

Asking the Question: Uncovering the Assumptions that Undermine Conversations Across Race¹

Why is it that discussions about race still paralyze groups in organizations? Consider the following typical scenario:

A group of employees, mixed by race, is meeting to discuss the company's approach to diversity. Top management has sanctioned the meeting. Employees welcome the opportunity to address concerns that seem to hamper their daily working relationships. As the conversation begins, however, a heaviness descends on the group. The conversation is an uneasy one, with long pauses, people staring at the floor, and numerous starts and stops. Comments and questions are left unanswered. Participants appear more uncomfortable physically, shifting in their seats, and sighing frequently. As the group takes a rest break, employees seem to hurry to a safe space. Away from the meeting, animated conversations take place. When the group returns, however, it is again burdened by the discussion. At the end of the meeting, many employees leave feeling unsettled. Some comment that nothing was really accomplished, that the real concerns were not discussed, and that this was a waste of time.

Even in an environment that celebrates diversity, having a dialogue across differences like race can be stilted, difficult, and unproductive.

While many would suggest that ignoring race is an undesirable and ineffective approach, others would argue that focusing on race has not proven to be a successful strategy either. Those who engage in discussions about and across race may leave the conversation believing that the gulf is wider and deeper than they anticipated.

There are instances, however, when mixed-race groups remove impediments to having a productive discussion. One way is for an individual to pose a question that taps into the fundamental beliefs and opinions that are influencing the conversation. Almost immediately, group members let out a collective sigh of relief that someone has named the elephant in the room, thereby opening the way to a candid and meaningful discussion. I call this "asking the question." Asking the question is a process through which individuals use inquiry as a method for inviting others to consider basic assumptions that are generating conflict. These questions allow the group to access the subtext of the conversation—to consider what is not being said, but is nevertheless present. The information gained by asking the question can provide insights that help the group view both its purpose and its interaction from a different perspective — one which may complicate the boundaries between races such that groups can move beyond their racial differences without ignoring them.

Race as an "Undiscussable"

Chris Argyris has been drawing our attention to "undiscussables" for almost 30 years.² Undiscussables are issues or dynamics within organizations that everyone "knows" should not be

r a i s e d (whether or not they have ever been explicitly told) in open conversation. These issues tap into the basic, unchallenged beliefs and assumptions that drive the group and organization.

Rarely are organizational participants aware of the powerful influence of these deep-rooted assumptions. Argyris argues that the existence of the undiscussables may itself become undiscussable, driving these topics further underground. Interactions during this stage become especially onerous since the group has no mechanism for discussing the topic or for challenging its undiscussability. The result is deteriorating exchanges that obscure both real problems and viable solutions to the work the group has been asked to complete.

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We still have much to learn about how to build successful working relationships across race, and it remains an undiscussable in many organizational settings. This sense of race as being “off limits” can manifest itself in two ways. First, managers may find that providing a forum within which to discuss race may, ironically, ensure its undiscussability. If participants enter the conversation with fears of making comments that might be construed as derogatory or confrontational, they will act in ways to protect themselves. Perhaps two of the biggest fears are being called a racist or a troublemaker; even the suspicion that one could be either can prove detrimental to a person’s working relationships. Participants may even view the forum as an opportunity to be exposed and disciplined rather than as a chance to openly discuss race. Second, in some groups, *any* topic can raise tensions if people of different racial backgrounds address it. If a difference in opinion between whites and blacks in a conversation becomes apparent — even when no such division was evident at the beginning of their discussion — an awareness of the difference in perspectives may be sufficient to bring conversation to a halt. What is undiscussable? Perhaps it is the beliefs and assumptions each group has about the competence of the other, the difference in organizational opportunities for each group, or power differentials between the groups (or even lack thereof). These organizational concerns are buttressed by strong societal, historical, and cultural influences regarding the relative position of each group in the larger U.S. society. Rarely is a group able to explicitly discuss them as concrete, current realities that circumscribe the group’s ability to foster productive relationships.

An Illustration: Getting Stuck

Two groups, one almost exclusively white and the other black, of the most senior women in a large financial institution were each advocating for changes that would make the company a more hospitable and equitable environment. The white women’s group had been quite successful in lobbying the CEO and top management team to address the concerns of women. In continuing their efforts, the white women believed a stronger case could be made if black and white women worked together to influence top management (which was largely white and male). The black women were not interested in an alliance, however, and organized to approach the CEO on their own. They distrusted the white women’s intentions; in their view, the white women did not understand or accept their role, as whites, in perpetuating racism inside the organization.

A trusted white female consultant advised the white women to “learn about race.” The white women agreed, though they were unsure what “learning about race” meant and even less clear about why the black women were so reluctant to form an alliance. Representatives from each group formed a planning committee charged with devising a strategy for establishing a partnership. Even though individuals from each group knew each other, the meeting was uneasy from the start, with long pauses, uneasy glances, anxious chuckles, and attempts at humor. Quickly, the tone turned somber and formal, as the group decided to “get down to business.” The white women outlined their purpose for wanting to meet with the black women. The black women stated their reluctance to do so. None of this was new information for either group. After that, the conversation became slow and laborious, as various women stated and restated their positions.

The meeting was notable more for what was not being said. Each group had held several meetings in order to prepare for this one, and the meetings had been marked by animated debate. However, the concerns raised within each group were not aired in the cross-race meeting. Doing so was not easy; there were many undiscussables. There is a long history in the U.S. of strained relationships between black and white women. As Naomi Wolf has noted, white women wonder why black women do not like them or want to be friends with them.³ White women see black women as distrusting and distant. Black women, however, see themselves as occupied with a unique set of concerns that white women will not understand. They see white women as members of a privileged race and, thus, the enemy; white women see black women as co-members of an underprivileged gender and, thus, potential allies. Against this backdrop, any overture by white women may be viewed suspiciously, and reluctance from black women may be interpreted as rejection. Furthermore, any interaction between the two may be fraught with tension if the groups attempt to work together without some fundamental understanding of the motives and stance of the other. In short, having a conversation without uncovering assumptions erects barriers in the interaction. Yet, having an explicit conversation is risky terrain.

While there are many helpful theories, strategies, and techniques to address diversity, one crucial piece has been underemphasized: risk-taking. We recognize it when we see it; we applaud it when we hear it. However, we still wish for an approach that will allow us to connect across our differences without taking a risk. My argument here is that we cannot. If, as Argyris has argued, airing embedded beliefs and assumptions facilitates or-

ganizational learning, the ability to work with differences such as race will be strengthened by unearthing and critically examining the assumptions driving cross-race interactions.

Taking a Risk: Asking the Question

The challenge for organizational participants, then, is to articulate and consider assumptions that burden a group. In the case discussed so far, at a particularly awkward part of the conversation, one of the white women said, “How far down the path of understanding differences does one have to get before you start to understand the sameness?” There was a long pause while all the women considered the question. The conversation picked up considerably after this, and eventually the two groups agreed to proceed with a session devoted to understanding race more fully.

The willingness to ask what was a fundamental question for a white woman helped push this group forward. The content of the question was not unfamiliar; the white women had talked with each other about what they really wanted to know from black women. They also had a shared understanding of what they could not ask black women. At one meeting of the white women, one person said, “We know what we can’t ask them. We can’t ask them what they want. We hate it when the men ask us that.” Asking the question, then, required courage. The white women believed that they might again be accused of being “clueless.” Moreover, the conversation might have broken down completely, with the asker being viewed as the culprit, if the black women found the question too aggressive or offensive.

Instead, the question helped the women reflect on and reconsider the dynamics within and across their groups. For example, key assump-

tions held by the black women began to emerge. These assumptions included:

- That focusing on difference is the basis for building an alliance. Oftentimes, black women assume that white women would prefer to ignore difference.⁴
- That developing a full understanding of difference requires time; thus, the focus on race must be a sustained one. Black women see white women as allowing the emphasis on race to dissipate over time, reverting to gender and/or rewriting race as gender.
- That an essential precondition for establishing a working partnership is the willingness of white women to occupy a learning role with respect to race. Black women see themselves as having to teach white women about race.

White women — even those who did not agree with the assumptions — began to understand more clearly the basis for the black women’s concerns.⁵

Secondly, intra-group controversies became evident after the question was posed. Though a consensus had developed in each group regarding key issues, neither group had unanimous support for its stance. Some black women questioned the need to focus exclusively on race, while some members of the white women’s group thought focusing entirely on gender was problematic. These intra-group controversies are often invisible to outsiders. In this case, however, differences within race became visible while the women considered the question, making the dividing line across race less stark.

Lastly, in the wake of asking the question, the women began to envision the possibility of establishing cross-race connections. Individual women considered their own assumptions and

those of others, finding areas of agreement across race. This complicated the rigid black/white boundary and allowed women to risk some loss of intra-group loyalty and cohesion by forming individual cross-race connections. These “subgroups” provided a foundation for further links between the two groups.⁶ For example, the leaders of both groups began to share their misgivings about the proposed partnership. This subgroup influenced other women to revisit the history, development, and purpose of the relationship between the two groups. Eventually, the women agreed that a dual focus on race and gender was both necessary and possible, and they crafted an agenda for action that was more expansive than that of either group.

Facilitating Asking the Question

Asking a question that uncovers assumptions and stimulates individual contemplation helps build connections across groups. How does one know which question to ask and, more importantly, gather the courage to ask it? During an interaction, each of us often has thoughts and feelings that pull at us repeatedly. We leave with the nagging question on our minds, particularly if we have no trusted ally with whom to discuss it. We often take these questions into side conversations. Part of the reason the question is a nagging one is that it violates a cherished thought or belief. It creates dissonance within us. These are the undiscussable thoughts and feelings that can be offered as questions to the group. Groups that use distorted, inaccurate data are less capable of successfully reaching their objectives. A consideration of newly discovered (or offered) thoughts and feelings is information for the group, which can be used to improve the group’s functioning.

Determining when to ask the question can be a thorny issue, particularly in an organizational setting where being seen as competent and judicious is critical to one's success. Moreover, we may not have had an opportunity to think through the issue enough to pose the question in an artful manner. Much of the risk, however, is associated with the timing rather than content or style of the inquiry. Asking a question may be viewed as an unwelcome and ill-timed interruption, even in groups that are at a standstill.

Because the consequences can be great for individuals who interrupt a group at an impasse, groups and organizations may choose to adopt practices that help individuals give voice to their pressing concerns. For example, suggesting that individuals ask questions rather than offer solutions absolves participants from the burden of finding *the* answer for what is troubling the group. Anonymity can also be beneficial. One tool may be allowing space for "burning questions" into sessions.⁷ Participants can write down any question, comment, or observation that s/he did not want to ask or have an opportunity to ask during the session. There is no requirement that participants do so; they are invited to if they choose. Time can be allotted for airing these burning questions, whether it is by simply reading them or by providing a mechanism for answering and wrestling with the questions.

Moving Forward

The road from asking the question to successfully working together as partners is a long, complex one. The de-

sire to see immediate results from interventions such as this, and the disappointment and frustration that can follow, often derail us from continuing the work necessary to ultimately improve our interactions. In the account discussed here, I am not suggesting that asking the question magically propelled the two groups forward. Much further work remained before the groups began to work together in earnest. More importantly, missteps and setbacks occurred along the way, though the groups were more resilient and committed than in the past. Tapping into these underlying beliefs and assumptions gave the participants pause, however, and created rather than destroyed possibilities. These efforts at connecting across race need not be insurmountable, though they remain uncharted territory for many. As feminist writer Gloria Anzaldúa has written, "there are no bridges, one builds them as one walks."⁸

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Notes

¹ The ideas presented in this briefing note were developed, in part, during my year as a Senior Research Fellow at the Center for Gender in Organizations. I want to thank my colleagues at CGO for providing me with many opportunities to test and refine these ideas.

² Argyris, C. 1976. Single-Loop and Double-Loop Models in Research on Decision-Making. *Administrative Science Quarterly*. 21 (3), 363-

375. See also Argyris, C. 1977. Double Loop Learning in Organizations. *Harvard Business Review*. 55 (5), 115-125. See especially Argyris, C. 1986. Skilled Incompetence. *Harvard Business Review*. 64 (5), 74-79. Argyris continues to develop these ideas in Argyris, C. 1991. Teaching Smart People How to Learn. *Harvard Business Review*. 69 (3) 99-109.

³ Wolf, N. 1994. *Fire with Fire: The New Female Power and How to Use It*. New York: Ballantine Books.

⁴ Audre Lorde noted that, "As women, we have been taught to either ignore our differences or to view them as causes for separation and suspicion rather than as forces for change." In Lorde, A. 1983. *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House*. In Moraga, C. and G. Anzaldúa (eds). *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 98-101.

⁵ This description of the black women's assumptions is based on the discussion during the planning meeting and observation of prior meetings among the black women. The white women's assumptions were less accessible during the planning meeting. I would argue that tapping into any assumptions would help the two groups move forward.

⁶ See Agazarian, Y. 1999. Phases of Development in the Systems-Centered Psychotherapy Group. *Small Group Research*. 30 (1). 82-107.

⁷ Maureen Scully, Affiliated Faculty at the Center for Gender in Organizations, and I have used this technique effectively during executive diversity training sessions.

⁸ Anzaldúa, G. 1983. Foreword to the Second Edition. In Moraga, C. and G. Anzaldúa (eds). *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press.

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Linking gender and organizational effectiveness

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