Facilitating Conversations
About Racial Inequities in the Workplace

In light of recent national events that have brought stark racial inequities to the forefront of the conversation, organizations everywhere are navigating and facilitating unfamiliar discussions between leadership, employees and customers. When it comes to confronting the issue of racial inequity, employers must create purposeful dialogue, create safe spaces for employees to listen, learn, share and be informed leaders, educated and equipped to stand against injustices.

Use these discussion tips to navigate workplace discussions:

BE PROACTIVE:
Don't wait for your employees to bring it up or shy away from the conversation. Acting like things are business as usual, is not acceptable. As a leader, it's your job to start the conversation and facilitate more open dialogue and silence will be perceived as being complicit. Take a proactive approach and start the meeting off by addressing the current situation and show your willingness to listen and learn.

Example: "I want to take some time to acknowledge events that are happening in our communities and across the country before the meeting and discuss respectfully and authentically as a group."

ACKNOWLEDGE COMPANY TRACK RECORD:
Many organizations are taking a close look at their structure, leadership teams, hiring practices and more. Leaders must be upfront about the shortcomings and take responsibility. While you may not have all the answers, be transparent about your commitment to making the changes necessary.

HAVE A PURPOSE:
Have a clear purpose when addressing employees. State the purpose and goal of the discussion. If the conversation takes an unexpected direction, determine whether it should be redirected. Unfamiliar conversations are necessary for progress.

Example: "My purpose is to allow us to share our feelings in a safe space," or "My goal is to reaffirm the organization's position and let this group know how to identify and report racial inequalities in the workplace."

CREATE A SAFE SETTING:
Establish "ground rules" for the discussion and take the necessary precautions to ensure employees are comfortable and respectful. Employers should permit employees to express any dissatisfaction with the conversation privately with you.

Example: "Before we talk, I ask that we speak with empathy and are respectful to one another, since we may not all have the same experiences or see things the same way. It's also ok if you do not want to share."

DEMONSTRATE EMPATHY:
Understand that each employee's point of view may be different based on their own unique experiences. Empathy is conveyed in our non-verbal behavior, the questions we ask colleagues, and the statements we make. Asking respectful, open-ended questions can often help obtain information about a person's emotional reactions, providing a unique understanding of their experience when emotionally distressed. Individuals are much more likely to feel comfortable and supported in the workplace when they feel they are understood.

EMBRACE THE UNFAMILIAR:
Courageous conversations can only happen when a leader is willing to embrace the discomfort of not having all the answers. Employees will feel your empathy, active listening and presence as a leader.

ENCOURAGE ONGOING CONVERSATIONS:
Like any change initiative, the conversations and commitments must be ongoing and consistent to be effective and have a long-term impact. This is especially true regarding organizational culture, processes and norms.

How an organization responds during times of uncertainty and adversity will have a direct impact on employee satisfaction and define organizational culture. For more guidance, watch the on-demand advisory session, Action in Times of Crisis: Facilitated Discussion About Racial Inequalities.

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