

Session 25 – Courageous Conversation about Race: Setting the Stage

Materials

- Agenda charted on the board or chart paper, or provided as a handout
- Chart paper containing Community Agreements from Session 7
- Handout: “Why It Is So Hard to Talk About Race in the U.S.”
- Handout: “On Language”

Opening Ceremony: Rainbow Breathing

Have people get as comfortable as possible in their seats, as you invite them to take some rainbow breaths with you. If it feels more comfortable for participants to stand, invite them to do so.

Have them bring their arms out by their side, and as they breathe in through their nose, have them slowly move their arms all the way up above their head by tracing an arc in the air around them (like a rainbow). Have them pause for just a moment as their hands meet at the top.

Then on the outbreath, have them slowly trace that same arc back down around them until their arms are back by their sides. Invite participants to pay attention to how the stretching feels in their body and let them know to stretch only to the extent that is possible and comfortable for them and their bodies.

Repeat five times, encouraging participants to continue paying attention to their bodies as they trace the arc up on the inhale, and down on the exhale, in the way Grace Cecilio models in the [Calm Corner: Rainbow Breath](#). In the video, Grace Cecilio whose intended audience is younger children, encourages her audience to imagine tracing colors and sparkles up and down around them, as part of the rainbow, for some added levity.

Invite people to check in with themselves after these five rainbow breaths. Ask a few volunteers to share out how they feel, using one word only. Then explain that today we'll start talking about race. Acknowledge that talking about race can be uncomfortable for

people. It can trigger a stress response for some because of the way we've been raised, what we've been taught and our life experiences.

Encourage participants to continue breathing throughout this session and ground themselves, as needed, so they can remain present and engaged. Invite them to use whatever practice works for them, and to lean into any possible discomfort or stress they might experience as this is what will help them learn and grow.



Talk Participants Through Today's Agenda

- Opening Ceremony: Rainbow Breathing & Check-in
- Check Agenda
- Journaling: Courageous Conversations
- Why Is It So Hard to Talk About Race in the USA?
- Addressing the Challenges
- On Language
- Closing Ceremony: A Takeaway



Journaling

Entering courageous conversations about any “-ism” can be challenging, especially when we are from different racialized groups with different experiences. Invite participants to take out their journals and spend some time reflecting on the following questions:

- Have you ever had an awkward or uncomfortable conversation about race with colleagues, with students, with family, with friends, or with anyone else?
- Who was part of the conversation? What was the specific topic?
- Why do you think it felt awkward or uncomfortable?
- Do you think there is anything that could have been done differently that would have helped make the conversation less awkward or uncomfortable?
- As circle keeper, be sure to journal as well for your own personal reflection and healing.

Invite a few participants to share out.

Explain that in this country, with its 400-year history of white supremacy and racism, there are multiple challenges to having productive conversations about race.

Why It Is So Hard to Talk About Race in the USA?

Distribute the “Why It Is So Hard to Talk About Race in the USA?” handout contained at the end of this session. Discuss each challenge listed, explaining and checking for understanding along the way.

After reviewing each challenge, ask participants the following questions:

- Does this make sense?
- Does it connect in any way to your journaling reflections at the start of this session?
- Are there other reasons we can think of that make it hard to talk about race in cross racial groups in the U.S.?

Touch on the fact that it can be helpful to take these challenges into consideration when entering into conversations about race and racism. Also, there are ways that we can help address these challenges.

Addressing the Challenges

Some ways to address these challenges are listed below:

- a) developing community agreements about how we will engage with each other
- b) sharing what we call brave space tools and have them guide us in our conversations
- c) looking at language and definitions and making sure we understand what's being said, recognizing that words can mean different things to different people
- d) introducing and using affinity spaces

Remind participants how you've already developed Community Agreements in Session 7 and you've explored Brave Space Tools in Session 8 and 11. Explain that in this session, you'll be exploring the complicated nature of language.

On Language

Provide additional framing by sharing that, as we just discussed, for many people it can be, or is, difficult to talk about race and racism. These conversations touch on issues of

power and privilege. They can conjure up feelings of fear, guilt, anger, hurt, hope and disappointment.

We know that words can mean different things to different people. Sometimes language evolves to take on new meaning altogether. Encourage participants to be open and to listen to each other fully, seeking understanding.

As we have intentional conversations about race, we should find the words that work for us and our colleagues. Explore labels, definitions, and descriptions. Talk about different meanings and the impact of the words that people use.

Acknowledge that everyone is at a different place in developing their racial literacy. To that end, you'll be sharing some ideas that can be helpful in thinking about the language used to talk about race, racism and other oppressions.

Distribute the "On Language*" handout contained at the end of this session. Invite two volunteers to read the two paragraphs aloud. Give participants two minutes to review the document independently after having heard it read out loud.

** Based on materials from Project Change and Everyday Democracy.*

Pair Share

In pairs, invite participants to share in response to the following prompts:

- What is your IFET (Impression, Feeling, Experience or Thought) in response to the "On Language" excerpt?
- What resonates with you personally about this document?

Large Group Share

Reconvene the group. Invite a few volunteers to share out on what was discussed in their pairs, keeping confidentiality in mind. Summarize what people share.

Consider touching on the updated definition of "racism" as an example of how language evolves over time. In 2020, Merriam-Webster—whose dictionaries are ubiquitous in U.S. classrooms, offices and libraries—announced that it would expand the definition of the word "racism" in its publications to include the concept of systemic oppression. The action followed a suggestion from recent college graduate, Kennedy Mitchum, who took issue with the publication's definition of racism. Mitchum, a Black woman, emailed

Merriam Webster to point out that racism is “prejudice combined with social and institutional power.” She argued for a definition that included systemic oppression, based on her frustration with people who used the dictionary definition to downplay her own experiences with racism.

Closing Ceremony

Invite a few volunteers to share a takeaway from today's session.

Additional Resources: Session 25

Additional Written Resources:

Mindful of Race: Transforming Racism from the Inside Out by Ruth King

White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism by Robin DiAngelo

Handout: Why Is It So Hard to Talk About Race in the USA? Handout

- There are power dynamics between colleagues, leaders, (and students). We are afraid there may be repercussions.
- Many of us have been told all our lives not to talk about certain issues with people from other backgrounds. Especially not at work or school.
- Some people are talking about their personal experiences while others are talking about the system. For example, if we were in a conversation about racism in the health care system, a doctor may feel attacked because the doctor feels they treats everyone fairly.
- Intent vs impact - Sometimes we say or do things that are hurtful to someone else. We didn't mean to hurt that person, but that was the result. Often, we stop at saying I didn't mean it, but the hurt is still there.
- Many people have had bad past experiences with talking about race, so they are hesitant about engaging again.
- We are afraid to be vulnerable and expose ourselves in front of other colleagues or students.
- For some of us, the issue hits home more than for others. The issue is painful.

Handout: On Language



On Language

Language can be used deliberately to engage and support community anti-racism coalitions and initiatives, or to inflame and divide them. Discussing definitions can engage and support coalitions, yet it is important for groups to decide the extent to which they must have consensus and where it is okay for people to disagree. It is important to keep in mind that the words people use to discuss power, privilege, racism and oppression hold different meanings for different people. People at different stages in developing an analysis tend to attach different meanings to words like discrimination, privilege and institutional racism. When people are talking about privilege or racism, the words they use often come with emotions and assumptions that are not spoken.

Many of these and other related terms have evolved over time. For example, given the changing demographic trends in the United States, the word “minority” no longer acceptable to some (non-white) racial/ethnic groups. The terms “emerging majority” and “people of color” have become popular substitutes. Also, the terms used to refer to members of each community of color have changed over time. Whether to use the terms African American or Black, Hispanic American or Latino/a or Latinx, Native American or American Indian or Indigenous, and Pacific Islander or Asian American depends on a variety of conditions, including geographic location, age, generation, and, sometimes, political orientation.

Source: Project Change's "The Power of Words" and Everyday Democracy

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