

# How to Have Difficult Conversations About Race

Tags: [#diversity](#) [#inclusion](#) [#difficult-conversation](#)

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## Dialogue

Title: How to Begin Difficult Conversations About Race

After George Floyd's murder...

I ran as far away from anything that had to do with racial inequity as I could. For over a year, I stopped watching the news.

What got you there? What happened?

It's hard for someone else to appreciate how much of a person's identity affects every other area of their life until you've lived it. You mention parenting as an example and people bringing up their kids.

One of the most hurtful things you can say to someone is "I don't care." In the words of Holocaust survivor and writer Elie Wiesel, "The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference."

For example, one of my friends confided in me that, "Whenever a BIPOC colleague talks about a microaggression they experienced, I noticed that I have this tendency to just say, 'Oh, I'm sure the other person didn't mean it that way.' I've seen a lot of my White colleagues do the same thing. It's like we're trying to justify what happened and explain it away by either saying that what happened was unintentional or minimizing it by saying it wasn't that bad. Why do we do that?"

You have a theory.

One tendency that a lot of us have is to discount either in our minds or out loud when someone else things a conversation is about race and we don't.

So whether or not you personally think it's about race, the mere fact that your conversation partner does think it's about race means that you're having a conversation about race.

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Winning isn't about confrontation it's about your goals for the conversation. What do you mean by that?

- What do I hope to accomplish in this conversation?
- Given what I know about them and the situation, what is likely to be their goal?
- What are three questions I can ask them that will help me to understand their position?

Give the other person the benefit of the doubt:

Giving others the benefit of the doubt in difficult conversations is also a smart strategic choice. While it might seem naïve or foolish, it actually puts you in a better position for success. People often perform to your level of expectation. When you assume the worst, they perform poorly. If you assume the best, they perform better. It also makes it easier for you to focus on the conversation at hand because you're not burdened with the emotions associated with assuming the worst.

Engaged Communication = Situation + Impact + Invitation

- Naked facts
- Impact
- Invitation

You as a manager say something. I'm offering my assistance -- it's OK to say no.

One Person / One Topic

Distinction --> Calling Out vs. Calling In

Speak to the Heart, Not the Head

What have you changed your mind on?

## Reserve

Daryl Davis:

Davis says he's been able to convince two hundred Klansmen to renounce their membership and change their lives

The best things in life are on the other side of difficult conversations.

We don't have these conversations because they're easy. We have them because they're necessary and worth it.

You mediated a dispute between a police department and a Black family. Let's explore.

Your thoughts on code switching.

## Quotes

Before I became a parent, I used to roll my eyes every time somebody would bring up their kids out of nowhere. We could be having a conversation about something completely unrelated to family—say, peanut butter—and then it was like they would go out of their way to throw the fact that they had kids in my face. I would think to myself, “Okay, okay, you have kids. I get it.”

But I didn't get it. And now I'm that parent.

If I'm moving and considering neighborhoods, I have to think about my kids. If a friend wants to hang out, I have to think about my kids. If I have to travel for a speaking engagement, I have to think about my kids.

When there is just a little bit of Cinnamon Toast Crunch left in the box, I have to think about my kids (because I don't want to share). Now that I have kids, I get it. But when I didn't have kids, not only did I not get it, but there was no way for me to get it. I had seen plenty of parents.

Some of my best friends were parents. But I wasn't a parent.

It is extraordinarily difficult to fully appreciate how much one part of a person's identity can impact their life. When I told one of my White friends that I was going to put the story about being rejected on the playground into this book, they said, “I don't see the connection. I understand how that impacted your ability to have difficult conversations in general, but I don't get how it relates to this book about race.” On the other hand, when I shared the same story with my BIPOC friends, they clearly saw the connection between race and rejection.

I said, “Okay, I respect your perspective. I have a question for you. Does the person you're talking to think the situation is about race?”

“Yes.”

“So whether or not you personally think it's about race, the mere fact that your conversation partner does think it's about race means that you're having a conversation about race. The conversation is going to be about race regardless of your perspective, because you're not the only person in the conversation who matters.”

This isn't to say that, when a conversation is about race, it's all about

race. Part of the challenge in these conversations is determining how much of a factor race played, if any. But as long as the person you're talking to feels as though race is involved, then the conversation is about race.

For me, when it comes to code switching, I don't know how not to do it. It sounds odd, but for my unique life experience, this fluid adaptation is my form of authentic self-expression. I've spent sizable amounts of time with people of different backgrounds, and so there is a true, authentic version of Kwame for each of them. But, if I'm not intimately familiar with a culture, I won't try to code switch because it would be inauthentic and ultimately do more harm than good.

Being empathetic doesn't come naturally to me (when I took the StrengthsFinder test, which ranks your strengths from 1 to 34, my empathy was 34). But intentional empathy is a skill, and I knew I could learn it. With time and practice, I developed the skill and turned it into a conversational habit. A lot of times I don't want to do it. But I know that my ability to empathize impacts my ability to connect, communicate, and persuade.

## References