

Is race a taboo topic in the workplace?



Helen feels uncomfortable chatting to Sasha, her work colleague, beyond exchanging pleasantries. She is concerned that she might say the wrong thing and cause offence to Sasha, who is black, and so she avoids spending time with her even though she likes her. Sasha is aware that Helen is awkward around her, but she's unsure why, and she also tends to shy away from her.

In another scenario, an email joke goes around the office that touches on issues of race from recent news stories. Not everyone finds it funny, particularly those employees from ethnically and racially diverse backgrounds, but they do not know how to call this out without creating a scene. They believe their colleagues did not purposely try to upset them so they remain silent and cover their emotions about the situation.

According to The Business in the Community [Race at Work](#) report, from November 2015, this situation is not uncommon. It found that 58 per cent of white employees are not comfortable talking about race in the workplace, with 66 per cent of employees from "BAME (Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic)" backgrounds saying that they felt their colleagues are not comfortable talking about race at work.

Discussing how some aspects of our identities differ from other people, and the ways we may experience privilege and disadvantage, can feel uncomfortable and threatening. Because of this, having conversations about issues of race, ethnicity and gender is difficult and people often struggle with these 'taboo' topics.

However, [Catalyst's research](#) has shown many benefits to an inclusive workplace where difference is valued. A work culture is 'inclusive' when team members feel valued for their uniqueness, while also feeling a sense of belonging. Catalyst found that when employees feel 'included', they are more team-oriented and innovative.

Every time we shy away from conversations about our differences and uniqueness, the potential to create a culture of inclusion is diminished. If team members have to [hide or cover](#) an aspect of their identity, perhaps by altering their appearance or tempering their behaviours to fit in, they are unable to be themselves.

[Dnika J. Travis](#), Vice President, Catalyst said: "Our backgrounds and cultures shape our identities, values, and beliefs, and they influence which topics we feel are suitable for discussion. Taking the perspective of someone who is different from you requires openness and courage—and some level of vulnerability."

What can companies and leaders do? Catalyst recommends conversation '[ground rules](#)' to break down roadblocks, which are stopping conversations. Firstly, create a safe space for dialogue, not debate, always assume positive intent and be open, transparent, willing to listen and to admit mistakes.

The under-representation of ethnically and racially diverse women and men in the UK's top jobs is staggering. Only [2 per cent](#) of director positions in the FTSE 100 are held by people from ethnically and racially diverse backgrounds, despite making up 14 per cent of the UK's population. There is also no ethnically and racially diverse woman in the [FTSE 100](#) and women, in total, only represent 6 per cent of the top 300 jobs. The Green Park Leadership [report](#) also found that, "white women are twice as likely to reach the top three positions in a FTSE 100 company compared to an ethnic minority male and 20 times more likely than an ethnic minority female."

To make change, everyone needs to feel safe speaking up in the workplace and this includes not only women and people from non-dominant ethnically and racially diverse groups, but also dominant group members who no longer want to stand by as passive witnesses to exclusionary behaviours, bias, or discrimination.

Inclusion happens when everyone has an equal voice, where difference is celebrated and individuals are able to share viewpoints and ideas that lead to increased innovation and teamwork.



Notes:

- This blog post is based on the Catalyst tool [Engaging in Conversations About Gender, Race, and Ethnicity in the Workplace](#), by Dnika J. Travis and Julie S. Nugent, Catalyst, 2016.
- The post gives the views of its author, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.
- Featured image credit: [Meeting participants](#), by [Matthew Henry](#), under [this](#) licence
- When you leave a comment, you're agreeing to our [Comment Policy](#)



Allyson Zimmermann is [Executive Director](#) of Catalyst Europe leading the non-profit organisation's strategy to create inclusive workplaces where women and all talent can advance.