

Talking About Race: Conversations that Lead to Change

We are stronger when we lead together in these challenging times. On June 18, the GLSnext Event Series featured Sheila Heen and Morgan Franklin, both faculty at Harvard Law School, for a conversation about how to have difficult conversations around racial injustice.

The difficulty and the potential in conversations about race:

- For Morgan Franklin:
 - At the moment, our national and international interest is thinking about racism and particularly anti-black racism in the U.S.
 - It's important that this conversation is top of mind right now, but these are topics that are ever-present.
 - There are moments in these conversations that make me feel exhausted, but there are moments where I feel cared for.
 - Sometimes in conversations like this I'm hesitant to begin because I might anticipate people expect the black perspective—but I'm not here to give the black perspective. I couldn't even if I wanted to because the black perspective is not monolithic—there is not just one black perspective. I can only speak to my perspective.
 - It can be challenging because we live in individual interactions. It's hard to see how one individual might fit into a larger system or the ways in which systemic racism fits into day to day interaction.
 - Racism is a bigger issue that also plays a role in the background—in housing, healthcare, or hiring; or in so many other areas where we have more work to do to eliminate systemic racism.
 - We should be focused on substantive fairness and equality for all people of color.
 - As international audiences are focused on this topic, a question that I'm interested in is how can we maintain this momentum?
 - These conversations are often critical and can be indispensable. What needs to be engaged and how can we move forward in the pursuit of justice?
 - So often racism runs through so many issues from everything to how we think about promotion, strategy, strategy development and prioritizing audiences as we are engaging with our products.
 - In the present moment, as we think about remote and online work, some people say they can be more efficient. But you also have to ask the question, who's not included in the conversation? Who's not a part of decision making? Who's left off of a quick zoom call? We have to be vigilant.

- For Sheila Heen:
 - I often worry I'm going to say something wrong.
 - When we move to talk about systemic or structural racism it feels less tangible.
 - In order to have a meaningful conversation, I have to show up as my authentic self. I have to be willing to see things that aren't as visible to me.

- When I show up as my authentic self, I'm also showing up as my flawed self. I'm worried about being misunderstood or clearly understood. My ignorance is on display for everybody to see.
- These conversations, despite feeling fraught, are really important to have.
- What is the relationship between friction and traction? Right now, we're in a moment of friction. What is the relationship between that and actually doing something about it?
- You can't have traction to make positive change without some friction.
- It's easy to think these conversations are "extra" but as leaders, we're key players that shape societal questions and what needs to change in our own community or organization or our individual relationships.
- These are conversations to have in everyday life, they are not just "extra."
- As leaders, we have a responsibility to pursue truth.

Exercise About Truth

- Write two or three sentences about truth that you might use in everyday life that include the word "true" or "truth."
- Take a look at your sentences and replace the word "true" or "truth" with a word that would change the meaning of one of those sentences.
 - Morgan Franklin:
 - "He's not being truthful with me," which would translate to, "He's not being fair with me."
 - "Let's approach this conversation with truthfulness," to, "Let's approach this conversation with fairness."
 - "I'm not sure they can handle the truth," to, "I'm not sure they can handle fairness."
 - For Morgan, the idea of truth is aligned with fairness.
 - Sheila Heen:
 - "He has a loose relationship with the truth," to, "He has a loose relationship with reality."
 - "I'm not sure she's being truthful," to, "I'm not sure she's being honest."

This practice fleshed out requires three things from leaders:

- Leaders see reality—see the problems in front of us.
 - There are things that aren't always visible.
 - I must have conversations to get a fuller picture of reality.
- Leaders are truthful—am I seeing myself accurately?
 - Am I willing to be truthful with myself and be open to feedback?
- Leaders have a responsibility to true up our relationships.
 - Be in right relationship with each other.
 - Do people trust you to get traction to take action?

There's a challenge with reconciling with negative realities with a positive story.

- How do we think about our country more broadly?
- It's challenging to reconcile a story with the real violence and terror that has been part of our country history, and in so many ways, is still with us in systemic racism.
- It's important to not just have these conversations across race, but also among people in the same demographic.
- We must challenge the way our bias might show up.
- Part of these conversations involve holding seemingly conflicting information.
 - We have to face what we are and have been.
 - There are conflicting feelings involved in these conversations.
- I'm feeling exhausted around some of this conversation.
 - On one hand we're on the cusp of positive change.
 - And on the other hand, I'm wondering if there is going to be change.

The best place to start is the conversation we need to have with *ourselves*.

- Engage in introspection.
 - What messages have we internalized growing up?
 - What messages have influenced how we go throughout our everyday?
 - The story we tell ourselves is rooted in our lived experience.
 - It's important to maintain a sense of race consciousness.
 - Recognize that regional perspective has an impact on our mindset as well.
- Despite being difficult it's important.
- We can't avoid these conversations. We should step into them.

In conversations with others, it's important to *listen generously*.

- It's challenging to engage in conversation in which you and the other person are not aligned.
 - The purpose is to understand.
 - I think, what does this person want, and why does it matter to them.
 - Listen through the headline, and what is underneath.
 - What do they care about?
 - On social media, people talk past each other in a way where people are not having a real conversation.
 - Slogans that are loaded can be dismissive of a general purpose.
 - When someone says "all lives matter" one might say, "all" is inclusive of black lives. But a big purpose of saying "black lives matter" is focusing on anti-black racism, the point is the *specificity*.
 - Adopt an "and" stance.
 - Both things can be true, so let's talk about both.
 - The "and" stance can be tricky because it can often feel like a "but" so it can come off as dismissive

- Listening generously means that even your best efforts might unintentionally minimize or dilute someone's point.
- Let's not let the nuance of the conversation cover up the heart of the conversation.
 - There's a difference between debating and listening to what's wrong with what you're saying, to listening to understand what you're saying in a deeper way.
 - Maybe I should listen to what is right about what you're saying so my purpose for the conversation shifts.

How do we handle intentions and impact?

- It's difficult to know someone's intentions—assume good intentions.
- When having a conversation when I'm trying to listen generously and seeking to understand it's helpful for me to assume good intentions as I'm trying to understand how they see the world.
- If I'm assuming this person is not trying to be harmful, how can assuming the best help me understand their perspective?
- Assuming good intentions is as equally important as understanding the impact.
- I can be quick to explain my good intentions, but part of what is hard is that well-intentioned people are having negative impacts all the time.
- It's frustrating when negative impact can be brushed aside by saying there were good intentions behind it.
- It's important to seek good intentions but not let that sanitize the impact that can come from action.
- We need to pull apart intentions and impact and know they are equally important.
- The impact is the problem we have to solve and address.

To recap:

- Reflect on where your views would have come from.
- Engage with introspection and deep reflection.
- Be thoughtful about your purposes for having these conversations.
- Think about listening to understand and share your experiences.
- Anticipate conflicting feelings as you walk into a conversation.
- Listen generously.
- Separate intention and impact.
- Think about what you might be contributing to the problem but also how to contribute to the solution.

Is it ok not to have a conversation sometimes?

- There are two different flavors of this conversation:
 - One: "There's a problem and we need to figure out how to move forward."
 - Two: Or, "There's not a problem and nothing needs to change."

- “No” is a complete sentence. If you do not want to engage in the conversation, it is justifiable if I have to defend my humanity to someone.
- We have to step into a learning zone in order to tackle issues.
- Outside of the discomfort and learning zone, there is a panic zone.
 - People of color more often have to live in the discomfort zone, and when someone says there’s not an issue here, it can make people feel like they’re in the panic zone.

Quick Recap from the notes of Danielle Strickland:

- To see reality, we need each other.
- The most important conversation is the one we have to have with ourselves.
- Listen generously. Look for what’s right, not just what’s wrong.
- The purpose in listening is to understand, not to reply.
- Adopt the “and” stance.
- Embrace tension. Things can be true and different at the same time.

Q&A

How do you recommend an approach of transparency as a leader?

- When someone puts an issue on the table, say, “Let’s talk about how this is going to impact people.”
- As a leader, I often think my job is to have answers and to defend what makes sense, but I’m much better served by not knowing and asking questions.
- As a leader, it’s about saying we have a lot of learning to do together.

What advice would you give to someone who wants to address these concerns in an authentic way?

- The point of transparency is so important. It’s ok for people to struggle publicly in service of getting the right answer. It’s ok to say you don’t know the right answer.
- The three components of trust are ability, care and integrity.
- Someone will have trust in you if you have the ability to manage a situation, care about them and this topic with a sense of engagement and concern, and if you have integrity—do they think you’ll do the right thing? Are you willing to risk even profit to do the right thing?
- Do our actions match our words we’re saying publicly?

How do I lead my team through this process?

- Make sure the group of people you’re engaging with is inclusive—that you have a number of voices at the table making decisions.
- It’s challenging for a group of people that share the same demographics to engage on this issue.
- Be honest about what you don’t know.
- Make sure things actually come out of the conversation. It’s important to take action.

What do people do if they lack diversity on their team? If you are at zero, where do you go from there?

- The way we often hire is by networking, but the problem with that is that your network may be limited.
- The people who get hired end up being the people that are most like the people we have already.
- Who's not on our radar screen?
- You have to be honest about the practices you have in place and think about dismantling the barriers.
- You have to be proactive about your hiring practices and make sure they are reflective of your ideals.
- If you don't have diversity in your own life, now is a good time to cultivate a learning, listening heart to learn from people that are different than you.
- If you're not learning from a diverse group of people, you're not seeing reality, and your leadership will suffer.

What does success look like in this difficult conversation?

- If you walk away from the conversation with greater understanding, with a feeling of having shared your experiences authentically and fully, that is part of what success looks like.
- It's important that we don't forget about the importance of these conversation being tied to action.
- I'm hopeful that these conversations will lead people to think about the next action in order to yield substance and fairness.
- These are ongoing conversations over time...things won't change in just one conversation.
- Success is the journey to self-knowledge and being redefined by each other.
- Simply having the difficult conversations is one of the successes.
- Remember slogans aren't dialogue. Dialogue is where we start to change things.

Listening and finding a way to take your listening to the next level is the most powerful skill you can nurture as a leader no matter what the topic is.