

Guidelines for Facilitator Response to Tough Questions & Comments

Discussions about race, diversity and social justice deal with controversial issues and often invoke passion and emotion. To ensure that facilitators are prepared to respond to tough and challenging questions that may arise, RISE has prepared the following tips that can help keep the conversation positive and productive:



Pause

Listen

Ask

Consider:
Context &
Concepts



Engage other
perspectives



- 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 ever 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 remain consistent regardless of the race, gender or other demographic qualities 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 and other qualified 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.



Challenges, Questions, and Sample Responses

Example One

Comment: 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.

Response(s):

- Explain history and context of blackface and why reducing someone to just their race or skin color is harmful
- Explain perspective of non-white people, why they might be hurt, offended, or disrespected.
- Ask questions that allow the person to consider different perspectives. Examples include:
 - What is it about Jay-Z that stands out?
 - Why would you want to emulate or dress as him?
 - Is him being black so important it needs to be emphasized more than something else?
 - Why did you have to change your race via blackface or other makeup?
- Following this conversation, continue to explain that unlike Jay-Z, Tiger Woods' blackness is important given that golf is a traditionally white sport. 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].

Example Two

Comment: Black people are just built different (reference to body type, athleticism).

Response(s):

- 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, 100% of cases.
- Lead to the point that, for example, all black people aren't angry.
- Communicate the fact that there is no scientific basis for race (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.



Example Three

Question: 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?

Response(s):

- Ask: Why do you ask? What are you specifically asking about? What are our concerns?
- Explain everyone should be proud of who they are.
- Have the person asking the question how non-white 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 non-white.

Example Four

Comment: Caroline Wozniacki imitation of Serena Williams by stuffing towels in her top and bottom during an exhibition match.

Comment: I don't see why Caroline's parody is seen as sexist and racist. She was a just joking and other men's player, like Roddick and Djokovic, do it all the time.

Response(s):

- Ask: I am not sure I understand the joke. Could you explain what is funny about the situation?
- Are there athletes, or fans, who might not think the incident was funny, but find it hurtful? Who do you think might be offended and why?
- Invite the person to see how the sport context (tennis as traditionally, predominantly white) is important to consider because of the lack of voice/representation that athletes of color have.
- Emphasize that women of color may experience unique forms of discrimination given their sex (female) and race (black), which may challenge what is acceptably "feminine" for women athletes- especially in a majority white sport.