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Leading Black Employees During Times of Social Unrest

There was a time when speaking about certain topics at work was strictly taboo. Any discussion of religion, politics, or sex could result in disciplinary action, a one-way ticket to the unemployment office, or even a lawsuit. But increasingly, political discussions are pervading the workplace. Recent data from [Gartner](#)'s Election 2020 Survey reveals that 78% of employees report discussing politics at work. In addition, 31% of employees who talk politics at work report these conversations to be stressful and/or frustrating.

And it's not just election politics. Massive social change and civil unrest are dominating our global landscape. Protests, demonstrations, and periods of social upheaval have had an exhausting impact on all of us.

In the U.S., on a daily basis, we're confronted with racial injustice, including the abuse and deaths of Black people. Whether it's at the hands of police officers or racist individuals, the devastating effects of this behavior and disparate treatment are front and center. TV. Radio. Social media. Books. Blogs. Murals. Songs. Poetry. We're bombarded.

Black employees can't ignore it. We can't turn off the TV. Sure, we can unplug from social media for an hour, a day, or a weekend, but we can't turn off our blackness. We

must bring our whole selves to work with the enormity of these tragedies invading the corners of our hearts and minds.

If you're a leader, you know that problems don't go away on their own. They must be addressed, and if not resolved, at least monitored. What's happening in the world today is no different. Instead of being a victim of change, you can tackle it head on and manage it. Here's how: Acknowledge, communicate, watch for stressors, and give us grace.

Acknowledge

Recognize and publicly acknowledge that there is a problem and that Black employees are being affected. By publicly, I don't mean jump on social media and post a popular tagline with no meaningful action plan. Start with your direct report(s), your team, your department, or your organization. You might choose to address each person individually or if you have multiple employees, schedule a team meeting to give a consistent message.

Acknowledge the situation. Express empathy. Reassure employees that your door is open, and you are here to talk if they need you. Boom. End of story. Nothing else.

This is not the time for you to interject your politics or discuss whether you have "many Black friends" or whatever. Don't say you understand how they feel because you probably don't. This is presumptuous and may come across as unauthentic. It is acceptable to say, "I can only imagine how you feel" or "I understand that a lot of people are hurting right now."

It's okay to be vulnerable, but remember, this is not about you. Employees just want to know that their leaders are good, decent human beings who have their backs. Showing your support and to commitment diversity and inclusion and issues that impact them goes a long way. If you've always been transparent and fair, you should have no problem with this part. On the other hand, if these attributes have been absent from your leadership style in the past, it may be harder to inspire trust from your employees, but it's never too late to start.

Communicate Properly



Leaders are expected to be effective communicators. However, this can be difficult for leaders who aren't skilled in developing employees and cultivating relationships. If your company culture doesn't encourage frequent one-on-one meetings with direct reports, take it upon yourself to schedule regular touch bases. It's one of the best ways to build trust and learn about your employees' work habits and personal lives.

Take the time to really listen to what employees have to say. Whether in person or remotely, find an area free of distractions where you can focus on them. Look at their body language. Hear their tone of voice. Provide a safe environment for them to share their stories and their feelings. If they tell you something looks/feels/sounds hurtful or offensive, believe them. Don't get defensive. Don't ask for proof. Don't ask why something is offensive. Just know that it is.

Communication is a two-way street. After you listen, ask what you can do to help. Ask what they need from you. Let them know you're on their side and you care about them. If you're communicating through writing, do something as simple as sending an email to check on them. My manager frequently sends texts reminding me that she's available to talk no matter when I need her. Those texts have made me feel valued and appreciated.

When communicating, watch your language. The verbiage you use can derail any good intent you may have had. If you refer to protestors and demonstrators as rioters or looters, it has a negative connotation. You don't have the right to decide what is an

acceptable form of protest. Keep in mind that an increasing number of colleagues (Blacks and non-Blacks) are participating in social activism. Depending on how you come across, an employee may see you as part of the problem instead of an ally. Don't do anything to distract from the positive message you're trying to convey.



Watch for Stressors

When employees trust you enough to share their feelings, consider yourself fortunate. This means they have faith that you can handle the truth. The old saying that feedback is a gift is true. Being plugged into what's happening in your employees' lives can be a valuable superpower. Watch for signs of distress. Are they restless? Are they considering leaving? Are they unfulfilled? Are they missing deadlines? If a usually talkative employee has been quiet or distant during the last few meetings, the silence could be a sign of stress. Reach out and check on them for any behavior that may indicate an underlying issue.

Broad, sweeping social change prompts many people to make life-altering decisions, both at home and at work. Having your finger on the pulse of what's going on shows not only that you care, but that you're proactive and intentional about retaining talent.

Lastly, if employees communicate any issues that are beyond your area of expertise, don't freak out. You don't have to handle any of this alone. Use your resources (HR, Diversity & Inclusion department, Leader toolkits, and/or HRBPs). And remind

employees of any available company resources, such as EAP, employee resource groups, self-care/lifestyle programs, company town halls and webinars.



Give us Grace

This constant cycle of death is exhausting.

While we may not have known George Floyd or Breonna Taylor personally, we're still impacted more than you know. Last week after the shooting of Jacob Blake, I had to have "the talk" with my sons again. Not the *Facts of Life* talk, but the *Living While Black* talk to make sure they know what to do when they encounter the police. It doesn't matter if they're minding their own business, bowling at the local bowling alley, or picking up groceries at Walmart. They could be killed during a routine traffic stop.

I think about all of this while I'm on conference calls with stakeholders. I think about it when I'm sending an email to my team members. I think about it whenever the phone rings with an unfamiliar number. It weighs heavily on my heart and mind. Yet I must still bring my best self to work and exemplify the professional standard I'm known for. While beneath the surface, all this angst simmers like a pot on a stove that constantly needs to be watched.

And I'm not the only one who feels this way. Black colleagues have shared identical stories with me. White co-workers have told me they have grandchildren of color, and they have these same worries. As a leader, you need to recognize that many of your employees may be dealing with raw emotions you cannot visibly see.

Leading a remote team presents another set of challenges. You can't just pop into someone's office or drop by for an impromptu coffee break. Employees who are working from home may feel even more isolated and disconnected from their leaders and the rest of the team. At home, there are no restraints on how much news we consume. Remote workers can get bombarded by even more TV and social media. Throw in COVID issues and family drama, and it's easy to quickly feel overwhelmed.

It's even more critical for leaders to check on the mental well-being of these employees. I'm not telling you to get on a Zoom call and start singing *Kumbaya*. Just be aware that we're going through some major stress right now. We may need flexibility in our schedules. For example, moving morning meetings to afternoons so we can help with our kid's online math class. In short, remember to give us grace.

This may seem like more than you bargained for. Big changes can cause deep divisions or they can bring out the best in people. Likewise, your actions can close the gap or expand it. Don't look at this change as something negative. Focus on the positive. This is your opportunity to set the standard and lead by example.