



Tips for Managers in the Workplace

(Adapted from Laura Morgan Roberts and Ella F. Washington, *Harvard Business Review*,
“[U.S. Businesses Must Take Meaningful Action against Racism](#)”)

Three Common Missteps to Avoid

1. Keeping silent.

For those who are not directly impacted by an event, it is often easier to ignore the situation and stay silent. Some white managers may feel that if they discuss race, they will be viewed as racist or prejudiced, so they adopt a “colorblind” approach, where they claim not to see color. By not discussing race, the hope is that racism will just go away by itself. Or, managers might not think they have the skills to navigate discussions about differences. Although it may be difficult to speak about traumatic events, managers have a responsibility to express care and concern for all of their employees, especially those in the affected group.

Two important quotes to consider:

“If you are neutral in the situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor.”
(Bishop Desmond Tutu)

“In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends.” (Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.)

2. Becoming defensive.

Conversations about racial injustice may be uncomfortable, so our first inclination is to become defensive, especially when we feel that our worldviews, positions, or advantages are challenged. For example, when hearing of police brutality against unarmed individuals, rather than responding with compassion and empathy, the first thought is what the person must have done to deserve such abuse. Or instead of focusing on the unjust acts that drove people to protest, attention is deflected to those who engage in looting (moral outrage over property damage rather than the people adversely affected).

3. Overgeneralizing.

Don’t assume that everyone within an identity group (such as race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity) has the same experiences. Identity groups are diverse and individuals should not be asked to be the spokesperson or representative of their entire identity group.

Three Ways to Take Meaningful Action

Although an organization may have issued a statement about a traumatic event, managers hold a special place in engaging directly with their employees about these issues.

1. Acknowledge

It's important to acknowledge the harm that your Black employees have experienced. Commit to lifelong learning about racism and understanding the aggressions and microaggressions that your employees have faced inside and outside of your organization.

Some suggested steps are (from: <https://hbr.org/2020/06/u-s-businesses-must-take-meaningful-action-against-racism>)

- a. Do the research to fully understand events, using data from reliable sources.
- b. Do give your Black employees the space to be angry, afraid, disenchanted, or even disengaged from work.
- c. Do seek out support from your human resources team or office of diversity, inclusion and health equity. Books and articles can also be good resources.
- d. Do not ask Black employees to educate you about what happened in order to justify their hurt and outrage or to help you counter “colorblind” rhetoric.
- e. Do not ask your Black leaders or employees to be sources of comfort, or advocates for colleagues and justice initiatives. Realize that they may also be processing the events and may need time and space to grieve.

2. Affirm

Creating a safe space for your employees to share their experiences is one of the first steps of affirmation. Rather than just asking, “How are you today?” consider saying something like this:

- “I’ve been thinking about the harm of racism in our country, especially considering recent events.”
- Next, describe your personal reaction and concerns, then make a commitment.
- “I’d like to help in promoting equity, so here’s one thing I plan to do to help prevent future tragedies like these.”
- Explain those intentions.
- Then, offer to engage.
- “Please let me know if there’s anything else I can do to be supportive, even if you just want to talk about what’s happening. I understand if you don’t, and I won’t be offended. But I just want you to know that the door is open, and that I care.”

3. Act

What are you going to do to commit to promoting equity, justice, and anti-racism? Learn more here in the “[10 Steps to Non-Optical Allyship.](#)”