

## Difficult Conversations: Racial & Ethnic Diversity

*Race remains one of the most difficult topics to discuss in the workplace. But the need to have candid, respectful dialogue with colleagues on the topic has never been more crucial. Tensions have heightened over the past few years, in part fueled by national events and media coverage. We recognize each person may perceive and react to these and other situations differently, depending on their backgrounds, experiences and understanding. This is why open dialogue is critical to helping our people understand and support each other. When individuals reach out to each other and engage around challenges, whether professional or personal, it helps everyone know they are valued as an individual in the organization, and this inclusion supports them being fully-focused on the mission.*

**OBJECTIVE:** Instill confidence among Airmen and Space Professionals in the Department of the Air Force leadership's support of a diverse and inclusive workforce. This guidance should help facilitate discussion about race and other difficult topics.

### TALKING POINTS – Why These Conversations Matter

- Department of the Air Force leaders and commanders are charged with the physiological, safety and belonging needs of their people. A leader's premiere task is the development of the character and emotional well-being of their Airmen and Space professionals.
- Leaders should always encourage honest and respectful reflection, internally and externally, fostering a culture of inclusion and understanding.
- Individuals contribute their highest levels of creativity when they are cared for and feel a sense of belonging. A leader must be able to sense and understand the viewpoints of those around them.
- In an environment where our people feel truly safe and genuinely belong as a valued member of their organization, they will be inspired to innovate. They take more responsibility and work harder. They have the courage to come forward when they know something isn't right.
- Open mindedness overcomes any artificial barriers to innovation and embodies the culture we aspire to promote.
- It's okay to be open and acknowledge how these conversations make you feel. If done correctly, with respect and civility, these conversations can build empathy and trust, strengthening your units.
- The idea behind these conversations is to help Airmen and Space Professionals develop *empathy* for other viewpoints by actively listening to understand from another's perspective, getting clarification where there is confusion or misunderstanding, and discovering points of connection with those who think or believe differently about an important issue.
- Empathy means thoughtfully considering feelings – along with other factors – in the process of making decisions.

### TIPS FOR FACILITATING SMALL GROUP CONVERSATIONS

#### BUILD SELF AWARENESS – Assess Your Comfort Level

Many leaders avoid talking about race and racism. It's uncomfortable, may lead to conflict, and calls for skills few of us practice regularly. Often, this avoidance comes down to a fear of misspeaking, sounding racially insensitive or unintentionally impacting someone in a harmful manner. Preparing our people to talk about race and racism requires us to first deal with our own fears. Leaders must have a deep understanding of their emotional perspectives, biases, strengths, weaknesses, needs and drives – they must be honest and authentic with themselves and others. Before initiating a workspace discussion, do a simple self-assessment.

Consider the following statements and select the one that best describes how you feel.

*I would rather not talk about race/racism.*

*I am sometimes uncomfortable talking about race/racism.*

*I am very uncomfortable talking about race/racism.*

*I am usually comfortable talking about race/racism.*

*I am usually uncomfortable talking about race/racism.*

*I am very comfortable talking about race/racism.*

Then use a sentence-stem activity to self-reflect. *Why do I feel this way about discussing race/racism?*

*The hard part of talking about race/racism is...      The beneficial part of talking about race/racism is ...*

#### PLAN AHEAD – Develop a Safe and Courageous Space

Planning ahead and establishing a safe and courageous environment within your workplace should minimize discomfort. It's important to note, however, that for some Airmen and Space Professionals—particularly members of marginalized, non-majority or targeted identity groups—you may not be able to provide complete safety. Once a safe and courageous environment is established for your people, openness to participate in authentic, genuine and respectful conversations can help to create a space of vulnerability where others will be more willing to take on these difficult conversations.

### **MODERATING THE DISCUSSION – Ask the Tough Questions**

To facilitate difficult conversations with your people, equip them with strategies they can use to persevere during difficult conversations.

#### **Questions and prompts:**

- What's interesting or helpful about this view?
- What are some intriguing features that others might not have noticed?
- What would be different if you believed this view, if you accepted it as true?
- What are you curious to know more about? And why?
- What has stopped you from engaging in conversations about race?
- Think about a time you've been part of an effective team... what made you all effective? Did you feel included? Why?
- How do you think your own background, experiences, etc. impact the way you interpret certain events?

### **STRATEGY ONE: REITERATE•PAUSE AND CONTEMPLATE• COMMUNICATE**

Explain these steps as a way to communicate while experiencing complex emotions. These steps won't prevent or change the emotions people may feel, but they can help them and you self-regulate.

**Step 1: Reiterate.** Restate what you heard. This step enables individuals to reflect on what they have heard as opposed to what they think they may have heard. Repeating what they have heard limits miscommunication and misinformation.

**Step 2: Pause and Contemplate.** Count to 10 before responding. People can think about their responses and use the time to compose what they want to say. Taking time to think about their responses helps move individuals away from immediate emotional responses that can potentially derail the conversation. Also, take a breath to check in with yourself. Suggesting individuals take a few breaths before responding may help them settle their thoughts and emotions during difficult conversations.

**Step 3: Communicate.** Speak with compassion and thoughtfulness. Individuals should do their best to speak as they want to be spoken to, assuming good intentions and seeking understanding. Explain that when they disagree with something someone has said, they should focus on challenging the statement rather than the person who said it.

### **STRATEGY TWO: CHECK IN WITH AIRMEN AND SPACE PROFESSIONALS DURING AND AFTER THE SESSION**

Stay on top of the emotional temperature in the room and check in with your people during and after the session about how they feel. This will let you know when to take a break and address strong emotions.

### **CLOSING – Thank Everyone for the Feedback**

Provide members the opportunity to come to you with concerns later, one-on-one. Furthermore, provide them with resources to reach out to if needed – first sergeants, chaplains, lawyers, equal opportunity, etc.