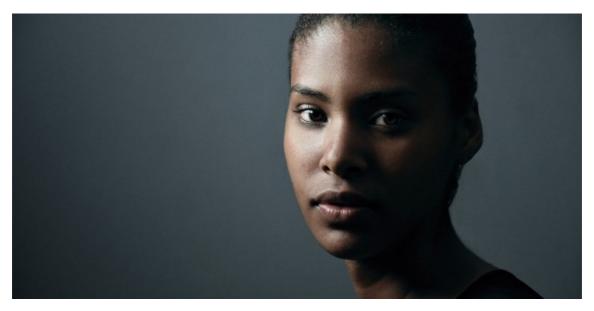# How firms can encourage courageous conversations about racism in the workplace

When [black women were asked](#) where they are most likely to experience racism the top answer was work.

No company or country can say that they do not have a problem with racism. Organisations must tackle discrimination in the workplace, rooting out systemic racism, and accelerate gender and racial equity.

The global outpouring since the terrible murder of George Floyd has laid bare the discrimination and economic and social injustice, and the lived reality that people of colour face every day. Women of colour were [paid less than white women](#) before the pandemic, and Covid-19 has only accelerated inequality with women of colour paying a devastating price, economically and socially. They are more likely to be front-line [essential workers](#) and have [suffered heavy job losses,](#) often earning low wages and facing health risks to themselves and their families.

Catalyst research has also found an additional burden, an ['emotional tax'](#) that women of colour face in the workplace. Women from non-dominant ethnically and racially diverse groups may feel different from their work peers and this has consequences for their overall health, well-being and ability to advance. They often feel their contributions are undervalued and feel the need to stay 'on guard' for acts of possible bias or discrimination. Emotional tax can also impact women's sense of value and their confidence, as well as contributing to retention problems within businesses. The more 'on guard' an individual feels the more likely they are to contemplate leaving their job.

Despite this emotional tax, people of colour want to succeed and contribute:

- [86% of those highly on guard](#) aspire to leadership positions at work
- [90% of those highly on guard](#) aspire to being influential leaders or altruistic in contributing to communities

Companies need to recognise and value employee's multiple identities — race, ethnicity, gender, immigrant status, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, all those different aspects and cultural backgrounds that impact people's experiences on a day-to-day basis, as well as the systems of power that oppress and advantage certain sections of people in the workplace and broader community.

To show support for underrepresented communities, organisations can create a safe space for [conversations across race](#) to take place. Individuals must feel that their differences are recognised and valued and that this is embedded in the fabric of an organisation.

Roadblocks that can stifle our ability to talk about our differences include fear, resistance, emotional fatigue, lack of knowledge, or a perceived inability to make a difference. We found three major barriers to these conversations:

"There isn't a problem" (the myth of meritocracy)

- "Gender differences don't matter, we view men and women equally" (not true there are systemic issues and this intersects with race/ethnicity)
- "We don't see colour – only people"
- "Race and ethnicity are not relevant in certain places" (colourism, religious discrimination all feed into different ways)

"There's no benefit to talking"

- "Talking about our differences can only further divide us"
- "Talking won't solve anything"

"There will be negative consequences to my actions"

- "People think I'm overly sensitive, and I feel that my experiences are minimised"
- "I will say something inappropriate – or worse, be viewed as racist or sexist"
- "It's not safe to speak up" – main category we see

We know that fear plays an enormous part. There is a fear of damaging relationships for saying the wrong thing and a fear of the 'how to', how do you bring up the topic of race and ethnicity without making mistakes? Conversations of gender, race and ethnicity are uncomfortable and it is only natural that we might feel fear. But these conversations should not be considered off-limits because of this. People can learn that despite the fear, you can still have conversations.

A model that can help organisations have an impact and create a more inclusive environment is:

- **Talk to me** – People want to have open dialogue and the opportunity to talk, not necessarily about themselves, but to know there's an opportunity to have open discussions about the unique experiences people face; share challenges and for leaders to share mistakes and allow group learning;
- **Trust me** – Trust me to do my work, give me autonomy to do my work where and when works best for me;
- **Stand by me** – When issues occur, back me up, give me air cover;
- **Equip me** – Enable me to do my job to the best of my ability.

Creating a safe space for conversations to take place is essential. Assume positive intent, engage in dialogue, not debate, listen to another point of view and hold yourself and others accountable for demonstrating cultural humility. Be open, transparent, and willing to admit mistakes.

Our research found that leaders who invite genuine and open dialogue with people of colour can have a profound impact on their experiences of inclusion.

Not talking about our identities ignores what makes us unique. We need to understand that we all have multiple identities and having challenging conversations within organisations allows us to understand each other's experiences and perspectives.

We must understand that this is not just about one single act of discrimination or bias – It is about a long history of cultural subjugation that has systematically advantaged one group over others. We all have a responsibility to make a better future and to counter the racism, bias, and unfair treatment that cause us to have very different experiences and opportunities.

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Notes:

- *This blog post expresses the views of its author(s), not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.*

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Rikia Birindelli-Fayne is a director in Catalyst's Europe office. She works with leading global organisations as a relationship manager to create more diverse, inclusive, and flexible workplaces. Furthermore, she is a frequent facilitator and speaker on a range of topics including taking charge of your career, engaging men, mentoring and sponsorship, employee resource groups, unconscious bias, and inclusive leadership.