

# CONVERSATION ROADBLOCKS AND HOW TO SURMOUNT THEM

- »» **Do you want** to talk about gender or racial bias, but fear saying something insensitive or hurtful?
- »» **Do you worry** that conversations about social issues and events will do more harm than good?
- »» **Do you feel** things are “not so bad” in your organization, and, candidly, struggle to fully grasp your colleagues’ experiences?

Conversation roadblocks—assumptions, attitudes, or experiences that keep us from talking about our differences—can prevent us from connecting, collaborating, and countering stereotypes and exclusionary practices.<sup>1</sup> Acknowledging and then addressing these roadblocks can help you better understand deep-rooted issues and overcome challenges that would otherwise remain unresolved, buried, or unspoken.

Set small goals each day to hold yourself accountable and start a conversation. You may be uncomfortable or make missteps, but keep going. You are human and don’t need to have all the answers to make an impact.

**REMEMBER: DIALOGUE IS ACTION.**

## THERE ISN'T A PROBLEM

### ROADBLOCK

#### **Gender differences don't matter—I view women and men equally.**

Research confirms that workplaces are not meritocracies.<sup>2</sup> Gender bias, discrimination, and sexism<sup>3</sup> are still a reality for many women, especially women of color.<sup>4</sup> Although you may not have experienced these issues personally, it’s always good to realize that others in your workplace may have.

### ROADBLOCK

#### **We don't see color—only people.**

Everyone sees skin color—it’s a human reality. But this isn’t a bad thing. In fact, for people to feel included and do their best work, they have to be able to bring their full selves to work, including their racial/ethnic identity. Our differences should be honored and celebrated, not ignored.<sup>5</sup>

### ROADBLOCK

#### **Race and ethnicity do not matter in certain places.**

Our racial and ethnic backgrounds are a huge part of who we are, and they influence how we view the world. In today’s globalized workplaces, there is no homogeneity—and diverse viewpoints, experiences, and identities are an asset.<sup>6</sup>



### BE ACCOUNTABLE EVERY DAY

**Get uncomfortable.** Write down every question that you have about gender inequality. Where are you stuck? Use this as a guidepost to push past your discomfort and help you get advice or coaching in key areas.

**Mix things up.** Think about who you know least on your team. Schedule time to connect about their experiences at work and how you can enhance your working relationship to develop trust and understanding.

**Check yourself.** Have you ever said “we only hire the best person,” “everyone is the same here,” or “they just don’t fit”? Explore how this type of coded language may be inadvertently harmful.



### START A CONVERSATION

**Ask** colleagues (of all genders and different cultural backgrounds) if they have ever experienced or witnessed biased behavior. What did it look like? What was said?

**Ask** colleagues how they think you can build trust by having open discussions about biased behavior team members may experience because of an aspect of their identity (e.g., race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, language, or cultural background).<sup>7</sup>

In the next month, **watch** or **listen** to five videos or podcasts<sup>8</sup> on the topic of race and ethnicity. Or dive into a blog or news story that covers race, ethnicity, social class, or cultural background in a region you know little about. Start a conversation with team members on the topic to share and continue learning.

## THERE WILL BE NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES TO MY ACTIONS

### ROADBLOCK

#### **It's not safe to speak up.**

When people don't feel they have a safe space to speak up, and they can't bring their full selves to work, it's nearly impossible for them to fulfill their potential and accomplish their best work.

### ROADBLOCK

#### **I will say something inappropriate—or worse, be viewed in a negative light (e.g., as racist or sexist; not a team player).**

Talking about our differences can be hard and uncomfortable. But these fears should not hold us back from connecting with others and creating an inclusive culture. We have to embrace discomfort—get comfortable being uncomfortable. The risk is worth it.

### ROADBLOCK

#### **People think I'm overly sensitive, and as a result I feel my experiences are minimized.**

Sharing experiences of bias and exclusion can be difficult and painful for many people. As a listener, take the time to truly acknowledge the speaker's unique experiences, which will help them feel more included.



### BE ACCOUNTABLE EVERY DAY

**Plan to "get real."** Have colleagues anonymously write down 2-3 social norms or processes that prevent them from speaking up. Then hold a working session to dig into the central issues, rather than defaulting to problem solving.

**Embrace humility.** Share a mistake you made with a colleague, and be specific what you learned and will do differently. This will help your colleagues learn and be encouraged to do the same.

**Start with empathy.** Even though you may be on the receiving end of a hurtful comment, consider asking "Can you explain what your intention was in saying [\_\_\_]? Here is the impact on me." Or try, "Can you clarify... I may have perceived your words in a different way than what you intended." Seize these opportunities for continued dialogue, demonstrating empathy, and shared learning.



### START A CONVERSATION

**Notice** who is being silent in meetings. Then follow up one-on-one to find out why, and ask how you can support them in making sure their voices are heard.

**Ask** a colleague: "If it's okay, can I ask you for honest, constructive feedback about words I'm unsure may be hurtful or offensive to others?"

**Ask** your colleagues if they have ever felt that their experiences were minimized. What happened? How did it make them feel?

## THERE'S NO BENEFIT TO TALKING

### ROADBLOCK

#### Talking about our differences can only further divide us.

Ignoring our differences holds us back from doing our best work. We must openly discuss and value what makes us different from one another to create an inclusive culture where people feel like they belong and are valued for their unique perspectives.

### ROADBLOCK

#### Talking won't solve anything.

Listening to our colleagues and validating their experiences of bias and exclusion is a powerful step toward inclusion. Importantly, learning about people as individuals can also challenge biases and help positively resolve conflicts.<sup>10</sup>



### BE ACCOUNTABLE EVERY DAY

**Learn from mistakes.** Reflect on your last tough conversation. Take lessons you've learned and in the next 24 hours, try again. Do one thing different based on what you learned.

**Be a role model.** When people open up to you about their experiences, listen carefully, ask thoughtful questions, and affirm their perspectives. As appropriate, share with others how these dialogues impact you and your work.

**Create shared responsibility.** Identify a common goal with colleagues to communicate across difference. Be specific and ensure you put in place a strategy to follow up.



### START A CONVERSATION

**Ask** colleagues what fears or assumptions prevent them from having discussions about differences. Do they assume that differences will be divisive? If so, why?

**Ask** colleagues how they think we can make progress on these issues. What would make them feel more comfortable opening up?

**Invite** colleagues to share examples of when they've successfully worked through differences with another person. What was key to their success?

- 1 The roadblocks and actions listed here are based on a detailed tool focused on communicating across differences. See Catalyst, *Engaging in Conversations About Gender, Race, and Ethnicity in the Workplace* (2016).
- 2 Emilio J. Castilla and Stephen Benard, "The Paradox of Meritocracy in Organizations," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, vol. 55 (2010): p. 543-576.
- 3 Ariane Hegewisch and Asha DuMonthier, "The Gender Wage Gap by Occupation 2015 and by Race and Ethnicity" (Institute for Women's Policy Research, April 2016); U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, "Charges Alleging Sex-Based Harassment (Charges filed with EEOC) FY 2010-FY 2017;" Pew Research Center, "On Pay Gap, Millennial Women Near Parity - For Now" (2013).
- 4 Victor Lavy and Edith Sand, "On the Origins of Gender Human Capital Gaps: Short and Long Term Consequences of Teachers' Stereotypical Biases," NBER Working Paper No. 20909 (January 2015); Claire Cain Miller, "How Elementary School Teachers' Biases Can Discourage Girls From Math and Science," *The New York Times*, February 6, 2015.
- 5 Michael I. Norton and Evan P. Apfelbaum, "The Costs of Racial 'Color Blindness,'" *Harvard Business Review* (July-August, 2013).
- 6 Michàlle E. Mor Barak, *Managing Diversity: Toward a Globally Inclusive Workplace*, 3rd ed. (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2014); Michàlle E. Mor Barak and Dnika J. Travis, "Socioeconomic Trends: Broadening the Diversity Ecosystem," in *The Oxford Handbook of Diversity and Work*, ed. Quinetta M. Roberson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013): p. 393-417.
- 7 United Nations, *Vulnerable People: National, Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities*; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, *Indigenous Peoples: Cultural and Linguistic Diversity* (2017).
- 8 Suggestions include: [Ted Talks](#); Fortune's [RaceAhead](#) newsletter; NPR's [Code Switch](#); The Globe and Mail's [Colour Code](#); Race Forward's [#RaceAnd](#) video series; Procter & Gamble's videos "The Talk" and "The Look"; [The Whiteness Project](#); and [What Kind of Asian Are You?](#)
- 9 Jeanine Prime and Elizabeth R. Salib, *Inclusive Leadership: The View From Six Countries* (Catalyst, 2014).
- 10 Jean Kantambu Latting and V. Jean Ramsey, *Reframing Change: How to Deal with Workplace Dynamics, Influence Others, and Bring People Together to Initiate Positive Change* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2009).



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