

Leading with empathy:

How to hold workplace conversations through stress and trauma



In many workplaces, leaving your personal life behind remains a core expectation of professionalism. The absurdity of this expectation is perfectly expressed by Shenequa Golding in her recent article "Maintaining Professionalism in the Age of Black Death...is a lot." Golding states, "I just witnessed the lynching of a black man, but don't worry Ted, I'll have those deliverables to you end of day."

The stress and trauma experienced by employees are a part of their "whole self" alongside their social identities, skillsets, and personality traits. Following the murder of George Floyd and nationwide protests, many organizations are considering office-wide discussions to acknowledge and support staff as they process emotions. Others hesitate to hold these conversations out of fear. With these conversations, there's always the possibility of conflict or discomfort. However, it is an even bigger risk to go about businesses as usual and pretend that staff are automatons. **If your organization is planning a company-wide conversation, here are some things to consider:**

Examine the intentions behind having this conversation

First, spend some time thinking about the intentions behind your desire to hold this conversation. Why does your organization want to hold this conversation? Are you reacting to an incident within your organization? Are you responding to requests for dialogue by staff? Is this part of your existing DE&I strategy?



Develop a format appropriate for the size, structure, and culture of your organization

While open forums sound simple, larger organizations will likely find them hard to implement and employees who do not get an opportunity to speak may leave feeling frustrated. Typically, more structure, rather than less, is going to lead to better results, especially if your organization does not have a shared foundation for challenging conversations.

- If the goal is to give staff a place to express feelings, this cannot happen effectively for a staff of 40 during a one-hour meeting. In fact, it may do more harm than good to staff most impacted by the subject matter.
- Encourage staff not to schedule work meetings directly following this conversation to allow time for staff to process and gather themselves.
- Consider working with your meeting group to set community agreements at the beginning of the discussion. Think of these agreements as guidelines for "how we would like to be together."

Be explicit about your purpose

Ensure, as a convener, that everyone knows the purpose of the conversation. It's important to connect this conversation directly to your organizational values and/or DE&I strategy.

eliminating racism
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Through our DE&I services—InclusionBoston and LeadBoston—as well as our advocacy work and youth programming, we help individuals and organizations change policies, practices, attitudes, and behaviors with a goal of creating more inclusive environments where women, people of color, and especially women of color can succeed. As part of that work, YW Boston is providing organizations with digital workshops and resources to help them better understand the challenges faced by their employees.

Visit www.ywboston.org to learn more about our DE&I services and to find additional resources.

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Develop a format that aligns with your organizational culture

If staff are used to speaking informally and across levels, structure this conversation similarly. If you have a top/down culture, leadership should initiate and/or lead the conversation. Senior leaders can be powerful models by being authentic and, where appropriate, vulnerable. If staff are invited to “ask anything,” be prepared to answer honestly, including when an answer isn’t readily available.

Be mindful of who you ask to organize and facilitate

Consider your organizational assets. Is there staff with facilitation experience? Can you engage your DE&I leaders? That said, be considerate and intentional with your requests. Too often, staff most impacted by an event are the ones asked to initiate discussions and educate their colleagues. Examples include asking Asian employees to lead a conversation about COVID-19 bias and asking Black employees to lead a discussion about police brutality.

Consider setting some context and shared understanding

We all perceive the world through the lens of our identities and lived experiences. It can be helpful to provide participants pre-reading or shared glossary.

This is a common practice during YW Boston program facilitation. For instance, we’ve recently developed a digital resource about the history of social violence leading up to recent events of racism and police brutality. That way, we can discuss and understand that the death of George Floyd and subsequent protests are not happening in a vacuum.

Such context will also support organizations in identifying systemic changes they can make.



What happens next? After the conversation, express gratitude for the employee’s willingness to participate and engage. Be prepared for the conversation to spark both positive and constructive feedback. By definition, challenging conversations can be messy and lack closure. It’s imperative to be open to opportunities that emerge, whether for further discussion, for organizational change, or both.

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