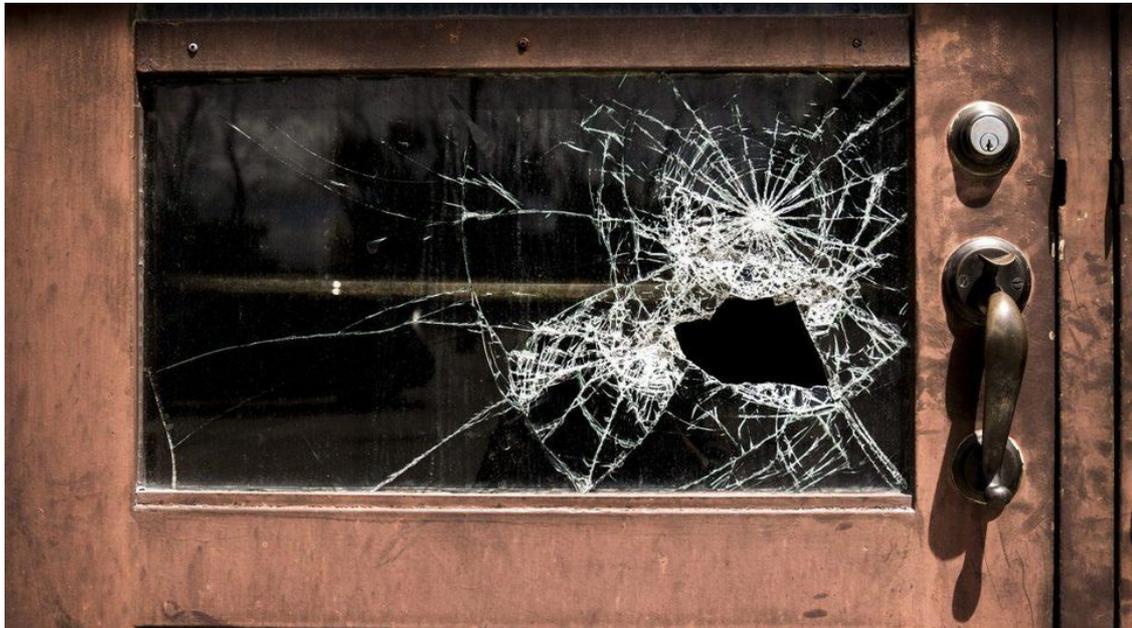


Speaking Up Against Discrimination And Racism In The Workplace



How will you speak up when faced with racism and discrimination?

Is there a "right way" to respond to discrimination, racism and racist comments in the office? As a leader, you have to consider carefully the impact of racism within your organization. Imagine if you worked for Virginia Governor Ralph Northam—the leader who recently referred to African slaves as "[indentured servants](#)," in a CBS interview with Gayle King.

Calls for the governor's resignation are rampant, as of this writing, while Northam [remains defiant](#) in his denials ("This isn't me," referring to an alleged image of a younger Northam in blackface, standing next to someone in a Ku Klux Klan hood). Furthering his "defense", Northam explained why he didn't wear a lot of [shoe polish](#) (his costume of choice for an '80s-era dance contest where he dressed as Michael Jackson): "it's really hard to get off." So is the stain of racism.

As a leader, you may have already faced racism and discrimination in your organization, or in your life. Whether you encounter anti-semitism, unwanted sexual advances, or misunderstandings about LGBTQ lifestyles, marginalizing others is poison for your company. How you communicate around discrimination will define your impact as a leader...and as a human being.

Here are four ways you can speak up against racism, and discrimination, in the workplace.

1. Not Welcome Here: As a leader, you set the tone for your team. Do you have a clearly stated zero tolerance policy against racism, sexual misconduct and discrimination? As the saying goes, *"What you allow is what will continue."* Marginalizing others is easy, in this day and age - teamwork only comes with clear guidance from the top. Does everyone know where you stand, and why? The great coach of the Green Bay Packers, Vince Lombardi, famously kept racism out of the locker room — as he led the Packers to world championships during 1960s. He refused to frequent restaurants and hotels that treated anyone differently due to their skin color. Lombardi, the namesake of the Super Bowl Trophy, coached the first openly gay player in the NFL, [David Kopay](#) (he came out after his NFL career had ended). Beyond Lombardi's moral motivations, we know that he wanted to win—so he fostered the environment that created greater teamwork, support and productivity. Do you?

2. "Do No Harm": What happens when someone pops off with a remark that is out of line, at a company function, meeting or event? How will you respond when the actions of the group (or an individual) are racist, sexist or hurtful? Consider the harm that starts with silence. When faced with inappropriate behavior, the time for action is immediate: don't let inaction condone discrimination. As a leader, it's your job to watch out for your organization. Tolerating intolerance lets the cancer spread. How quickly will you speak up, when you see behavior that is tearing people down—and destroying your team?

3. Free Speech Doesn't Mean Free Reign: As a leader, when talking to someone about recent racist comments, sexist remarks or unwanted sexual advances, a private leadership conversation is needed. In a private forum, there is a method for expressing yourself in a way that is not intended to incite conflict. Begin in the first person: "When I heard

what you said..." or "When I saw what you did..." and explain what it meant to you in a way that's calm and even-handed. Discrimination is a difficult topic, but don't duck. There are things that need to be said. And done. Depending on the circumstances, and your role, don't go it alone. Consider who could (and should) join you for this dialogue. The conversation must be a dispassionate retelling of the facts, followed by a first-person discussion of the impact. The conversation isn't a debate, but an understanding that actions have consequences. Were you hurt? Disappointed? Share your feelings, and (if you can) the feelings of the team. A look at the impact of divisiveness—and ask for others to do the same. Ask for greater understanding around collaboration: because we are all better when we work together, without fear of harassment.

4. The Conversation You Need: confronting racism can be a difficult dialogue, ripe with opportunity for disagreement. That's why it's important to shut the door. Consider carefully the *scope* of your conversation. Do you wish to convert or change the thinking of a racially insensitive person? That's a tall order. A more realistic goal: *reaching understanding* and *encouraging new behavior*. Understanding how words (and actions) can do harm—even unintentionally—can shed a non-confrontational light on unwanted actions. Maybe you can't change minds, but you can close lips. And curb behavior. If harmful intentions are evident, the conversation needs to include HR or executive leadership. Beyond the moral implications of racism, racist remarks foster a hostile and offensive work environment. Be prepared to take disciplinary action. Align behavior to your expectations with a conversation that invites appropriate actions—or an appropriate departure, if needed. As a leader, you must share that offensive remarks are counter-productive...or even dangerous. And take swift action when others feel otherwise.

I can't erase history. But I can be a voice for tolerance, teamwork and collaboration -- one conversation at a time. How about you?

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