



# It's OK to be uncomfortable when talking about race

BY MIRKO CHARDIN AND KATIE NOVAK

**W**e live in perilous times for educational equity. The progress we've made in desegregation, culturally responsive pedagogy, and social justice is threatened by backlash legislation and protests in defense of the status quo. The pushback is happening at

structural levels and very personal levels.

Consider some unsolicited commentary we recently received about our organization's equity-focused professional learning services. Via email, an anonymous sender accused us of "dumbing-down American Education through diversity, equity, and inclusion" and went on to say that "these notions

are idiotic and evil; they are incompatible with excellence, achievement, and just basic learning."

This commentator had never worked with us. Their uninformed opinions of our work, and of diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts in general, were based on bias and fear. Unfortunately, this kind of "feedback" is not uncommon for us, nor is it for the educators or students

we serve. We live in a world where many people fear the loss of their power and privilege and will resort to hateful, defamatory comments in an effort to protect it.

At the same time, cancel culture, shaming, and the #IsOverParty make many students and educators afraid to say the wrong thing, so they forgo healthy debate and avoid uncomfortable conversations. The result is that constructive discourse has been compromised.

In this context, there is an urgent need for professional learning that prepares educators to stay the course and lean into difficult conversations about race and equity.

To help students navigate tensions and respond to difficult conversations, educators need to build their own skills first. How can an adult who has never been at the center of their own learning experience create rich learning experiences for students? In the same vein, how can adults who have not wrestled with the presence or absence of privilege create spaces and circumstances in which their learners can do the same?

School leaders and professional learning facilitators share a moral imperative to create safe spaces where educators can learn to engage in constructive dialogue around their identity, race, personal safety (or lack of it), and how our systems are designed to benefit privileged students at the expense of their peers. Without such learning opportunities, many educators avoid and undermine initiatives aimed at increasing equitable access. Educators can unintentionally inflict tremendous harm on students if they do not have spaces where they can lean into critical conversations with humanity, an open mind, and an acceptance of nonclosure.

Having difficult conversations about race requires more courage and vulnerability than most people know or understand. Educators in dominant groups may experience discomfort, defensiveness, and withdrawal. Conversely, educators who struggle with oppression have to figure out how to navigate the system while also providing relief to students as well as colleagues who are not prepared for this work. This is why professional learning must intentionally and skillfully support educators to do the hard work and navigate these challenges.

This begins with supporting educators to enter into difficult conversations. It's not enough for them to read about how to have difficult conversations. They must engage in them. In difficult conversations, we ask students to be publicly vulnerable with each other, and yet, too often, we don't model this vulnerability within professional spaces or shy away from it or are resistant to it. Educators need to know what it feels like to sit with the discomfort, as well as the potential lack of closure.

In our work with educators, we apply strategies and tools designed to facilitate challenging conversations. We highlight these here to help other educators in their own conversations and challenging situations.

### **ENTERING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS**

Marshall Ganz's (2009) work on public narrative is a helpful starting point. Ganz, a senior lecturer in leadership, organizing, and civil society at Harvard University, anchors the process of leaning into difficult conversations by asking participants to explore their own identity, values, and

life journey, using these questions:

- What is my identity?
- How have my race and gender played a role, whether positive or negative, in my life and professional career?
- What do I value and how has my decision-making or journey shown evidence of this?
- Have I or do I benefit from systems of oppression?
- Do I often feel seen and heard?
- Do I authentically see and hear individuals who are different from me?

These questions can be challenging. Grappling with them and other difficult questions requires that learning spaces adopt the four agreements and tools of courageous conversations articulated by Glenn Singleton in his book *Courageous Conversations About Race* (2012):

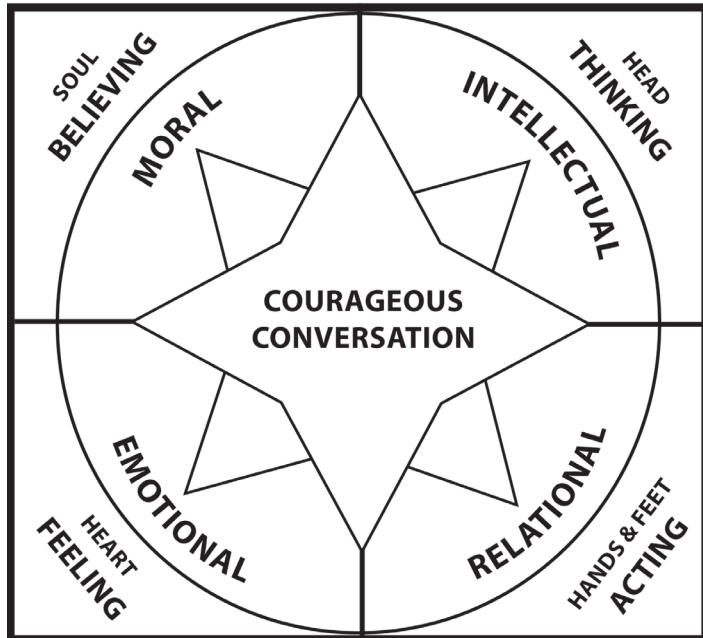
- Stay engaged.
- Speak your truth.
- Plan to experience discomfort.
- Expect and accept nonclosure.

The courageous conversations framework acknowledges that different people enter difficult conversations from different spaces. These entry points are illustrated in the compass visual from Singleton's book (see figure on p. 32).

Some people enter into difficult conversations emotionally and respond with feelings such as anger, sadness, or embarrassment. Others enter conversations intellectually, which disconnects them emotionally while they search for more information or data.

When entering into a conversation morally, people come from a deep-seated and profound belief system, but it may be difficult to articulate these views because they are often seated in

## COURAGEOUS CONVERSATION COMPASS



Source: Singleton, 2012

the “gut” (Singleton, 2012). Lastly, some people enter into conversations relationally, and they tend to respond to difficult conversations by taking action and changing behaviors.

None of these entry points is right or wrong. We need to make space for all of them. But understanding and identifying them can help us support our own and others’ self-reflection and listen deeply to each other.

### GETTING COMFORTABLE WITH DISCOMFORT

Although the conversations we facilitate about race should be nonthreatening, we do not want people to associate nonthreatening with comfort. Listening to the stories of others who have overcome challenges may cause discomfort — and that is a necessary part of the learning process.

For example, we once facilitated a professional learning session with an educator who said that when she was in elementary school, she didn’t have school supplies at home and rifled through the recycling bin at the end of each day to bring home paper. Her

teacher observed this and called her Trash Girl.

This story triggered several guilt responses from attendees, who immediately shared how they would never do that to a student, how they donated supplies to students, and how they, too, were insulted by a teacher. Instead of acknowledging the burden this educator had carried from this experience or celebrating her resilience, people tried to shift discomfort to assuage their guilt.

Instead of placing blame or distancing ourselves from another person’s pain, we have to sit with this discomfort to be allies. Our goal, therefore, is not to minimize discomfort but to eliminate the blame, shame, and guilt that often accompany this work.

### REGULATING EMOTIONS

Because difficult conversations about race often cause discomfort, it is critical to provide tools to help educators with emotional self-regulation. Zaretta Hammond (2015) introduces a strategy called SODA in *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain* as a process for

self-regulation. SODA stands for stop, observe, detach, and awaken.

Applying this approach, facilitators start by reminding participants to stop and pause when they feel discomfort. This pause allows one to breathe deeply and observe what is going on. It is critical to take at least 10 seconds for this observation because, when the brain gets triggered, it takes stress hormones about 10 seconds to move through the body to the prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain involved in self-regulation.

When a conversation triggers individuals, we need to allow people to step away, or detach. But detaching does not mean abandoning the conversation. Facilitators should provide options to help participants disengage when needed — for example, to sketch, play with fidgets, take a short walk, or get a drink of water before returning to the conversation.

After a brief period of detachment, we can encourage colleagues to awaken and become more present. In this space, they can lean into the discomfort and sit with it to try to understand what the other person is saying. Reflection prompts may include, “What are they thinking? How are they feeling at the moment?” Shifting perspectives can help create a more positive interaction.

Some people may not feel ready to have these conversations or may not feel ready to return to them when tension arises. We find that this is often a reflection of privilege. We remind educators that many students and educators experience daily discomfort as they sit in systems that were not built for them. They do not have the luxury of opting out — and neither should the rest of us. We must opt in to conversations that will create more equitable opportunities for students, especially those most often marginalized, to learn.

### AVOIDING DEFENSIVENESS

Creating more equitable and inclusive schools and systems will require leaders, educators, and students to navigate difficult conversations,

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weather controversies, and recognize how identity and stories of self contribute to our work. The adults in our schools must feel safe and supported in having these conversations.

We cannot let conversations turn into debates, fueled by defensiveness. Defensiveness will not result in the changes necessary to create more equitable systems. At the beginning of this article, we shared some hostile, misinformed feedback we received about our work. It can be tempting to respond to such feedback with defensiveness. But we know this is counterproductive.

When you have courageous conversations, you will likely hear hostile things and be tempted to respond defensively, too. And when you do, we ask you to call people in to the conversation, instead of calling them out.

Remember that listening and agreeing are two different things. Although we do not agree with the feedback we received, we can listen and try to learn from it. We all have to commit to being lifelong learners and helping difficult conversations about race continue. If we let the conversations end, we are saying that the journey of equity has come to a conclusion. And as we have seen, it's not over yet.

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