Effective Conversations in the Midst of Racial Unrest: Tips for In-house Counsel

Cultural Competence

Cheat Sheet:

- Organizations must encourage and foster authentic conversations, even if difficult, on issues like racial strife and unrest.
- A sense of belonging is critical to an organization's culture of inclusiveness.

One of the biggest challenges in fostering inclusiveness is confusion and anxiety about what is okay to say, what to avoid, and why people think and feel as they do. Overcoming the discomfort, however, can evolve both sides toward understanding even if they don't always agree.

This overview and selection of tips is based on the ACC Webcast "Effective Difficult Conversations in the Midst of Racial Strife and Unrest, " by Kori Carew, chief inclusion & diversity officer, Seyfarth Shaw LLP; Laura Maechtlen, partner, chair of Labor & Employment, Executive Committee, Seyfarth Shaw LLP; and Marianela Peralta, general counsel & corporate secretary, Allegis Global Solutions.

Authentic communication works

People can verbally communicate what they're thinking and feeling to effect change — or they can act it out.

Belonging is the cornerstone of an inclusive culture. A feeling of belongingness makes team members feel like they are part of a tribe, contributing to something bigger. A sense of belonging allows people to come to work "as you are."

A strong sense of belonging leads to higher productivity, creativity, and engagement.

Authenticity is another important aspect of an inclusive culture and is directly linked to a sense of belonging. Authentic leaders affect others more significantly than those not felt to be authentic.

Leaders, regardless of race, need to be part of all difficult conversations. Authenticity plays a large

part. For example, leaders should be comfortable saying, “I was not aware of … . ”

Learn about the ACC Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Maturity Model —it can help with your company's program.

Create and share guidelines

Establish and communicate guidelines for the discussion. Everyone is at a different stage in their journey, and you will need to meet them where they are. It is critical that these guidelines are widely communicated:

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Acknowledge the reality and lived experiences of others. It is important to be specific and address the current issue. Avoid generalities in support of diversity.

Leaders should model how to conduct these conversations and be at the forefront.

Offering education and awareness is critical.

Offer resources and toolkits. Organizations can create a resource library or collection.

Engage skilled facilitators for discussions.

Encourage and offer ongoing experiential learning like museum or other site visits.

Maintain a responsive plan, be ready for the next situation. These difficult conversations must be on-going and consistent.

Set the right stage

- In-person conversations are always preferable, but when unavailable, technology has made virtual meetings effective.
- Smaller group discussions are important and more manageable. However, large groups, like townhalls, can also play a critical role.
- Be mindful of recorded conversations as they tend to negatively impact authenticity.
- Organizations must be mindful of when to leverage internal or external speakers. Sometimes the organization needs to hear from its leaders!

Get more information about diversity, equity, and inclusion in the ACC Resource Library.

Connect with colleagues. Check out membership today!

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