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WE CAN'T
TALK
ABOUT
THAT
AT WØRK!

HOW TO TALK ABOUT
RACE, RELIGION,
POLITICS, AND OTHER
POLARIZING TOPICS

MARY-FRANCES WINTERS

Praise for *We Can't Talk about That at Work!*

"I'm very excited about the release of *We Can't Talk about That at Work!* The issue of discussing polarizing topics at work is a really tough one. People are not comfortable having uncomfortable conversations. I'm happy that there will finally be a resource to guide us all on how to get comfortable being uncomfortable."

  —Michele C. Meyer-Shipp, Esq., Vice President and Chief Diversity Officer, Prudential Financial, Inc.

"This book is a comprehensive, practical, and highly accessible tool for empowering people to have the brave conversations that are needed in these tumultuous times. Mary-Frances has given readers an invaluable resource for organizations and individuals to navigate the charged times that we live in and make a contribution toward cocreating a more compassionate future."

  —Nene Molefi, diversity and inclusion thought leader and CEO, Mandate Molefi, Johannesburg, South Africa

"Mary-Frances Winters's wisdom shines throughout this book. She helps us understand deeply why we need to talk about polarizing topics—yes, at work—and then proceeds to show us how with care, concern, and compassion for those who may not agree with us. I hope that all leaders and employees read it and implement her wise suggestions and counsel."

  —Julie O'Mara, coauthor of *Global Diversity and Inclusion Benchmarks* and other inclusion works and Past-President, American Society for Training & Development (now ATD)

"We are living in times of crisis. Day after day, we are confronted with polarization about issues of real import to our society and our world that can seem difficult, if not impossible, to talk about. And yet this is not a time for timidity. We must talk about these issues if we are going to cross the great divides in our ideologies and exist together in civil society. Mary-Frances Winters has created an extremely helpful guide for better understanding and navigating those difficult conversations. Be bold—use this book!"

  —Howard Ross, founder and Chief Learning Officer, Cook Ross

"*We Can't Talk about That at Work!* has hit the mark. This body of work is critically important to advancing inclusion and dialogue in our workplaces. As we work diligently to increase our diversity, we struggle with inclusion and having the difficult conversations about the various aspects of diversity. Now, we have a road map and tools to support diversity professionals, leaders, and employees in any work environment. This will be the book used by all."
  —**Darlene Slaughter, Vice President and Chief Diversity Officer, United Way Worldwide**

"In the current global political and social climate, characterized by increasingly polarized views, the ability to embrace views different from our own, without judgment or vilification, is more critical than ever. It is also at the heart of all diversity and inclusion work. For with all our ideals, we often overlook the fact that diversity and inclusion can be hard. In *We Can't Talk about That at Work!*, Mary-Frances addresses this issue head-on, providing practical skills to empower leaders and managers to have effective dialogue across difference."
  —**Kate Vernon, Director, Strategic Programmes, Asia, Community Business**

"The presidential farewell address is a perfect way to set up this powerful and practical guide to effectively engaging in conversations about polarizing issues. I too believe that we need to meet people where they are, and not expect them to necessarily see the world from our view, and that we *all* have work to do to close the cultural divide and change hearts. What makes this book different is its soft approach to bold conversations, using talking tips, templates, and reflection questions."
  —**Tyronne Stoudemire, Vice President of Global Diversity and Inclusion, Hyatt Hotels Corporation, and Adjunct Lecturer of Management and Organization, Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University**

"Whether in her writing, public speaking, or consulting, Mary-Frances Winters always delivers. Deep subject matter expertise, strategic thinking, sociocultural insights, contemporary application, and wisdom will spill out of these pages as you engage with them."
  —**Andrés Tapia, Senior Client Partner and Global Practice Leader, Workforce Performance, Inclusion and Diversity, Korn Ferry Hay Group, and author of *The Inclusion Paradox***

WE CAN'T TALK ABOUT THAT AT WØRK!

A GUIDE FOR **BOLD, INCLUSIVE** CONVERSATIONS

WE CAN'T
TALK
ABOUT
THAT
AT WØRK!

HOW TO TALK ABOUT
RACE, RELIGION,
POLITICS, AND OTHER
POLARIZING TOPICS

MARY-FRANCES WINTERS

BK

We Can't Talk about That at Work!

To the generations of freedom fighters, civil rights leaders, and social justice advocates who preceded me in the ongoing quest for an inclusive, equitable world that values the dignity of all people.

And especially to those who lost their lives in the struggle. Without their sacrifice, my voice would not be possible.

For too many of us it's become safer to retreat into our own bubbles, whether in our neighborhoods, or on college campuses, or places of worship, or especially our social media feeds, surrounded by people who look like us and share the same political outlook and never challenge our assumptions. . . . All of us have more work to do. . . . Hearts must change. . . . But without some common baseline of facts, without a willingness to admit new information and concede that your opponent might be making a fair point . . . then we're going to keep talking past each other. . . . None of this is easy.

BARACK H. OBAMA
44TH PRESIDENT
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
FAREWELL ADDRESS
JANUARY 10, 2017

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Preface

Don't talk about race, politics, or religion at work!

Whether we like it or not, or are prepared for it or not, this adage no longer applies. People are talking about these issues, or at minimum, thinking about them, and it impacts productivity, engagement, and employees' sense of safety and well-being. Considering we have been taught not to talk about polarizing topics, especially at work, we may not know how to do it very well. Thus, our attempts may lead to counterproductive, divisive dialogue. And as our workplaces become more diverse, these conversations are ever more complicated.

Effectively engaging in bold, inclusive conversations is hard work and is getting even harder due to the current global, political, and social climate. Many great leaders have attempted with some success over the years to bring people across varying dimensions of difference to the table to alleviate the **polarization**, animosity, and hatred that has plagued the human race since the beginning of time.

I contend that the reason we are not further along—and perhaps regressing—is because we have not approached the

Words in the text that are **sans serif bold** are defined in the glossary.

work in a developmental way. We have failed to fully realize and understand that not everybody is ready for bold conversations. If we were to approach the work developmentally, we would meet people where they are, not expect them to necessarily see the world from our view, and acknowledge that while one may be learning, mistakes are inevitable.

Someone who is just learning to ride a bike will fall off. If you ask someone to solve an advanced algebra problem before taking Algebra 101, he/she will likely be unsuccessful and may give up. I urge us to cut each other some slack—be patient, encouraging, and forgiving. In Malcolm Gladwell's book, *The Outliers*, he asserts that it takes 10,000 hours of practice to achieve mastery in any skill. And I posit that once you have achieved mastery, let's say as an accomplished pianist, you still don't stop practicing. You never stop learning new pieces. The same is true for engaging in bold, inclusive conversations.

We Can't Talk about That at Work! provides an effective guide to developing the skills necessary to engage in conversations around polarizing topics, acknowledging that these topics are complex, that there are no simple answers, and that it takes time and practice to learn how to do it well. Keep in mind that this book is a guide and not a prescription for how to have bold, inclusive conversations. There is no one right answer and no one fail-proof model. Throughout the book, I try to give you a myriad of things to consider before embarking on a difficult conversation, as well as some examples of what may work and why other approaches may not.

Over the past 20 years, we have witnessed increased and intensified global polarization on many topics related to our differences. Unfortunate acts of terrorism, incidents that spurred movements like Black Lives Matter, Brexit (fueled by xenophobia), and the divisiveness of the 2016 US presidential election are leaving indelible wounds on many. We see vast divisions that exacerbate an "us-and-them" disunity,

leading to heightened racism, xenophobia, Islamophobia, classism, and homophobia.

We are failing to find a shared purpose that binds all of humanity together. Rather than moving more toward shared meaning and understanding, as President Barack Obama said in his farewell address, we are staying in our own corners with like-minded people, entrenched in our own ideologies, unable to find a common vision.

I wrote *We Can't Talk about That at Work!* in response to clients of The Winters Group wanting tools and resources that would support them in engaging employees in effective and authentic conversations around these unfortunate events. We found there was a growing desire among leaders and employees to have these conversations but a lack of competence to do so effectively.

This practical guide will support you in answering some of the following questions:

◆ As an individual who has been personally impacted by some of the unfortunate events of our time, how do you maintain your level of engagement at work? How do you share your feelings and thoughts with your manager or coworkers? Is there a level of trust present to engage in topics like race, religion, and politics?

◆ You may not personally feel that you are impacted by some of these events but empathize with coworkers who have been. How can you become an effective, supportive ally and build trust among diverse coworkers? What skills are required to initiate these conversations?

◆ As a leader, how do you manage diverse employees who have different perspectives and experiences? How do you encourage and facilitate inclusive conversations about polarizing topics so that all employees feel valued, respected, and safe?
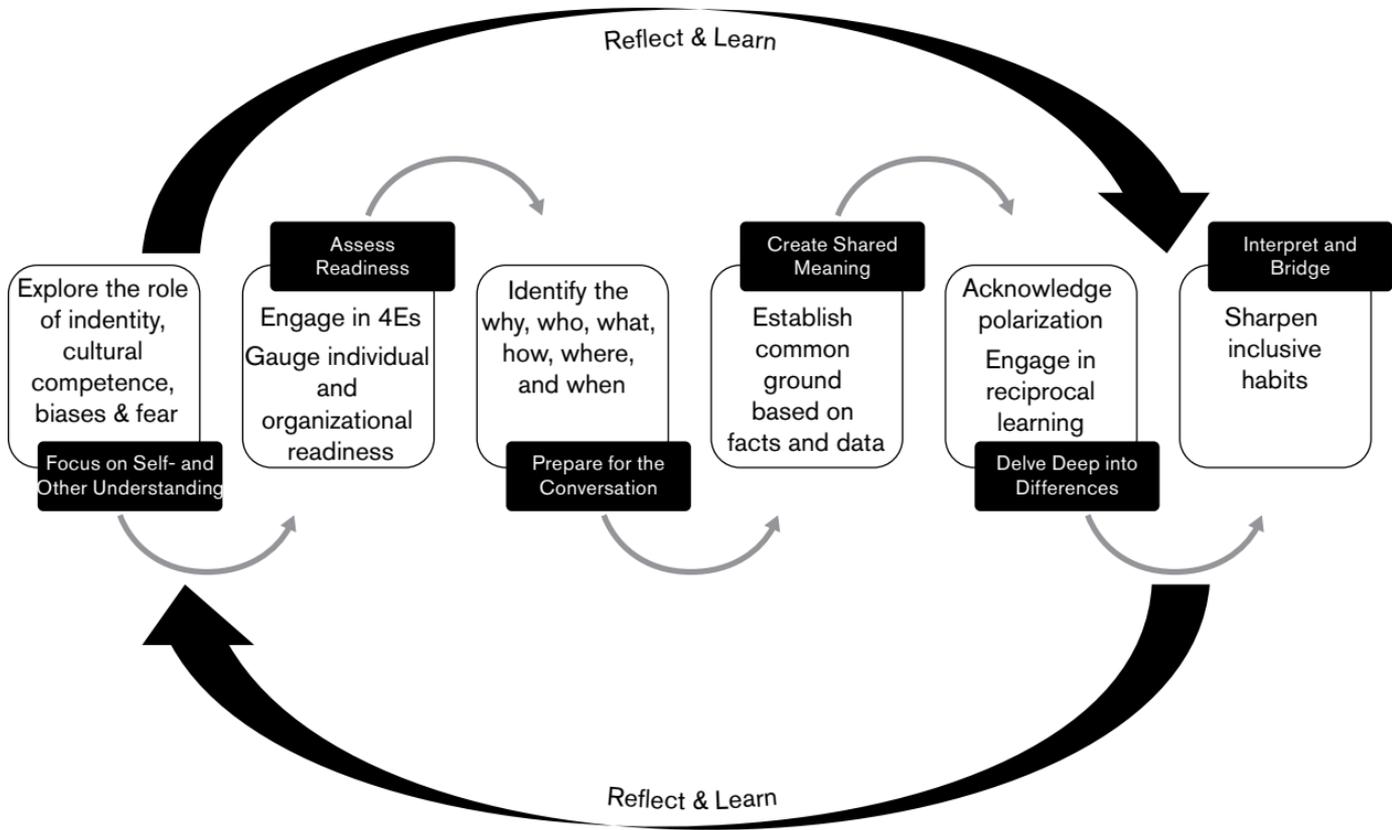
FIGURE 1. A MODEL FOR BOLD, INCLUSIVE CONVERSATIONS

We Can't Talk about That at Work! lays out a blueprint for developing the skills necessary to effectively engage in conversations about polarizing issues. Figure 1 (A Model for Bold, Inclusive Conversations) depicts a process for engaging in these conversations and will serve as the structural sequence for the book. In Chapter 1, we explore the business case for engaging in bold conversations in the workplace. The subsequent chapters expound on each phase presented in this figure.

If you are interested in engaging in conversations to create a more inclusive world, this book will start you on your journey.

Thank you for your interest in my book.

Yours inclusively,

Mary-Frances Winters

ONE

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Why Do We Have to Talk about **THAT** at Work?

> High performing leaders are able to unite
> diverse team members by building common
> goals and even shared emotions by engaging
> in powerful and effective dialogue.
>
> GEORGE KOHLRIESER,
> Clinical and Organizational Psychologist[1]

Why in the world would we want to encourage employees to talk about polarizing topics in the workplace? We come to work in order to make products and provide services for our customers, members, and/or clients—not to talk about social issues. Topics such as race, politics, and religion are inappropriate and should be discouraged.

Perhaps this is how you feel. For as long as I can remember, this has been the prevailing sentiment for many organizations and corporate environments. However, there are compelling reasons why a position of avoidance is no longer the best policy.

The most persuasive reason for building the skills necessary to talk about polarizing topics at work is that they are already being talked about or thought about, more than you may think. Social media is a huge factor in the increased visibility of and exposure to these issues. And even as these topics remain top of mind for most of us, in general, we lack the skills to have effective dialogue.

The goal of this book is to help you make the conversations that are already happening more productive, supportive, and inclusive, leaving people feeling whole and ultimately resulting in better teamwork, productivity, and engagement.

A POLARIZED SOCIETY LEADS TO A POLARIZED WORKPLACE

When race enters our public conversations about these important national issues, the dialogue is too often dehumanizing and racially charged. Language matters, and we need more tools to move our race conversations forward in more accurate, fair, and productive ways.

President Barack Obama [2]

As the workforce becomes more diverse, there are more people from different racial/ethnic groups, religious affiliations, political affiliations, sexual orientations, and **disability** statuses who may be facing very different realities than ever before. We are living in times of heightened social conflict around race, religion, and politics. The last few years have been filled with instances of police brutality, the shooting and killing of police officers, immigration debates, religious intolerance against Muslims and Jews, heightened awareness of transgender rights and its backlash, terrorism, and extreme political divisions, making it impossible for many *not* to bring strong emotions about these issues into the workplace.

Social scientists contend that the more we feel threatened, the greater our tendency to be "tribal" and polarized. Tribalism is part of human nature. We've found that many people feel that their way of life is being threatened by terrorism, demographic changes, and new technology. When people are fearful, the gut level response is to blame "the other tribe(s)" for their plight. With so many complex issues facing society

today, there is more polarization than ever before. Consider these realities:

- In a 2016 survey that explored the state of race relations in the United States, only 44 percent of white people were very concerned about the killings of black people at the hands of police, compared to 77 percent of black responders. However, when asked about the killings of police officers in Dallas, over 75 percent of *both* black and white people were very concerned.[3]

- In a survey on race and workplace trauma conducted by The Winters Group, six in ten whites answered that they think their organization understands the unique experiences of blacks in the workplace. In direct contrast six in ten blacks answered that they did *not* think their organization understands their unique experiences.[4]

- The vote for Britain to exit the European Union has largely been attributed to class issues and xenophobia. A headline in the *Guardian* in June 2016 read, "BREXIT is the only way the working class can change anything."[5] The results of the election showed deep class divides. Many working-class Brits blame immigration for the loss in jobs. Between 1993 and 2014, the number of immigrants into the UK surged from 3.8 million to 8.3 million.[6]

- A recent poll showed that 56 percent of Americans feel that Muslim values are at odds with US values. However, 68 percent said that they had never or seldom talked to a Muslim.[7]

- In a Pew survey on gender equality, 56 percent of men said that obstacles inhibiting women's progress are largely gone. Only 34 percent of women shared that view.[8]

◆ According to a global study conducted by Unilever based on interviews with 9,000 men and women across eight global markets, stereotypes and inappropriate behavior targeting women in the workplace still prevail. Sixty-seven percent of women in the study reported that they feel pressured to "get over" inappropriate behavior, and 55 percent of men and 64 percent of women believe that men do not challenge each other when they witness such behavior.[9]

◆ Relative to political polarization in the United States, a Pew study showed that 93 percent of Republicans are more conservative than the median Democrat, while a nearly identical share of Democrats (94 percent) is more liberal than the median Republican. Twenty years ago, there was a much smaller divide, with 64 percent of Republicans to the right of the median Democrat, and 70 percent of Democrats to the left of the median Republican.[10]

◆ The inauguration of Donald Trump as the 45th president of the United States drew strong protests around the world. Globally, over three million people participated in the Women's March to protest the election of President Trump, who they feel does not represent the values espoused by the United States, especially those policies geared toward gender equality, health care for women, religious freedom, and **LGBTQ** rights. Protesters said that they joined the marches because of Trump's divisive campaign and his disparagement of women, minorities, and immigrants.[11]

◆ The North Carolina HB2 bill, known as the "bathroom bill," requires transgender people to use public bathrooms associated with their birth sex.[12] As a result, a number of

organizations cancelled high-profile events in the state, resulting in millions of dollars of lost revenue.

◆ Environmental justice and racism, both highly political subjects, intersected in mid-2016 when the US Army Corps of Engineers authorized the Dakota Access Pipeline project (DAPL), which threatened the safety and sanctity of the Standing Rock Sioux tribe's water and sacred cultural sites. The project sparked national protests and a grassroots movement that sought to reaffirm the humanity of indigenous people and their land. The DAPL has sparked polarization among business, political, and Native American communities.[13]

◆ There has been ongoing dissention around the term "Redskin" and other mascots that denigrate Native American communities. As of 2010, over 115 professional organizations—representing civil rights advocates, educational institutions, athletes, and scientific experts—have published resolutions or policies that state that the use of Native American names and/or symbols by non-native sports teams is a harmful form of ethnic stereotyping that promotes misunderstanding and prejudice, which contributes to other problems faced by Native Americans.[14] However, as of the publication date of this book, the Washington, DC, football team has not changed its name.

◆ We see a great deal of polarization and discourse around immigration. A range of countermeasures have been put forth—from building a wall to the more liberal proposal of the Dream Act, a multi-phased process for undocumented residents to provide conditional residency leading to permanent status. Due in part to political dissention, the bill never passed.[15]

◆ While conversations about disability and people with disabilities may not be deemed as polarizing, I have found that we shy away from the subject matter, even in discussions around diversity. Perhaps this is because we do not know how to effectively have these bold conversations. In 2014, the British charity Scope conducted a survey that found two-thirds of British people feel uncomfortable or awkward talking to somebody who is disabled.[16]

Kate Vernon, director of strategy programs at Community Business and author of extensive research on diversity and inclusion in Asia, makes this observation:

> It can be difficult to have open and honest conversations about race in Asia. We often talk about **culture** and the impact of different cultural profiles on communication and working styles—but we rarely address the biases and prejudices that exist about or between different ethnic groups, or openly acknowledge the power and **privilege** that certain groups enjoy. But there is no doubt that racism does exist in Asia. Whether it be India or Hong Kong, Japan or Singapore, there is an unspoken, often complex racial hierarchy that many will recognize but be wary to articulate. If we are to promote a culture of true inclusion, we need to find a way to broach this sensitive topic. Yet the Asian preference for promoting harmony, saving face, and showing respect can make having such bold conversations doubly hard.[17]

These polarized views and often-avoided topics drive attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors. If I no longer believe there are barriers for women in the workplace, I would see no need for special programs designed to bolster women's chances for advancement. If I am not concerned about the shootings of unarmed black men, then I may not be empathetic to workers who are fearful and traumatized by such events.

POLARIZATION THWARTS INCLUSION;
INCLUSION DRIVES ENGAGEMENT

Polarization thwarts attempts for inclusion. Polarization is the opposite of inclusion. Polarization fosters an "us-and-them" environment, whereas inclusion attempts to create a sense of belonging and unity. Most major organizations today have a goal to create an inclusive culture because they realize that inclusion drives engagement. As reported in a 2013 Gallup study, inclusion and engagement are highly correlated.[18] The results showed that the most engaged employees rated the company high on diversity and inclusion. The least engaged employees rated the company very low on the questions related to diversity and inclusion. The Winters Group conducted a survey with a large financial institution that showed similar results. Inclusion was the highest correlated factor to engagement.

When employees feel that they are psychologically safe, they are also more engaged and innovative. According to a study by Catalyst that surveyed Australian workers, employees who experience psychological safety feel that they can freely speak up about problems and tough issues.[19] One's perception of psychological safety is based on a belief about the organization's norms or culture, which I cover in Chapter 3. The same study identified four leadership characteristics that enable psychological safety across race, gender, and other demographic variables. They are accountability, courage, humility, and empowerment. I speak to courage and **cultural humility** in Chapter 2.

THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA
ON POLARIZATION

Social media outlets are exacerbating the increase in polarization. Instantaneous access to breaking news and opinions

via tools such as Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat, and others has magnified opportunities to engage in contentious conversation and debate. People routinely use their smart phones to record all sorts of events that go viral for the whole world to see and comment on.

Before social media, we weren't as likely to be constantly confronted with polarizing topics such as race, religion, and politics unless we were news junkies. In the workplace, it is easy, even if against company policy, to have ongoing access to social media on our smart devices. Therefore, many people are constantly debating and sharing their opinions and beliefs on social media; and to the extent that they are virtually connected to coworkers, they are having these conversations at work, or in a workplace context. Social media makes it very easy to know the beliefs and opinions of coworkers.

The more that an individual's personal beliefs are repeated (i.e., go viral), the more they become accepted as fact. By the same token, the more an individual's or a group's beliefs are challenged, the more they are believed by that group. When beliefs are challenged, the human tendency is to become more obstinate and determined to defend the opinion. In other words, we dig our heels in deeper, as the saying goes. Any attention to the belief or opinion, positive or negative, acts as fuel for the fire.

Let's take Facebook, for example. The personal nature of this form of electronic communication can keep our emotions in high gear. We tell our Facebook friends what we like and what we don't like. When we disagree with a friend on Facebook we continue to post more rationale for our own position, and they, in turn, post more for their position, increasing the polarization. In the extreme, when a friend posts something we don't like, we can "un-friend" them. In other words, we can stay firmly rooted in our own beliefs,

totally rejecting another's viewpoint. We take an "I don't want to hear it" attitude and in some cases, an "I don't like you anymore." We are often unable to separate the person from their position. I discuss the need to separate the person from the position in Chapter 3.

Many people today are addicted to social media. Social and behavioral scientists are busy studying the psychological ramifications of this fairly new phenomenon. I have talked with many people who say they have disconnected from social media and now feel less stressed. Some, who have not done so, bring these intense emotions and associated anxiety with them to work. And they do not stop communicating on polarizing issues just because they are at work.

THE IMPACT ON EMPLOYEES, IN THEIR OWN WORDS

The Winters Group has conducted a number of dialogue sessions for a variety of different clients over the past year, supporting them in effectively addressing the aftermath of recent traumatic events and the polarized views that seem to always be associated with them. My first request is "Describe how you are feeling in one word." The responses range from depressed, despondent, frustrated, angry, helpless, and hopeless to encouraged, energized, hopeful, and optimistic. However, a majority of the emotions are negative.

Psychologists believe that the recurrence of unfortunate events intensifies feelings of stress and trauma. The more we see images of police shootings, terrorist attacks, and other acts of violence, the more we are likely to experience effects likened to post traumatic stress syndrome. Individuals who are most impacted by these events—for instance, black men fearful that they will be wrongly targeted by police, Muslim women in hijabs afraid they will be subject to bullying or

worse, transgendered employees afraid to use the bathroom that corresponds to their gender identities—are likely distracted at work. This impacts engagement and productivity.

The Winters Group has conducted several public, free virtual learning webinars to address some of these issues. One was called Race & Workplace Trauma during the Age of #BlackLivesMatter. More than 250 people were in attendance. Another, called Let the Healing Begin: Restoring Our Quest for Inclusion, was conducted immediately following the 2016 presidential election. Over 600 registered for this 90-minute session. We polled participants during both sessions to explore the extent to which these events impacted their productivity at work. More than 60 percent admitted that there was either a "great deal" or "somewhat" of an impact.

Here are some perspectives shared during these sessions:

> "I came to work the day after the Philando Castile killing and I said to my boss that I was pretty upset, and I got nothing, not even an acknowledgment. This really shook me up and now I don't know if I can really trust her."[20]
> —*African American male at large consulting company*
>   (I heard similar sentiments from several others from different companies.)

> "I am Muslim, gay, and from the Middle East. That is three strikes against me. When I am waiting for the train at the metro station I don't stand near the edge because I am afraid someone might push me in. I bring that fear to work with me every day. It does impact my ability to concentrate and do my best work."
> —*male employee at a not-for-profit research organization*

> "I was at work and got a call from my child at school. He was terrified because the kids were telling him that he

was going to be deported. I felt a need to leave and go and get him. My boss understood."
—*Latina employee at a large service organization*

"Our company sent out a statement after the Pulse Night Club shooting[21] but said nothing about the killings of unarmed black men. Why does one group deserve acknowledgment and sympathy and our group [African Americans] does not?"
—*African American employee at a large consulting firm*
  (I heard similar statements from African Americans at
  several different companies.)

"I have not been affected by these events at all. I could not have imagined the impact that it is having on you. It is shocking to me that you are fearful based on who you are."
—*white senior leader in a not-for-profit research organization*

"I work from home. I am isolated. I don't know what the sentiment is at the company really. I just know that my ability to stay focused on work has been impacted. I did look for a message from leadership. I think it would have helped."
—*African American woman at a large consulting firm*

"One of my coworkers was literally gloating after Donald Trump won the presidential election. I don't mind show-ing happiness that your candidate won, but the tone was like, 'See, now you people will have to know your place again.'"
—*African American woman at a government agency*

"As a Muslim doctor, I have patients who ask for a differ-ent physician because they do not want to be seen by a Muslim. I have colleagues who are visiting nurses, who

have doors shut in their faces when they arrive for home health care services because of the color of their skin. We have to talk about these issues in the workplace."
—*Muslim doctor at a large health-care organization*

"I am the only person of Middle Eastern descent on my team. I overhear conversations about terrorists, but they never discuss that with me. As a matter of fact, I think they purposefully avoid such conversations around me. It makes me feel isolated. I don't really feel like I am a part of the team."
—*Muslim engineer at a large technology company*

While over the past five years, our awareness of traumatizing events has increased, unreported incidences of unequal treatment that impact **historically marginalized groups** are certainly not new.

Fifteen years ago, I was conducting a diversity strategy session for a large insurance company in the Midwest. It was a three-day event comprised of senior leaders who were charged with developing the company's inclusion strategy. On the second day, one of the African American male participants arrived a few minutes late. He was visibly distracted. Later, I learned that he had been stopped by the police on his way to the session, which was held at a venue in a high-income part of town. No infraction had occurred. The police officer asked to see his license and wanted to know where he was going. He was asked where he lived, where he worked, and what brought him to that area.

This incident was extremely disturbing to this African American executive. He did not want to share the incident publicly with the rest of the group, even though it was a diversity session, because his organization, in his estimation, was not ready to really deal with such issues. He admitted to

me that it was difficult for him to continue to engage in the session.

How many people are bringing similar stresses with them to work as a result of being targeted just because of what they look like? How many feel that they must suffer in silence?

COMPANY SILENCE TRANSLATES INTO "YOU DON'T CARE"

During The Winters Group's virtual learning sessions, we asked: "What is the impact when your manager and your company are silent about what is going on in the external world?" The most common response is "We don't think they care." Employees who are impacted, either directly or indirectly, by these events are looking for their companies to say something. Organizations do not operate in a bubble; what is happening in the external world has a direct impact on employees, and they are talking about it at work whether we like it or not.

CEO's Story Reveals Aha Moment

AT&T's CEO, Randall Stephenson, made a public statement at an employee meeting about Black Lives Matter. "Our communities are being destroyed by racial tension and we're too polite to talk about it," referring to shootings and protests in Charlotte, North Carolina; Ferguson, Missouri; Baton Rouge, Louisiana; and Dallas, Texas.[22]

Stephenson also shared a story of his struggles with understanding the US racial divide. One of Stephenson's longtime friends who happens to be African American, provided an aha experience for him. Stephenson said that he learned that his friend's life as an African American male doctor is fraught with being called negative names, being mistaken for the server in restaurants, and needing to always carry his ID,

even in his own neighborhood, because of experiences with law enforcement.

Stephenson told his employees that he was embarrassed that he had known this man for many years, had shared intimate moments, counted him as one of his best friends, and had no idea of his daily struggles as a black man in America. At the end of his speech, the employees cheered. In that moment, Stephenson made himself vulnerable and passionately articulated the compelling reason for having the courage to dialogue about our differences. The world now knows Stephenson's stance. The video has garnered over 160,000 YouTube views. In an increasingly competitive hiring market, I think this will boost efforts to attract diverse talent to AT&T.

Company's Proactive Approach Leads the Way

Sodexo is a company that is routinely heralded for its progressive inclusive practices. It has been number one on *DiversityInc*'s list of top 50 companies for diversity several times and has won a number of other awards for diversity and inclusion. It is also taking a proactive approach in supporting employees in navigating the current social and political environment. The company has issued several statements letting employees know that it cares and advising them on where they can seek support internally.

In addition, The Winters Group has designed several virtual learning labs for Sodexo's inclusion community, including HR and employee network group leaders, to provide tools and tips for engaging in bold conversations. The 90-minute learning sessions, entitled Affirming Inclusion: Meaningful Dialogue across Difference, explore strategies for maintaining inclusive environments after tragedies.

After the 2016 election, The Winters Group hosted a

learning lab for Sodexo employees entitled Moving For-
ward: Reaffirming Our Commitment to Inclusion, with the
goal of examining feelings after the results of the divisive
2016 presidential election and reaffirming what it means
to be inclusive. The content was balanced, recognizing that
their employees represent all political parties. We explored
the complex reasons for political polarization, including the
socio-economic divide, lingering effects of the 2008 reces-
sion, influence of social media, worsening race relations, and
technological advances that are replacing human workers
with automated solutions.

In addition to the virtual learning labs, Sodexo has a page
on its diversity and inclusion site called Inclusion Amidst
Turbulent Times—Fostering Understanding across Differ-
ences. It acknowledges the pain associated with the violence
and terrorism and provides employees with several inter-
nal resources for different groups, including blacks/African
Americans, immigrant employees, Muslims, and the LGBTQ
community.

Sodexo's website is proactive in providing employees with
tools to dialogue across difference. It believes that offering
these resources will improve employees' overall sense of
well-being and thus improve engagement. It is consistent
with Sodexo's mission of "improving the quality of life for
those they serve."

Virtual Learning Labs Provide Tools

A large trade association attended one of The Winters Group's
public virtual sessions on race-based trauma. Following that,
the organization hosted a series of what it calls Health Hints
to continue to discuss the topic and provide employees with
coping strategies and tips on how to be an ally. In conjunction
with these efforts, they retained The Winters Group to offer

a virtual learning opportunity to further enhance employees' capabilities in having culturally competent, constructive conversations around race and trauma. The session explored the current state of race relations and implications for the workplace and provided strategies for engaging in meaningful dialogue around race. The evaluations showed that employees who attended felt better equipped to manage the stressors and to engage in effective dialogue.

ENGAGING IN CONVERSATIONS SENDS THE SIGNAL THAT AN ORGANIZATION CARES

There has been a consensus among participants that just allowing the opportunity for the dialogue is cathartic and sends a message that the organization is sensitive to the impact of these types of events. Most say that they just wanted to be able to share their feelings and hear how others may be coping. However, progressive companies recognize that this initial sharing session is not enough. People may feel better for the moment, but despite heightened awareness, there are no solutions. In order for effective dialogue to continue, employees need the skills necessary to go deeper in fostering mutual understanding. Skill building takes time, which is why Sodexo conducts ongoing skill-building training for its employees. Chapters 5 and 6 focus on building and practicing the skills.

You may not be able to precisely account for the loss of productivity caused by the emotional toll of tragic events or immediately gauge the enhanced engagement that may come from employers' acknowledging the impact, but it can be significant. Taking a proactive approach demonstrates to employees that the company cares and wants to be supportive. It is critical to develop ways to have meaningful conversations across difference. In the end, it will help to create

an environment that allows every employee to feel like they belong.

CHAPTER 1 ◆ TIPS FOR TALKING ABOUT IT!

◆ Recognize that whether we think it is right or not, employees are talking about topics like race, religion, politics, and other polarizing topics in the workplace.

◆ Because workplaces are increasingly diverse with different racial/ethnic groups, religions, sexual orientations, and so on, you will need to pay attention to the needs of different groups if you want to engage all employees.

◆ Realize that the tragic events that are occurring in our world impact different groups in different ways and can negatively influence productivity, engagement, and employees' sense of safety.

◆ Recognize that employees bring their fears and other emotions into the workplace.

◆ Promote inclusion and provide resources to support employees in addressing their concerns.

◆ Provide tools and resources to develop skills to effectively talk about polarizing topics.

◆ Create the space for bold dialogues to occur. This reduces anxiety and increases workers' sense of well-being, which, in turn, enhances productivity, engagement, and inclusion.