

**DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION**

# Steps to Set the Space for Crucial Conversations

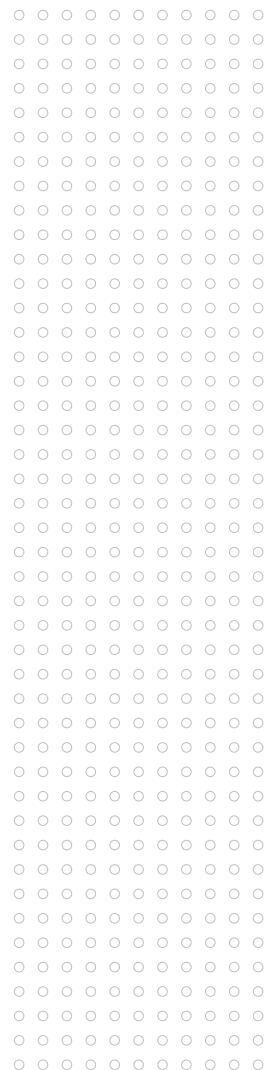
The current national (and global) unrest associated with racism and discrimination can provoke deep personal reactions. It is important to understand that the emotions people are feeling are not tucked neatly away the moment they walk into the workplace. Your people will continue to process what is taking place outside of the walls of work while starting the first task of the day. They likely have feelings about the current events and want to discuss them with colleagues at work, where they spend the majority of their day. For companies, this is an opportunity to demonstrate leadership in an organization, whether you have the answers now or not, and create an environment for these crucial conversations. However, it is important to be mindful that not everyone is comfortable leading discussions on these sensitive topics. Here are some preparation steps which may be helpful to take.

## IDENTIFY ENGAGEMENT

As you examine the climate for having these conversations, ask if it is your organization's place to have them. Are you ready for potential responses you may receive from employees, clients, or investors?

Establish how your organization will represent its level of engagement based on the current events. Is it more authentic for your organization to have leadership provide a large-scale forum to all employees, schedule small group sessions, or have one-on-one discussions? Perhaps you will use all of the above, but it is important to do what is best for your organization in an organic way that aligns with your goals and values.

Identify the purpose of your organization's engagement, and what do you want to accomplish through these conversations. Are you trying to create a safe space to generate a new level of communication between leadership and other levels of employees, or just allowing people to have a place to get something off their minds and fully express themselves? It may simply be an opportunity for employees to share their personal story, give encouragement to others, and talk about what comes next for them.



## ESTABLISH A COMMUNICATION PLAN

To meaningfully communicate to your workforce about having crucial conversations, you'll need to plan who, what and how. Employee advocate groups or informal influencers around the organization are excellent resources to provide context of the unique challenges specific groups of employees are experiencing, give suggestions on the approach to take, as well as specific topics that warrant discussion. Within the plan, also include leadership's expected outcomes and highlight how they align with the company's mission and values.

Be sure to provide guidance to leadership on how to effectively listen, ask respectful questions and not interject with their own stories or solutions. Leaders will likely appreciate having a few conversation starters or scenario examples to enable them to set an appropriate tone. Also let them know it is okay to not have "the perfect answer," because there is no perfect answer. Acknowledge that it may feel uncomfortable and awkward. This is not only expected, but serves as an excellent opportunity for a leader to role model vulnerability. In doing so, they are role modeling what others are feeling and are showing that it is okay to lean in to a conversation. Finally, provide an opportunity or mechanism for leaders to prepare and share a personal response to what they heard, what they learned and what they feel. This is the classic feedback loop, where employee insights and collective learning are used to create a greater understanding and a better workplace.

## PREPARE FOR THE TAKEAWAY

After all the listening, there will likely be an expectation for action. Collect the ideas or requests generated from the conversations, but also determine how they will be evaluated and what response will be shared with the company as a whole. Some of the ideas will be easier to implement such as providing a resource for employees to use when dealing with challenges with diversity or inclusion, or how to talk with children about what is occurring, or a continuing forum for people to connect on a monthly or quarterly basis. Others will be more challenging or will require clarification. At a minimum, it is important to acknowledge the ideas.

In conclusion, crucial conversations are one step in creating an inclusive environment, and effective crucial conversations require preparation. Once the environment is prepared to have these conversations, your organization can show its commitment to issues facing its people with well-executed discussions.

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