up a daily reminder, like a sticky note on the mirror, to confront it. Paula shared another idea: "Any change is hard. Accountability is key. I think taking a journey of discovery can be much more powerful if you find someone to 'journey' with you. Read the same things; discuss them; keep the momentum going."

I've heard that it takes anywhere from 21 to 66 days to make a habit that sticks. If that's true with things like exercise and eating, you best believe it's true with our habits, views, and beliefs regarding race. Noah notes that "Kazu Haga, an instructor of Kingian Nonviolence, compares working in movements to improving in a martial art, taking years of consistent dedication and slow progress." Bay applies that mentality to the issue at hand by stating: "A well-intentioned journey of re-education about race and racism is a commitment."

Recognize Bias and Privilege

Acknowledge your privilege.

Before having conversations about race, explore the history of race-based privilege in this country and put your privilege in context. Privilege, loosely defined, is any unmerited or unearned advantage. In that sense, we all have experienced privilege. Part of the privilege associated with whiteness is the luxury of not having to consider one's own race -- let alone the disadvantages faced by many people of color. Bay had this to say about his own white privilege, "It's mine, and it doesn't say anything about my value as a person. White people are not better people because we have unearned privilege -- we are also not worse people. We just have it and there is no way out of it. The more we can face the reality and take the value judgment out of [white privilege], the more we can work together to eliminate it." Respected scholar and Director of the [Haas Center for a Fair and Inclusive Society](#) John A. Powell hits the nail on the head when he says, "The slick thing about whiteness is that you can reap the benefits of a racist society without personally being racist."

Privilege can be present in any circumstance. It is important to name privilege wherever it exists. I am a mixed-race African-American male who was adopted at birth into a white family. (Shout-out to all my transracial adoptees!) To a certain extent, I indirectly benefited and still benefit from my family's white privilege. That's part of my story. Being white and benefiting from white privilege does not disqualify you from having a voice in the fight for racial equity. Privilege should not be a constant source of guilt. Rather, it should fuel action against the inequality that it breeds and sustains.

Get comfortable with your story.

"It was realizing and owning my story," Yodit says, "that allowed me the space to be honest with myself and others. Stories are powerful tools to cultivate dialogue and bring us to a place of harmony. They don't negate our understanding of race. They simply reveal where we are. Then it is up to us to stay stagnant or progress."

Moving Forward

"A mind that is stretched by new experience can never go back to its old dimensions." -Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes

All of these recommendations can lead to changes that might be frustrating at times, and that's OK. This process brings about empathy, which is a crucial ingredient of meaningful action. My hope is that we all become better equipped to talk about racism and come together to make a positive difference in our communities. If you share that hope, taking action in your own life on any of these points is a great start.

I asked Noah and Yodit to share some final advice for anyone interested in having these important conversations. Noah says, "Don't worry about being wrong or saying the wrong thing – worry about not moving closer to the truth." And Yodit adds, "Your voice matters – use it! That simple decision can move us all toward equity."

About This Post

There is so much to say about racism and the fight for racial equity. I am still reeling from the latest reminder that racism is alive and well. The racially motivated mass murder of nine black church-goers in Charleston causes me great pain and anger – but it also fuels my motivation and steels my resolve. It is stark and undeniable proof that we have a long road ahead to address the underlying causes and undo the mindsets that lead to such hate and violence. It is a painful reminder of how crucial our individual and collective commitments to fight against racism and for equity are.

For our part, this is one post in [a series](#) highlighting Net Impact's focus on the issue. I want to thank Yodit, Noah, Bay, Paula, and Chris for adding their perspectives. These friends and colleagues are not only experts in their fields, but also have a wealth of experience working toward racial equity. They shared their stories and beliefs -- and so

can you. That's how we'll build solidarity. I consider myself blessed to work for a network of progressive, solutions-oriented folks who want to move the dial and I look forward to hearing from more of you. We are engaging with some incredible partners that support this dialogue, and we plan to continue this conversation both at [our annual conference in November](#) and throughout our chapter network.

Resources

Learn:

<http://kirwaninstitute.osu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/2014-implicit-...>
<http://www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2014/05/the-case-for-reparat...>
<http://rei.racialequityinstitute.org/wpsite/resources/>
<https://www.youtube.com/user/racialjustice>
<http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ727803.pdf>
<http://diversity.berkeley.edu/haas-institute-co-releases-science-inequal...>
https://www.ted.com/talks/mellody_hobson_color_blind_or_color_brave
http://www.ywcabham.org/sites/ywca/files/u35/tar_resource_notebook_feb20...
<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>

Take action:

http://stepupprogram.org/docs/handouts/STEPUP_Action_Continuum.pdf
<http://www.aspeninstitute.org/sites/default/files/content/images/rcc/Les...>
<http://www.racialequitytools.org/resourcefiles/kivel3.pdf>

Transform your organization:

http://www.buildingmovement.org/our_tools
<https://www.raceforward.org/practice/tools/racial-equity-impact-assessme...>
<http://racemattersinstitute.org/assessment/>