

Some Do's and Don'ts for White People Who Want to Discuss Racism at Work

This should be required reading for all workplace 'allies'



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As many of us prepare to go back to work, physically or remotely (and for those who already have), the day may already be feeling incredibly exhausting and traumatizing before it has even really begun.

For Black people, we can turn off social media for a few days, but we often can't turn off work. We are preparing to be re-burdened at work in an unnecessary way. And for White people and people of color, the need to say something is real. But it's important that it is approached in a way that isn't burdensome, traumatizing, or re-triggering.

I wanted to share a quick guide of do's and don'ts and ideas on how to approach every day at work during this time. As a reminder before you read:

I do not speak for all Black people. I am speaking from personal reflection and observation. Please continue to invest and support those who have been carrying the burden of this work on their shoulders. And yes, entrepreneurs, coaches, fitness leaders: These same tips are applicable for you, too.

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DO: Be mindful of opening up meetings and interactions with questions like "How are you?" or "How was your weekend?"

Recognize that by doing so, you can potentially be re-triggering what your Black colleagues are experiencing or dismissing their experience by pretending all is normal. It's not and hasn't been for a long time.

DO: Acknowledge what is happening and share your empathy.

This is an important one because to fail to acknowledge what is happening

sends a message that it does not matter nor do Black people's emotions matter. There are too many organizations that are not planning to say anything. Do not let that be yours.

DO: Ask Black colleagues if they would like to make space to discuss first before making space.

In organization-wide meetings, team meetings, and even individual conversations, once you've acknowledged what's happening, don't just leap into a discussion. It is important that you ask Black people (not White people) if they would like further discussion space, as not everyone is comfortable, ready, or simply willing to discuss at work. Plus, think of it this way: If you are a Black person who has eight meetings in a day and every meeting automatically opens with discussion, think about how exhausting and burdensome that can be.

Top highlight

It is critical to begin including Black voices and perspectives and truly listening, not debating.

If Black colleagues say yes to wanting to make space, here's a quick list of do's and don'ts for the discussion (mainly don'ts):

Do listen.

Don't keep saying I'm sorry and putting the burden on Black colleagues to respond.

Don't ask to be educated on racism, why something is, or their opinion on X that is happening. In fact, don't ask to be educated at all.

Don't take up space with how you are now "burdened" or "feel helpless." It is not your time.

Don't ask if you have done anything racist or take space attempting to determine whether or not you are one of the "good ones."

Don't force us to share if we don't want to. Not every Black person speaks for every other Black person. Some may want to share and others may not. Don't force them to or look for them to do so.

If you are sending an internal or external response out, DO ask Black colleagues in your organization if they would be willing to engage in what is shared.

I want to name this as it is critical to begin including Black voices and perspectives in these conversations from the very beginning and truly listening, not debating, about what a response should look like.

Be prepared if Black colleagues decline if they are feeling burdened. They are not required to be or become your token voice. And don't be surprised if and when Black colleagues respond to your public statement with a question of "what's next?" Because you should be able to answer it.

For my fellow Black leaders and colleagues, don't take on more burden than you can carry.

Bonus do's and don'ts for people of color leaders and colleagues:

DO remember that sharing acknowledgment and empathy is critical.

DON'T equate your experience to the Black American experience. Acknowledgment is also acknowledging that it is different.

DON'T become the "Black voice" for your team if you work in an organization where there are no Black colleagues or leaders.

And for my fellow Black leaders and colleagues:

DO remember self-care first in these moments.

DO take all of the space or none of the space that you need.

DON'T feel pressured to speak.

DON'T feel pressured to carry the Black voice at work.


DON'T take on more burden than you can carry.

Sending love and support to those carrying the burden.

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