

Learning Conversation Stems

It's easier to attack someone or avoid a difficult conversation than it is to engage. However, if you want learning to occur and greater likelihood of change, you will have to practice engaging in courageous conversations about race. The best way to do this is to learn to ask questions with genuine curiosity. This strategy is necessary whether you are the person who committed the microaggression, the one who was impacted, or a bystander. Please note that these strategies are not meant for those who are not open to learning or who don't care about their impact on others. The following phrases are learning conversation stems to help guide you in getting started. Make them your own and think about what you might add to this list. Practice is key to success!

The Person Who Committed the Microaggression

In order for this to work it's important that you are open to understanding how your words or actions impacted the other person and that you...

1. Try and connect with the other person's feelings and needs.
2. Show you are sincerely interested in them. This is not a technique.
3. Focus on contributing to their wellbeing. Meet them where they're at.
4. Focus on impact vs. intent.
5. Empathize don't sympathize.
6. Remember that their reality/experiences may differ from yours.
7. Stay with it, but don't push them for closure or reassurance that you are "okay".

Listen for Understanding

If you are a good, kind, moral ethical, loving human being it can be difficult to hear that your words or actions demonstrate bias and may have harmed or insulted someone. As a result, it is easy to go into defense mode, defending the way you see yourself and want to be seen by others. Try and listen to what they are telling you no matter how they say it to you. Even if they say, "You are a racist," they could actually be trying to tell you, "What you did was racist." Both are difficult to hear but the latter can be easier to accept if you recognize we all have learned biases, and you don't automatically respond defensively to the word racist.

- Listen to what they say with an open mind.
- Receive their words as if they are a gift to you; something you can use to improve your conversations with other people.
- Focus on the impact of your words and actions not your intent. Save your good intentions for later in the conversation and believe them when they say they know you had good intentions.
- Recognize they may be taking risk to tell you you've offended.
- Affirm their experience of you. This can be as simple as saying, "I'm hearing when I said... it offended you." Don't use the word "if" as in, "if I offended."
- Understand that their reaction may be due a cumulative effect. It is likely that this is not the first time this was said or done to them. If so, the one time you said or did that thing feels like the thousandth cut they've experienced that day or over several days.
- Apologize only after you understand what you are apologizing for. Don't apologize for their feelings, as in, "I'm sorry you feel that way."
- Commit to changing your words or actions in the future and educating others.

Conversation Stems for The Person Who Committed the Microaggression

Remember your tone matters.

1. What impact have my actions had on you?
2. It seems like you might be having an emotional reaction to what I just said, and I'm wondering if you would be willing to engage me in conversation around it.
3. How did what I just said impact you? I notice you seem upset.
4. Can you say a little more about why you're so frustrated with me?
5. Were you reacting to something I did or said?
6. What was it that I said that caused your reaction?
7. Will you let me/us in on your thoughts?
8. I'm trying to understand these issues better. Can you say more about...
9. I'm trying my best to grasp what you're saying but it's difficult for me given how new I am to these conversations. Could you give another example of what you mean by...
10. I'm nervous having this conversation because I worry what you will think of me, but I will do my best to stay in it. Are you saying that...?
11. Let me see if I'm hearing you right, you're saying that...
12. I'm truly sorry for having offended you. I had no idea that my words had those subtle implications. Have I ever said anything like that before that has offended you?
13. I'm trying to listen for understanding but I'm struggling to fully understand how... Would you say more about that?
14. Can I start over?
15. Thank you for taking the risk to share how my words impacted you. Is there something else I should be aware of?
16. I'm hearing that when I said... I revealed an unconscious stereotype about... Thank you for taking the risk to share that with me. I didn't know the impact of my words. I'm sorry...
17. I appreciate you trusting me enough to bring this up. In the future I will (name different action).
18. _____
19. _____

The Person Who Was Impacted

If you are the target of a microaggression it's important you...

1. Recognize your own capacity to engage effectively in a given moment.
2. Work not to hold the enemy image.
3. Try and connect with the other person.
4. Respond with curiosity vs. React with anger.
5. Don't try to shame, blame or guilt them into understanding.
6. Meet them where they are at.
7. Move beyond a place of rightness and wrongness.
8. Give them grace to make mistakes without excusing their behavior. In other words, don't communicate, "It's okay," when it is not.

The Who, What, Why, Where, When, and How Approach

It's easy to jump to seeing someone as the enemy when they commit a microaggression. However, this approach rarely, if ever works. Unfortunately, sometimes we feel we can't help ourselves and become instantly angered. There are also those times when we start off calm, but the person is not open to hearing how their words caused harm and as a result, this turns into tidal wave of emotions. Try and see the person as human and recognize they have been socialized to think and believe what they do. Try to remain curious.

- *Who else thinks this way?* Microaggressions are such not because they occur once but all of the times in which they are said. When someone commits a microaggression it can feel like the straw that broke the camel's back. Share with the person that that you have experienced this comment many times and why it hurts, why it is problematic, or why it does not feel like a compliment.
- *What is the offender trying to convey?* If the person is trying to pay you a compliment, show that you understand their intentions before telling them about the impact.
- *Why is the offender defensive?* The person who committed the microaggression has likely worked very hard at being sensitive to race issues and probably prides them self on this fact. If there is anything that you can share with them that speaks to what they have done well, tell them.
- *Why do you want to engage them?* The impact of microaggressions on the culture of organizations and individuals' lives goes well beyond a conversation between you and the offender. Recognize how you are contributing to the well-being of yourself, friends, family, and our society by continually taking the risk to engage someone who may not be open to feedback.
- *Where is a good entry point to engage them?* Because microaggressions happen as a part of everyday conversation, they often occur in the middle of a personal story, when a person is trying to explain their perspective, or even when simply asking a question or commenting on something. In any of these cases, pointing out a microaggression takes away from what they are trying to say and shifts the conversation to the offensive remark. Try and be sensitive to timing. It can make a difference on whether or not they will hear you.
- *When have they had experiences that would cause them to think any differently?* For many, the answer is rarely, if ever. Many people were taught at an early age to operate from colorblind thinking and as a result say and do things that are offensive without meaning to cause harm. Keep in mind that people who have less experience and exposure to diversity rely more heavily on words that have been deemed safe in the past without understanding the context of racism. If you can remember that you've had a lifetime of experiences to help you understand racism, and they may just be entering into the conversation, it will help you to meet them where they are at.
- *How do I engage them?* This is question of the century. The *how* comes with practice and even then, you will find yourself in situations where you thought you figured out the how, only to realize that this time and in this situation on this particular day, your *how* was ineffective. We are not trying to make you feel like these conversations are impossible, we just don't want to oversimplify the strategies. With that said, below are some tips for engaging when someone offends you.

Conversation Stems for The Person Who Was Impacted

1. Would you be open to hearing how I experienced what you said?
2. Would you be curious about how your words impacted me?
3. Can you say that again, but instead of using a label (such as "bossy") describe the behavior? I have a reaction to that word, and it makes it hard for me to hear anything else you're saying.
4. Could you say _____ instead of _____ ? The first is a loaded word for me.
5. I'm having an emotional reaction to what you just said. I'm wondering if you would be willing to engage in conversation about it.

6. Say more about what you mean by...
7. How would you feel if you learned that (racism, power, privilege, oppression) is still happening today?
8. What are some of your thoughts about what is going on with...? (Describe something having to do with racism, power, privilege)
9. It would help me understand if you could share an example of...
10. Help me to better understand why you feel that way. Can you be more specific about...?
11. I want to better understand your perspective. Would you give me an example of when your whiteness (for example) worked against you?
12. I'm hearing that your intent was... I can appreciate your good intentions, and I'm also wondering if you would be open to hearing what I heard when you said...
13. Repeat the offensive word or comment with a question, ex: "They don't care about their kids?" "Deserve?"
14. I'm wondering if there is another way of thinking about this situation? (When someone uses either/or thinking.)
15. I know you didn't mean it, and when you...
16. _____
17. _____

Both People

It's important that we all...

1. Give one another a chance to learn from our mistakes.
2. Know that the other person's perspective is their reality.
3. Avoid the posture that suggests all of our perspectives are 100% right.
4. Are open to learning.
5. Talk about our emotions in a way that helps the other understand them.
6. Realize that we all have prejudice and bias and that we have all offended.
7. Practice becoming skilled at communicating effectively.
8. Recognize that being told we did something that was racist is not as difficult as living with racism.

This is Everyone's Work

Racism existed long before any of us were born and it's going to take all of us to dismantle it. Though our work might look differently depending on our race and personal experiences, we all have work to do. Always step away from a difficult conversation and ask yourself, *What could I have done differently to more effectively engage the other person? What was their work to do?* Always see yourself as a learner.

Conversation Stems for Both People

1. Shift from, "I understand," to "Can you help me understand . . .?"
2. Tell me more . . .
3. Can you say a little more about how you see things?
4. What information might you have that I don't?

5. How do you see it differently?
6. How are you feeling about all of this?
7. Say more about why this is important to you?
8. I'm wondering if it's possible to . . .
9. I'm wondering if it would make sense . . .
10. I'd like you to help me understand where you are coming from on this.
11. I'm wondering whether we could talk about how we each reacted to that conversation and whether there's a better way we could address these issues.
12. What do you mean when you say...?
13. I think I heard you say... (paraphrase). Did I understand that correctly?
14. I'm feeling (anxious, concerned, etc.) about having this conversation and how we're going to work together in the future. I'm also hopeful that we can trust each other enough to have difficult conversations. How are you feeling?
15. What impact will the power dynamics in our relationship have on this conversation?
16. I'm hoping we can have a "courageous conversation" about what happened earlier because... (Name what's important about your relationship with that person).
17. What's going on for you right now?
18. I noticed (Name the nonverbal you observed) when I said _____ you _____. What was that about? Would you be willing to talk about what was going on for you?
19. _____
20. _____

Pathways to a Connected Conversation

Explore where each story comes from

"My reactions here probably have a lot to do with my previous experiences. . . "

"I've had some really bad experiences with these conversations in the past, so it's difficult for me to..."

"When I was growing up, I was taught not to talk about race. Now that I'm trying, I find that I often don't do a very good job of it. I get scared each time that I will offend and now I fear I have offended you..."

Share the impact on you

"I don't know whether you intended this, but I felt extremely uncomfortable when . . ."

"I know you didn't mean it this way but when you said... it made me think/feel..."

Take responsibility for your contribution

"There are a number of things I've done that have made this situation harder. . ."

"I'm not sure how, but I feel like I may have disrespected you in some way. I feel the tension between us; can we talk about it? I'm trying to become more consciously competent."

Describe feelings

"I'm anxious about bringing this up, but it's important to me that we talk about it."

"I'm not sure why, but I'm feeling uncomfortable right now with what was just said, can we stop for a minute and talk about it?"

"When you said... I instantly felt angry because it sounded like you were saying..."

Reflect on the identity issues

“I think the reason this subject hooks me, is that I don’t like thinking of myself as someone who. . .”

“It’s hard for me to hear that what I’m saying is racist. I have always thought of myself as...”

Name the elephant in the room

“I’m wondering how you feel about having a White (therapist, teacher, etc.) explore this issue with you. I imagine that if I was in your shoes I would be concerned about...”

Build a Platform

- When calling someone’s unconscious bias to their attention they are likely to get defensive, which is often rooted in deep identity issues. Tell them how you see them as (e.g., caring, thoughtful, kind, open to learning, etc.) so you are not saying they are a bad person as a result of their biased comment/action.
- Tell them why you decided to talk with them (concern for your child, you value your relationship, not wanting it to fester, your knowledge i.e., the impact on children).
- Share a time when you have done something similar, so they see you are not shaming or blaming them but see yourself as a learner too.
- Talk about what they did or said.
- Circle back at the end of the conversation and share how you are feeling and ask how they experienced the conversation. “This was tough from me to bring this up with you but I’m glad we talked about it. I don’t want to start off on a bad note.”
- Ask where they are at with this conversation, “How are you feeling?”

To make the structure of a difficult conversation visible, we need to understand not only what is said, but also what is not said. We need to understand what the people involved are thinking and feeling but not saying to each other. In a difficult conversation, this is usually where the real action is.

↪ Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton & Sheila Heen in *Difficult Conversations*

Adapted from Stone, D., et. al. (1999). *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*.