

Workplace Racial Scenarios

1. A workplace meeting is scheduled to discuss the new commitment to racial equity expressed by the organization's leaders. There are 18 white employees and 4 employees of color in the department. Over the week leading up to the meeting several white people approach the employees of color. One is asked, "You don't think there is an issue with racism, do you?" Another is met in the break room by 2 co-workers. One complains about having to go to the meeting. She says, "It's these kinds of discussions that create the problem by making everyone afraid to say the littlest thing!" After this encounter, the other co-worker takes the employee of color aside and tells her that she didn't agree with what their colleague said and that she was sorry.

When the meeting starts, there is tension in the room. A white employee of this new initiative isn't just reverse discrimination. He says, "I'm concerned about lowered standards." His statement is followed by silence.

2. A committee is created for a new hire. They begin developing the position description when someone points out that they are all white. They ask a co-worker of color to join the committee. This colleague is asked to write "the diversity question." When the committee is down to considering the 3 final candidates (2 are white and 1 is a person of color), they disagree on what is a strong answer to the "diversity question," with the member of color assessing the answers differently from the rest. To the committee's relief, she eventually agrees with their assessment. During the discussion of candidates, the question of fit keeps surfacing. The final decision is made based on fit and who could start by "hitting the ground running."

3. Your institution initiates a series of workshops on racial equity. Many of your co-workers are perplexed. One states that basic respect and kindness are all that is needed, and everyone here is kind and respectful. So what's the problem? Another says that they aren't going because they have already been to workshops on this topic. One says that it isn't relevant because he is in IT. Another asks why they only focus on race when there are other oppressions we should be talking about too.

4. A group of staff meet with administration to share their frustrations with the racial climate. What are some constructive ways this meeting could go? Unconstructive? What should the administration keep in mind?

5. A co-worker lets you know that something you have said has been racially problematic for her. You had no idea and certainly didn't intend to cause offense.

- What are some unconstructive ways that you could respond?
- What are some constructive ways that you could respond?

Questions to guide your discussion (not every question will apply to every scenario).

Note: These dynamics are complex and your task is to map out as many of them as possible, not necessarily to “solve” the problem. The more we understand how racism operates, the more effective our responses will be.

1. What are the various ways racism is being enacted (whether intentional or not)?
2. What is not being understood?
3. How is racism being protected?
4. What are some more effective responses?