Effective Communication:
Foundations for Anti-Racism

10 minute microlearning ⏱
Live the Six Toolkit | The Office of Equity and Inclusion

1. What's in a norm?

Looking to increase your team's attention towards equity and inclusion? Question number one: what is your team communication like when you're *not* talking about structural racism? Tackling more complex topics happens best with a strong foundation. **Communication Norms** are the written and unwritten rules we use to interact with one another.

Conflict Resolution

How does the group approach disagreement? Is it seen as inherently bad and avoided? Socially, we're encouraged *not* to "create problems" by acknowledging conflict, but disagreement and different perspectives are not only normal, they're necessary. When we ignore this truth, we end up with "conflict debt" - the unease and dysfunction that results from unaddressed issues. The learning & un-learning required for anti-racism work can include conflict: so start practicing now! Increasing Conflict Comfort (Harvard Business Review)

Psychological Safety

Team Psychological Safety is "the belief that one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes, and that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking" (Edmonson, 1999). This concept applies in both daily work and discussions about equity and anti-racism.

Reminder: discomfort is not the same as being unsafe. In fact, getting uncomfortable is a necessary part of growth for many people.

Feedback & Growth

Are team members encouraged to self-reflect? Is there a culture of lifelong learning, or discomfort with the idea of needing to improve?

Do team members have the space and skills to give and receive direct feedback? Teams should have mechanisms that support mutual sharing between peers and leaders/team members. Quality feedback doesn't shame past behavior, but focuses on what change is needed to improve. Creating a culture of mutuality and growth-mindsets can help teams thrive.

Unspoken Norms

Unspoken norms are the things we pick up as normal or even necessary on our team, but are never said out loud. Are team members expected to rely on subtext? Is it an expectation that emails are answered at any time of day? Is the team quiet in group meetings, but quick to text about their thoughts? Does learning go much better when there are snacks? All of these informal practices are important - approach with curiosity to see what habits are supportive, and which could use another look.

Accountability

What are the accountability structures like on your team? Can staff expect for missteps or harm to be swept under the rug, or addressed with confidence?

Accountability is restorative for those who have been harmed, and seeks solutions & changed behavior, rather than punishment. It's continuous, which means following up, checking in, and repeating accountability processes as necessary.

⚠ Unspoken Norms can include existing un/conscious patterns of bias & exclusion, which are important to address through learning, self-reflection, and/or restorative services.

- Are people of color, women, queer, or disabled team members spoken over? Are their ideas, contributions, or concerns taken less seriously?
- Do people make inappropriate jokes or other microaggressions? Do these go unaddressed?
- Do people speak differently about colleagues, patients, or students of some identities differently than others, even subtly?

The first step to disrupting patterns like these is being willing to notice and name them, so that new habits can form.

Leadership Practices

Leadership plays a key role in a team's culture around communication and learning. Leaders at every level should encourage and model the norms that will help the team succeed. This is particularly important for expanding a team's capacity to address racism and inequity. "Top-down" support sets the tone for how conversations will be handled, how to move through disagreement, take problem-solving approaches, and maintain mutual respect. Leaders may want to engage in anti-racism education proactively in order to increase knowledge and comfort in navigating related situations and discussions. Many learning resources are available through individual departments and the wider university and health system for leadership, inclusion, and communication skills.

Questions to Reflect On
- What are the norms like on your team?
- What are helpful patterns?
- What patterns might be barriers or challenges?
- How can we use shared agreements & other tools to overcome these barriers and challenges?

2. Shared Agreements

Shared agreements are a tool for setting healthy communication boundaries. They state our intentions & values overtly, and can be referenced if interactions veer off course. Check out these examples, then have a conversation about setting your own. Agreements should be tailored to your group, and can be reviewed & updated at any time.

Speak For Yourself
Use "I" statements, and talk about your own observations, experiences, and perspectives.

Listen to Understand
Avoid listening with the intent to immediately respond. Consider the words being shared by others carefully and fully.

Assume Good Intent - Honor Impact
Assuming good intent is a helpful starting point - *and* - be prepared to let intent take a back seat to better understand any unintended impacts that come from communications, policies, and practices.

Build, Don't Sell
We're here to build shared understanding, not convince or sell each other on ideas and opinions

Share the Air / One Mic
Also known as "three before me" - balancing how much we contribute and take in information, and ensure only one person is speaking or communicating at a time.

Yes, And
Holding multiple truths or perspectives at once is a key tool for communication about complex topics. Using "yes, and" avoids invalidating what someone shared while also highlighting a new or different perspective.

💡 Many of us may have seen lists like these before and perhaps have even agreed to them… but has your group actively applied them? Think through what it really might look like to take these from concept into practice.

3. Preparing for Anti-Racism Conversations

Think you're ready to jump in? These key concepts and next steps will get you started for the deeper dives ahead.

Intent

what was meant by the words, action, policy

Intent is important in personal self-reflection and examining unconscious bias. Even when we mean well, socially ingrained stereotypes and systemically biased patterns that we absorb can mean that we speak or act against our own values and intent.
Exploring intent can be a step towards having a discussion about impact.

*"I didn't mean it that way!
I was just trying to give you a compliment."*

and

Impact

what happened as a result of the words, action, or policy

Most of us don't walk through our days with bad intent, but we can still misstep. Looking at impacts helps us bring our actions and their outcomes more in line with how we hope to show up in the world.

"I'm glad you didn't mean it that way, and it was an ouch moment for me. This is the deeper meaning you might not have known…"

Cultural Humility

Racism happens in many ways, from interpersonal to system wide.

At the inter/personal level, exploring cultural humility can be a good place to start. This approach asks us to recognize that the identities we hold can impact our worldview and experiences, and starts with a commitment to learning and self-reflection.

Mindsets

Anti-racism work can involve uncovering uncomfortable truths, bringing up strong reactions and emotions. These are some common thought habits that can get in the way of successful learning:

All or Nothing Thinking

Defensiveness

Avoiding Discomfort

Blaming and Shaming
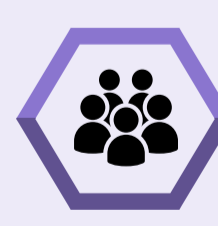
Team Work

Don't go it alone - connect!

Anti-racism efforts are best made in community, and the work is being done around us at all times.

Tools and resources exist for guiding discussions about race and racism, and supporting staff who are trying to make these conversations a reality.

Sources and Links

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This microlearning was created by the Office of Equity and Inclusion to support teams across the University of Rochester in building their skills to promote inclusion, equity, and anti-racism. Find resources and learn more on our websites: **Live the Six** | **The Office of Equity Inclusion**