



# Don't Be Silent: Expert Tips to Defuse Workplace Tensions

By Nancy Cleeland

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In these days of high emotion and polarization, it's hard to know how or even whether to address the feelings of anger, despair or frustration that may be percolating among employees at the workplace. But it would be a mistake for company leaders and managers to stay silent, said Eric Ellis, a longtime consultant on diversity and inclusion ([www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-news/hr-storytellers/pages/hr-storytellers-eric-ellis.aspx](http://www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-news/hr-storytellers/pages/hr-storytellers-eric-ellis.aspx)).

Today's crises have frayed nerves and opened wounds.

"None of us is unaffected by this," said Ellis, president and chief executive officer of Integrity Development Corporation in Cincinnati ([https://urldefense.proofpoint.com/v2/url?u=http-3A\\_\\_www.integritydev.com&d=DwMFaQ&c=nQOnw6HHAeKBNxj23OXhOw&r=1UFcadalRplrPKdyxcj7gCpRMG5mbpii82c5EWu8jcg&m=SuCZR-HB06VLescjaae0ckO\\_z8Z9Pc8ZDfCodCoE34I&s=QDZWQkBpmBiAgklewOcexCiqbUAYwYssbHHvFonWK-c&e=](https://urldefense.proofpoint.com/v2/url?u=http-3A__www.integritydev.com&d=DwMFaQ&c=nQOnw6HHAeKBNxj23OXhOw&r=1UFcadalRplrPKdyxcj7gCpRMG5mbpii82c5EWu8jcg&m=SuCZR-HB06VLescjaae0ckO_z8Z9Pc8ZDfCodCoE34I&s=QDZWQkBpmBiAgklewOcexCiqbUAYwYssbHHvFonWK-c&e=)) and a speaker at the 2020 SHRM Talent conference ([www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/behavioral-competencies/global-and-cultural-effectiveness/pages/try-these-strategies-to-reduce-implicit-bias-in-your-workplace.aspx](http://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/behavioral-competencies/global-and-cultural-effectiveness/pages/try-these-strategies-to-reduce-implicit-bias-in-your-workplace.aspx)). He advised employers to have a plan for managers to de-escalate conflict and build common ground. "If we don't prepare our people to have this conversation, we're leaving ourselves open to micro-explosions."

What is called for is empathetic support, with conversations guided by the "core values that companies adopt and post but are at times challenged to live," he said.

"A neutral leadership style is not very helpful during a crisis. Organizational leaders must assess their personal beliefs and feelings first and then expand beyond them. The most effective leaders find ways to support employees who have perspectives that differ from their own."

Ellis, who has consulted with businesses, advocacy groups and law enforcement organizations across the country, said HR professionals can play a crucial role in maintaining a respectful workplace.

"The kind of people-centered sensitivity needed at this time, in many ways, is baked into their training and professional DNA," he said.

## SHRM RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT

Overcoming Workplace Bias ([www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/Pages/overcoming-workplace-bias.aspx](http://www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/Pages/overcoming-workplace-bias.aspx))

To help provide a framework for opening and guiding productive conversations, Ellis offered the following tips:

**Start with yourself.** A good place to begin is by acknowledging your personal biases as well as what's taking place in our country and

Feedback

demonstrating empathy for those experiencing hurt, anger, sadness or disappointment.

**Recognize different perspectives.** People come to the workplace with a variety of perspectives on the ongoing unrest. Ellis suggested that these perspectives fall into four broad categories:

*Justice requires action.* Strong supporters of the protesters. They may have personal experience with injustice or are closely affiliated with people who directly experienced unfair and/or heavy-handed policing.

*Nonviolent protest supporters.* General supporter of protest but uncomfortable with rioting, looting and violence.

*Don't protest; a few bad apples.* People who believe George Floyd's death was wrong but not worthy of this response. They generally believe that every organization has a few people who abuse power or are negligent.

*Loyal to the system.* People who generally side with law enforcement and believe these protests demonstrate the need for more control, law and order.

Ellis recommends that leaders lean their support closer to the perspectives of those employees in the first or second categories, to align with the tradition of supporting peaceful protests for civil rights in this country, and also to acknowledge the well-documented history and ongoing examples of racial injustice, which is reflected in intense acts of solidarity with protestors from around the world. However, he added, leaders should remember the importance of being inclusive and protecting the rights of employees with beliefs closer to the third or fourth categories. No one should feel disrespected, blamed or harmed in the workplace due to their personal perspective, he said.

**Teach empathetic listening** (<https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/EmpathyatWork.htm>) **and de-escalation skills**

(<https://www.crisisprevention.com/Blog/CPI-s-Top-10-De-Escalation-Tips-Revisited>) **to your entire workforce.** People need these critical skills to communicate effectively with their co-workers, even when they disagree.

Empathetic listening requires people to avoid engaging in point-counterpoint debates. They need to display open body language. The listener begins by paraphrasing comments shared with him or her, beginning with a tentative opening such as "Let me see if I'm understanding what you're saying." This is followed by a summary of both the content of the message shared and the feelings expressed. The final step is to check for accuracy, to ensure that the listener accurately restated the message shared by the co-worker. Employees can engage in empathetic listening even when they disagree with the perspective shared by their co-worker.

**Arrange for company-sponsored listening sessions.** It can be helpful to provide employees with a safe forum to express their feelings and concerns with their co-workers. It may be necessary to engage external experts experienced at successfully facilitating these types of conversations. The ultimate objective is to provide solutions that improve employees' ability to effectively manage their feelings and anxiety in order to reduce the impact on their emotional health and workplace effectiveness.

**Provide counseling support.** Make sure to have counseling resources available for employees who may need assistance with their mental and emotional well-being as a result of stress and anxiety related to these massive national and global issues.

**Strengthen inclusion efforts, don't pause them.** Strengthen current commitment and engagement efforts with inclusion strategies ([www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/behavioral-competencies/global-and-cultural-effectiveness/pages/taking-steps-to-eliminate-racism-in-the-workplace.aspx](http://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/behavioral-competencies/global-and-cultural-effectiveness/pages/taking-steps-to-eliminate-racism-in-the-workplace.aspx)) versus pausing them. All companies should take a hard look at their own culture to ensure that they are strategically working to create workplaces that are fair and inclusive ([www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-magazine/0418/pages/6-steps-for-building-an-inclusive-workplace.aspx](http://www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-magazine/0418/pages/6-steps-for-building-an-inclusive-workplace.aspx)) of diverse employees in general and racially diverse employees specifically. If an organization conducts a legitimate assessment, it will include the identification of several areas where bias has limited the opportunities available for employees of different racial backgrounds and other diverse characteristics and traits.