

# Guidelines for Facilitator Response to Tough Questions and Comments



Discussions about race, diversity and social justice deal with complex issues and often invoke passion and emotion. The following tips can help you respond to challenging questions that may arise, and keep the conversation positive and productive.



**Pause**



**Listen**



**Ask**



**Consider**



**Engage**

- » Start by clarifying the question or concern raised by the participant. For example, ask: “What do you mean?”
- » Listen actively and acknowledge their perspective.
- » When you are uncertain about how to respond, it is OK to not answer or to say you don’t know. Put something in the “parking lot” and commit to finding more information to share following the session.
- » It may be prudent to acknowledge that the understanding of race, diversity and inclusion is evolving, under further consideration and study.
- » Offering current or historical context can be helpful. Also offering an alternative perspective to answer a question or respond to a comment can be worthwhile.
- » Work to help participants understand others’ perspectives and experiences when possible. Our interpretation and understanding of events vary based on our experiences. A great way to do this is asking if anyone else in the room has had a different experience.
- » Our approach should not be influenced by the race, gender or other salient identities of the person making the comment or asking the question.
- » The goal in all discussions is to remain not only honest but factual. Accordingly, being able to reference sources and other resources helps to substantiate the response you are providing. It also allows people to corroborate the answers on their own.

Think of RISE, the NCAA office of inclusion and other educational organizations as a resource to assist you in addressing these questions.

It is impossible to know everything about all social issues. There is value in being able to put something in a “parking lot” and allowing participants and yourself to seek answers elsewhere.



***“I don’t see anything wrong with blackface, it’s just a tribute. Growing up, lots of white people painted their faces to dress like Tiger Woods for Halloween.”***

- » Explain the history and context of blackface and why reducing someone to just their race or skin color is harmful.
- » Explain the perspective of nonwhite people and explain why they might be hurt, offended or disrespected.
- » It is important not to reduce a person to their race, but also not ignore race. We can acknowledge context/history and inequities within our institutions/systems [without blackface].
- » Ask questions that allow the person to consider different perspectives. Examples include:
  - o Do you see Tiger Woods as a golfer, businessman or Black man first?
  - o Does Tiger look like other golfers? Other billionaires?
  - o Is him being Black so important it needs to be emphasized more than something else?
  - o Why did you have to change your race via blackface or other makeup?

***“My family has always been passionate about civil rights and proud of our Norwegian heritage, but sometimes I feel guilty for being proud and I wonder: Is it OK to be proud to be white?”***

- » Ask: Why do you ask? What are you specifically asking about? What are your concerns?
- » Explain that everyone should be proud of who they are.
- » Have the person asking the question reflect on how nonwhite people might interpret their expression of pride in their whiteness and why.
- » Make the distinction between being proud of one’s racial or ethnic identity and white pride.
- » Make clear that historically, whiteness has been used to justify the enslavement, oppression and exclusion of people of color. Mention that many groups considered white today (e.g., Irish, Germans) were viewed as nonwhite.



## **Challenges, Questions and Sample Responses**

***“Black people are just built differently.”  
(reference to body type, athleticism)***

- » Start with a clarification by asking for more information: What do you mean? Why is that the case? Why do you believe this to be true?
- » Address that the statement is a stereotype, whether positive or negative. Share that stereotypes, by definition, don’t apply to everyone.
- » Communicate the fact that there is no scientific basis for race ([www.genome.gov](http://www.genome.gov)).
- » Bring awareness to the potential adverse effects of reinforcing this stereotype, such as the fact that Black people can “make it,” or be successful, in sport more than they can in other performance domains or professions.

***“An ESPN headline referred to Jeremy Lin of the Knicks, a Taiwanese American, as ‘a chink in the armor,’ using a traditional slur directed at people of Asian heritage.”***

- » Explain that the use of racial slurs in any context by anyone is problematic, even if they are being used in a manner that might be considered humorous or playful.
- » Explain that Lin is already being targeted as an ethnic minority playing basketball, and given ESPN’s prominence in sport, it should be more sensitive to the use of racial slurs.
- » Share that there was also no need for the humor in this situation since the article already was critical of Lin’s play. The racial slur adds to that by being disrespectful.
- » Ask how ESPN could have conveyed the message it wanted to get across without being disrespectful.