

# Respect, Reflect, and Resign

## 1. Approach the conversation with respect.

It is vital to approach the topic of race with respect. Respect for its weightiness and nuance. Respect for centuries of pain and oppression. Respect for multiple perspectives and narratives: those that have been lifted up and those that have been pushed to the background. Respect for the person(s) you are engaging with. Race, racism, and the racial inequity it breeds are topics of discussion that can polarize a space very quickly. **Coming from a respectful place** that is open and willing to listen and learn goes a long way to **diffuse potential discord before it arises**, and **preserve space for meaningful dialogue**.

## 2. Put aside your preconceptions.

This doesn't mean personal experiences aren't valid -- it simply acknowledges that personal experience can't possibly give the complete view of such complex issues. The history of racism extends far beyond individuals; it encompasses years and years of both individual and community experience. It is important to **recognize and acknowledge the validity and reality of other experiences**. By doing so, we can hope to have conversations that are open and willing to listen and learn.

Chris Russell, a product manager in San Francisco, provides a valuable insight here: "The fight for equality and equity requires an understanding of why systems (some seemingly arbitrary and antiquated) were initially established and whether there's a need for them to be modified or removed... You'd only be able to make a connection like that with a sensitivity toward and an understanding of pain and history."

## 3. Examine your motivation.

When having a conversation about race, it is important to be aware of why you want to have the conversation in the first place. Bayard Love of [The International Civil Rights Center and Museum](#) asks, "Why are you engaging in this conversation about race? If it's just curiosity, a pet project, a desire to 'fit in' or not look silly, or to feel less guilty, you might want to reconsider. **If you are ready to be part of change, and you want to understand racism better so that you can be a part of that change, then come on!**"

Recent events were not solely based on a single event of racism and injustice; they acted as a tipping point for the long history of systematic oppression and inequality. It is important to recognize and understand the connections between events, ideas, and movements. Yodit Kifle, Corporate Citizenship Specialist at Johnson & Johnson, also brings an interesting perspective: "It's easy to feel disconnected from this history when you feel as though it has no direct tie to your reality. It's interesting that even for me – as an Ethiopian – there was a time when I didn't truly connect with this history of slavery and racism. I've realized that, at the end of the day, **a love for humanity means a respect and honor for all pain and a oneness of purpose toward dismantling ignorance and pursuing justice**. The moment you are here in the U.S., your reality is connected to a racial construct."

## 4. Embrace the discomfort of not knowing.

On our way to new knowledge, we have to resign from a place of comfort and embrace the discomfort of not having all the answers. **We don't know what we don't know**. As we acknowledge this, it is important to understand that a willingness to be educated and informed is what will help us grow. This is true in life and especially true when it comes to race. Software engineer Noah Kaplan says: "Recognize that you don't have all the sides to a story or know everything. Be comfortable with the feeling of not understanding or knowing enough yet. Be comfortable changing your mind. Don't

let it hold you back -- let it push you to learn more." It is not enough to recognize and remain complacent in this state of unknowing; allow this to be a catalyst for an active effort to become informed.

## Research and Relearn

### 5. Find out what you don't know.

Developing a strong understanding of race requires a **combination of individual and group learning**. We can all accomplish a lot on our own through offline and online resources. Articles, white papers, books, academic studies, webinars, and video series are out there just waiting to be discovered (we've put together a short resource list at the end of this article). There are [workshops](#), conferences, meetups, and casual conversations with friends and colleagues. Those conversations can be tough, but there's no growth without stretching, as Chris points out: "The best conversations and comprehension can arise from holding past learning up to new ideas or new knowledge."

My colleague, Paula Luu, agrees: "I think we need to have water cooler conversations, and it's okay for us to have those conversations whenever and with whomever. **But if we only have those types of conversations, we're only learning about the personal side of race and racism.** We have to get educated about how we got here to effectively plan how we're going to move forward." The effort should go beyond personal conversations; this dialogue is only the starting point in the effort to become educated and understanding of the complex topic of race.

### 6. Listen and be open to questions.

The simple proverb "**listen to understand and then speak to be understood**" rings true. Genuine listening takes patience and effort. Spending the least amount of time listening necessary to come up with a solution or response doesn't work in addressing racial inequity. It is important to seek out answers to questions that you don't know, and be willing to be educated on topics that you are uninformed about. Real listening often results in questions, and Yodit encourages us to embrace this approach: "Never be afraid of questions. They aren't disrespectful. **Asking questions shows a willingness to learn and to understand.** Those who remain ignorant because they fear questions damage this dialogue." By asking questions, you are making a conscious effort to better yourself.

## Reset and Reboot

### 7. Internalize what you've learned.

New information has to pass through the gauntlet of your prevailing worldview. According to the [Frameworks Institute](#), facts alone do not often change people's views. It's necessary to "**change the frame so that people can hear the issue in a new way.** Facts then provide important support to the new frame, when the facts are linked to broader values and meaning..." It's so easy to hear something new, to even be convinced of its veracity and how it should impact our daily lives, and yet three days later return to the same mindset we held before. It is not enough to merely hear or read about race; it is important to make an effort to **apply these changes to your mindset and actions.**

### 8. Commit yourself to change.

One easy way to start internalizing this practice is by **identifying whatever race-based bias you might implicitly hold.** We all have implicit bias - what will make a difference is **acknowledging these biases** and **working to deconstruct them.** Paula shared another idea: "Any change is hard. Accountability is key. I think taking a journey of discovery can be much more powerful if you find someone to 'journey' with you. Read the same things; discuss them; keep the momentum going."

I've heard that it takes anywhere from 21 to 66 days to make a habit that sticks. If that's true with things like exercise and eating, you best believe it's true with our habits, views, and beliefs regarding race. Change doesn't come easily, and **active work must be done in order to make a positive impact**. You can make [an impact at work](#) or in your everyday encounters. Noah notes that "Kazu Haga, an instructor of Kingian Nonviolence, compares working in movements to improving in a martial art, taking years of consistent dedication and slow progress." Bay applies that mentality to the issue at hand by stating: "A well-intentioned journey of re-education about race and racism is a commitment."

## Recognize Bias and Privilege

### 9. Acknowledge your privilege.

Before having conversations about race, explore the history of race-based privilege in this country and [put your privilege in context](#). Privilege, loosely defined, is any **unmerited or unearned advantage**. In that sense, we all have experienced privilege. Part of the **privilege associated with whiteness is the luxury of not having to consider one's own race** -- let alone the disadvantages faced by many people of color. Respected scholar and Director of the [Haas Center for a Fair and Inclusive Society](#) John A. Powell hits the nail on the head when he says, "The slick thing about whiteness is that you can reap the benefits of a racist society without personally being racist.". Understanding this privilege may equip you to **help amplify the voices of those who face racial inequality**.

**Privilege can be present in any circumstance.** It is important to name privilege wherever it exists. I am a mixed-race African-American male who was adopted at birth into a white family. (Shout-out to all my transracial adoptees!) To a certain extent, I indirectly benefited and still benefit from my family's white privilege. That's part of my story. Being white and benefiting from white privilege does not disqualify you from having a voice in the fight for racial equity. This acknowledgement of privilege should invoke a **willingness to listen, to be educated, and to understand how you can use this privilege for the betterment of others**.

### 10. Get comfortable with your story.

**Understanding who you are, your own values and morals, and goals and aspirations will help you to better formulate the next steps in building racial equality.** "It was realizing and owning my story," Yodit says, "that allowed me the space to be honest with myself and others. Stories are powerful tools to cultivate dialogue and bring us to a place of harmony. They don't negate our understanding of race. They simply reveal where we are. Then it is up to us to stay stagnant or progress." What has brought you to this point? How do you want to use your past experiences to shape your future? How can you be a part of the change that you hope to see in the world? These are all questions that will help you to take meaningful steps towards a more just future.

## Moving Forward

*"A mind that is stretched by new experience can never go back to its old dimensions."* -Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes

These recommendations require you to understand yourself, others, and the situations at hand. This process brings about **empathy, which is a crucial ingredient of meaningful action**. My hope is that we all become better equipped to talk about racism and come together to make a positive difference in our communities. If you share that hope, taking action in your own life on any of these points is a great start.

It is important to understand the differences that the concept of race brings. Rather than eliminating any notion of these diversities, it is important to acknowledge them. Each person brings a different story, a different experience, and a perspective to the table. By having meaningful conversations on race that serve as a space for learning and action planning, we can hope that this dialogue will act as the **first step towards change and equality for our future**.