

The ABCD for Effective Engagement

Four strategies for making conversations about diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) more effective, engaging, and rewarding. Small shifts in language make big shifts in impact.



A – Activate Positive Surprise	A positive surprise reframes what people assume into something hopeful and unexpected.
B – Bring it Home	Make it personal by connecting the message to what’s important to them, i.e., their values, goals, or identity.
C – Convey the Benefits	Highlight gains, opportunities, rewards, and positive outcomes. Emphasize benefits over risks.
D – Deliver Choice	Encourage agency by presenting options instead of demands. Offering options reduces defensiveness.

A – Activate Positive Surprise

Creating a positive surprise means sharing information in a way that piques curiosity and reveals unexpected benefits, rather than triggering fear or guilt. Instead of bombarding people with stats or accusations, try to spark their interest with unexpected hopeful information.

1. “Conversations about racism always divide people.”

Positive Surprise: “Did you know that teams who talk openly about race actually report stronger trust and collaboration?”
2. “If you say the wrong thing about race, you’ll be labeled racist.”

Positive Surprise: “What most people don’t realize is that when someone owns a mistake and learns from it, trust in the relationship usually grows stronger.”
3. “Ignoring racism is just the way things have always been.”

“Here’s something surprising: Communities that take small steps toward equity often see big gains in safety, connection, and civic pride.”
4. “Addressing racism is exhausting and full of conflict.”

Positive Surprise: “Did you know that workplaces investing in racial equity also see higher employee satisfaction and lower turnover?”
5. “Talking about racism just makes white people feel guilty.”

Positive Surprise: “What people often find surprising is that learning about racism can actually deepen cross-racial friendships and strengthen community bonds.”

Anchors to start the conversation:

- “Did you know that...?”
- “What people don’t realize is...”
- “Here’s something surprising....”
- “Something I recently learned that shocked me...”
- “I used to think that to, I was shocked to find out...”

B – Bring it Home

Generic statements about racism often feel abstract. Make it personal. Linking the issue to their values, goals, identity, or lived experiences makes it resonate. Listen for what the other person values—fairness, teamwork, family, and connect your response.

1. “Race has nothing to do with how I do my job.”
 - “Since you take pride in being fair and professional, learning how race can shape workplace dynamics helps you make sure everyone has the same chance to succeed.”
 - “Because you value teamwork, understanding how race affects collaboration can help you build stronger, more effective relationships with colleagues.”
 - “Since you care about serving clients well, recognizing how race shapes people’s experiences will help you connect more meaningfully and provide better service.”
2. “I worked hard to get where I am; talking about privilege discounts my effort.”
 - “Because you want your hard work to be recognized, understanding privilege shows how effort and opportunity can work together — it doesn’t take away from what you’ve achieved, it helps explain how success can be possible for more people.”
 - “Since you value perseverance, looking at privilege helps ensure that others who work just as hard also get a fair shot.”
 - “Because you care about being a role model, acknowledging privilege lets you show others how to succeed while also paving the way for those who face extra barriers.”
3. “I treat everyone the same.”
 - “You value good relationships and seeing how race shapes people’s daily experiences will help you connect more deeply with friends and colleagues.”
 - “Since you care about fairness, learning how racism shows up in systems helps ensure everyone really does get treated with the same respect and opportunity.”
 - “Since you’ve said you want your kids to grow up in a world where everyone belongs, learning how racism works equips you to help make that possible.”

C – Convey the Benefits

Fear-based framings (“If you don’t address racism, you’ll get sued”) shut people down. Emphasize benefits over risks. Highlighting what’s gained activates learning and motivation. Talk about what you are moving towards rather than away from.

Situation	Risk	Benefit
Workplace	“If we don’t address bias, we could face lawsuits.”	“When we address bias, employees feel valued, which builds trust, loyalty, and stronger performance.”
Community	“Ignoring racism will divide our community.”	“Communities that work on equity together grow stronger, safer, and more connected.”
Education	“If students don’t learn about racism, they’ll miss key parts of history.”	“Schools that teach racial equity prepare students with empathy, leadership skills, and readiness for a diverse world.”
Leadership	“If leaders bring up race, they might say the wrong thing and lose credibility.”	“Leaders who take the risk to talk about race build deeper trust by showing courage and authenticity.”
Personal	“Talking about racism makes people uncomfortable.”	“Talking about racism can build stronger relationships, because honest conversations create respect and understanding.”

D – Deliver Choice

People resist being told what to think. Choice lowers resistance and increases buy-in—even small choices matter. Offering choices empowers them and lowers defensiveness.

1. Workplace Policy
 - Instead of: “We’re requiring everyone to take this training.”
 - Try: “You can choose from three different training formats — online, in-person, or small group — whichever works best for your learning style.”
2. Classroom Conversation
 - Instead of: “You have to participate in this discussion on race.”
 - Try: “You can share your perspective out loud, write a reflection, or pair up with a partner — whichever helps you engage most meaningfully.”
3. Community Dialogue
 - Instead of: “You must commit to this program.”
 - Try: “You can start with a one-time workshop, join a short series, or take on a longer project — it’s up to what feels manageable right now.”
4. Team Leadership
 - Instead of: “This is the way we’re going to do it.”
 - Try: “Here are two possible approaches we could take — which one do you think would work best for our team?”

Neuroscience of Communication

The brain learns better through hope than through fear.

When people hear messages rooted in fear, shame, or threat, the brain's alarm system (the amygdala) takes over, making them defensive or shut down. By contrast, messages that highlight possibility and hope engage the brain's learning centers, making people more open to new perspectives.

Personal relevance increases impact.

The brain tags information as “worth remembering” when it connects to a person's identity, goals, or values. Generic facts are easy to ignore, but messages tailored to someone's lived experience stick and feel meaningful.

Reward and motivation systems drive openness.

Our brains are wired to pay attention when something feels rewarding or motivating. Sharing information in a way that emphasizes benefits, progress, or positive outcomes lights up dopamine pathways, which makes people more curious and willing to lean in.

Autonomy lowers defensiveness.

The brain resists being forced or told what to believe. Offering choices, options, or “next steps” activates a sense of agency, which lowers defensiveness and increases the likelihood of buy-in.

“The ABCD framework is based on neuroscience research on persuasion and belief change (Hoffman et al., 2025; Sharot & Garrett, 2016), adapted here for conversations on race.”

Boundary Setting Anchors



In many situations people are being called out when we should be calling people in. Calling in is a much more difficult approach because it invites dialogue that fosters curiosity and plants seeds for learning. However, when people commit microassaults—instances where they knowingly make racist, homophobic, sexist, ableist and other discriminatory jokes or comments about marginalized groups, calling out is one of the best courses of action.

Calling out sets clear and firm boundaries and protects your and other people's wellbeing. When calling someone out, do not belittle or dehumanize them. Your tone and nonverbals matter. Stay true to your core values by treating them with dignity and respect. Pointing out that a comment is racist, rather than labeling the person as a racist, may reduce defensiveness and leaves open the possibility for change in the future.

Whether your response is in the form of a question or comment, calling someone out is not meant to open the dialogue but rather conveys your lack of tolerance for unacceptable comments.

Following are examples of boundary setting anchors for responding to microassaults. Adapt them to suit your style.

Workplace Values—emphasize professionalism, inclusiveness, and policy expectations

1. This is an inclusive space, and we don't tolerate that kind of talk.
2. That is not appropriate for work, or anyplace really.
3. That's not acceptable anywhere, especially here.
4. What you said is very unprofessional and is extremely offensive.
5. That type of language will not be tolerated.
6. You could be written up for saying things like that.
7. If you say something like that again, I'm going to have to report it to HR.
8. There is no place for that here.
9. I'm surprised you feel comfortable saying that at work.
10. Hey, let's keep it professional.
11. Saying things like that is against our policy.
12. You can't say hurtful things like that here.

Personal Values—focus on individual boundaries and personal reactions

1. I would appreciate you not saying things like that around me.
2. I do not agree with you.
3. I find that deeply offensive.
4. I'm not okay with that.
5. I know you think you're being funny. It's not.
6. I'm going to remove myself from this conversation.
7. I'll pretend you didn't say that.
8. Wait, what did you just say?
9. Watch what you say around me.

10. Please stop, that's not okay with me.
11. That's offensive to me.
12. I don't agree with that.
13. Your comment was racist, refrain from speaking like that around me.
14. Did you think that I was going to think that joke was funny. Because I don't.
15. I'm uncomfortable with that.
16. Please don't talk like that around me.
17. I'm surprised you feel comfortable saying that to me.
18. Yikes! I'm not okay with what you just said. Do not say things like that around me.
19. I don't appreciate you making comments like that.
20. I don't like that joke. It's hurtful.

Universal Responses—Not tied to any setting or situation

1. That's not acceptable language.
2. That's harsh.
3. Stop it!
4. That's inappropriate.
5. Please keep that kind of thinking to yourself.
6. That's not funny!
7. That's just not okay.
8. Wow! Not okay.
9. That's offensive.
10. What did you just say?
11. I hope you realize how inappropriate that was.
12. Excuse me? or, Pardon me?
13. Let me stop you right there.
14. You can't say that anymore. It's offensive.
15. That's taking it too far.
16. That should remain an inside thought.
17. Ouch!
18. I hope I didn't just hear what I think I heard.
19. Blank stare.
20. Moving your head left to right in disbelief.
21. That is inappropriate and I think you already know why.
22. That's not what we're doing here.
23. We're not going to have this conversation.
24. That was unnecessary.
25. Let's be careful not to talk about (x group) disrespectfully.
26. I'm surprised you feel comfortable saying that out loud.
27. I'm not a safe person for you to share that with.
28. What we're not going to do is make disparaging comments about them.