



Tips for Discussing Racial Injustice in the Workplace

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In recent years, psychologists have done significant research on the impact of systemic racism. Specifically, researchers including Wong et al. (2014) (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4762607/>) and Bilotta et al. (2019) (<https://racism.org/articles/defining-racism/stereotypes-bias-and-racism/210-implicit-bias/implicit-bias-and-the-law/7895-how-subtle-bias-infects>) have explored two kinds of systemic racism—*overt* and *aversive*.

Overt racism is the type exhibited directly in the form of racial slurs, castigation of others and explicit bias against a racial group. Aversive racism is typically performed by "well-meaning" individuals who have an espoused aversion to being perceived as racist, while nonetheless acting with bias. Aversive racist behaviors typically manifest as *microaggressions*, a term coined by Pierce in 1970 (<https://www.worldcat.org/title/black-seventies/oclc/651935013>).

Microaggression refers to brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral or environmental indignities, intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory or negative prejudicial slights and insults toward any group, particularly the culturally marginalized or a racial minority. A microaggression, as defined by Merriam-Webster, is a comment or action that subtly, and often unconsciously or unintentionally, expresses a prejudiced attitude toward a member of a marginalized group.

The American Psychological Association (<https://www.apa.org/monitor/2009/02/microaggression>) and researchers such as Sue et al. (2007) (<https://gim.uw.edu/sites/gim.uw.edu/files/fdp/Microaggressions%20File.pdf>) recognize three forms of microaggressions:

- 1. Microassaults:** Conscious and intentional actions or slurs. *Examples:* using racial epithets; displaying swastikas; in a restaurant, deliberately serving white diners before black diners.
- 2. Microinsults:** Verbal and nonverbal communications that subtly convey rudeness and insensitivity, thereby demeaning a person's racial heritage or identity. *Examples:* an employee of color is repeatedly asked how she got her job, with the implication it was through an affirmative action or quota system and not on her own merits; a Latino male speaking fluent English is addressed as "señor" by a non-Spanish speaker.
- 3. Microinvalidations:** Communications that subtly exclude, negate or nullify the thoughts, feelings or experiential reality of the target person. *Example:* Asian-Americans are asked where they are "from," implying that they are perpetual foreigners in their own land.

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When microaggressions are coupled with consistent overt racism, including physical assaults (as seen with the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and many others), it becomes absolutely critical for Americans—including employers—to have an open and honest conversation about race. For too long, authority figures have exhorted individuals and groups to avoid conflict, but *conflict avoidance* (DeChurch et al., 2002) (<https://atlas.northwestern.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/DeChurch-et-al.-2013.pdf>) merely subjugates the issues and further intensifies entrenched thinking. It is time to begin and maintain effective dialogue on racism using the best tools available.

What are some key pointers from the psychological literature for engaging in honest, open discussion? Here are five techniques and recommendations:

1. Communicate with a modified SBAR tool.

SBAR stands for *Situation, Background, Assessment and Recommendation*. This model for ensuring effective communication among disagreeing parties was first developed by the military and later adopted (<http://www.ihl.org/resources/Pages/Tools/SBARToolkit.aspx>) in health care settings. If two officers aboard a submarine, for example, are having a philosophical disagreement about how orders should be executed, each would provide an SBAR and work collaboratively to make a joint recommendation. In the case of parties who disagree over an issue involving race, the SBAR tool might be reframed as Situation, Background, Acknowledgment and *Rebuilding*. Both sides would share their backgrounds and acknowledge the other's perspective (without comparing it to their own—see #3 below), enabling them to reimagine the situation and *rebuild* a new way to move forward. Success may not be possible, but they will have made an earnest effort.

2. Communicate with a modified DESC tool.

DESC stands for *Describe, Express, Specify and Consequences*, a communications model introduced in *Asserting Yourself: A Practical Guide for Positive Change* (<https://www.amazon.com/Asserting-Yourself-Updated-Practical-Positive-Change/dp/0738209716>) (Bower, 1976) and used by marriage counselors in the 1990s (DESC Script for Assertiveness (<https://your.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/using-DESC-to-make-your-difficult-conversations-more-effective.pdf>)). In the early 2000s (AHRQ, 2005 (<https://www.ahrq.gov/teamstepps/officebasedcare/videos/desc-script.html>)), researchers pioneered the technique to help eliminate medical team members' ingrained biases; specifically, nurses were taught to use the DESC Script with abusive physicians in an effort to develop a more assertive and authoritative tone.

In the case of racism in the workplace, employers seeking honest communication should use a modified DESC Script, allowing the parties to Describe, Express and Specify the nature of the racism encountered and *Collaborate* on a solution. Because racism is completely unacceptable from any party going into such a discussion, *Consequences* are less important than collaboration toward a solution.

3. Don't conflate, compare or contrast.

Human brains are wired to process information by finding similarities and differences; we intuitively compare and contrast everything imaginable. When someone aggrieved by overt or aversive racism describes their experiences, listeners have a natural tendency to be defensive or to try to identify parallels with their own experiences. This is conflation, the biggest mistake made by most parties guilty of inadvertent racism or microaggression. Don't do it. Listen to others with an open mind; hear their story without injecting yourself into it. Take it all in and learn. Most of us have not lived through mass genocide, so we cannot draw legitimate parallels between our lives and those of its survivors, nor pretend to understand how they feel about it. This is why slogans like "All Lives Matter" are offensive to black

individuals who have endured racism for 450 years, and why comparisons of various events to the Holocaust are offensive to Jews.

4. Discuss, don't debate.

When driving open and honest dialogue, HR professionals and people managers should emphasize that the purpose of getting together is discussion, not debate or disagreement. Set up discussion rules. Articulate that the point of the conversation is to chart a course for future actions to eliminate racism from the workplace. Sometimes, discussing matters too deeply can result in feelings of indignation and invalidation. This is not acceptable. Listen to people's varying perspectives and find ways to shape future actions. Debating past perceptions of particular details will only result in failure.

5. Set goals and honor feedback.

People managers and HR professionals are encouraged to treat open discussions of racism the way they would discussions of job performance. Avoid blame or attribution and focus on behaviors. Define a challenging yet attainable measurable goal or objective to which all parties must ascribe and for which failure to do so is equivalent to a resignation. Consistent measurement is key, as with all other feedback. Psychologists have argued for the use of goal-setting theory in social instances for years; in today's climate, HR thought leaders speak to the notion of setting a goal to eradicate bias and racism. The goal should be a zero tolerance for racism, injustice and bias in the workplace.

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