

# Talking About Race Toolkit

Center for Social Inclusion

<http://www.centerforsocialinclusion.org>

AFFIRM

COUNTER

TRANSFORM



**Affirm**– Start off the dialogue by mentioning phrases and images that speak to the audience's values. The key is to hook and engage your audience.

## 1. Start with the heart

- o Start your message with an emotional connector to engage your audience in the message (e.g., *We work hard to support our families and all our contributions help make America great*)

## 2. Explain why we are all in this together

- o Explain “shared fate” in racially-explicit terms (e.g., *It hurts the same to lose a home or job, whether we are White or Black, male or female, a single parent or a two-parent family...*)



**Counter**– Lead the audience into the discussion of race with a **brief snapshot of the historical context**. The key is to open the audience's minds to deeper explanations about racial inequities.

## 1. Explain why we have the problem

- o Give a very brief explanation of what has happened in the past and explain why we have a problem today. (e.g., *Public dollars for schools, bus service, health care and a hundred more things we need, helped create jobs in the past. Cutting them now is not the answer to our problems, it will be the cause of more pain and misery.*)

## 2. Take on race directly

- o Take on the race wedge by declaring it and dismissing it by naming institutional opportunities and actions (e.g., *This is not about immigrants or welfare. This is about whether Americans will see their children off to college...*)



**Transform**– Leave the audience with an engaging solution. The key is to present a solution so that the audience feels committed and feels as though they are progressing forward.

## 1. Reframe “makers” and “takers”

- o Change and define who the real good guys and bad guys are in this fight (e.g., *And while oil company and bank CEOs are getting richer, some are laying off workers and fighting for tax loopholes to avoid paying taxes, instead of investing in our nation’s future...*)

## 2. End with heart and solution

- o Present solutions in emotional terms (e.g., *They [corporations] can and should do their fair share so we the people can invest in schools, health care, transit and services that help us all make a bright future for our country.*)

## Common Detours Used in Discussions about Race and Oppression

Detours	Examples	Use ACT to Interrupt This Detour
<b>Deny, minimize and invalidate</b>	“We had two different meeting times as options, and still no people of color participated”	<p><b>Affirm:</b> We all care about issues that will be discussed in the meetings.</p> <p><b>Counter:</b> People cope differently when experiencing stress or trauma. The current social and political environment can be stressful and traumatizing for people of color. It is not up to us to judge them on non-participation in these meetings.</p> <p><b>Transform:</b> Perhaps having more than two meeting times in the future will allow more people to participate in the meetings.</p>
<b>Blame the victim</b>	“If they really wanted to be there they would have made the time.”	<p><b>Affirm:</b> We all care about these issues and want to make our voices heard.</p> <p><b>Counter:</b> Historically, white people have benefited from systemic racism and people of color have been disenfranchised by it. Barriers such as transportation and child care could prevent people of color from actively being more engaged and volunteering their time.</p> <p><b>Transform:</b> Next time we could check on our colleagues of color and ask what assistance they might need to make it to the meetings.</p>
<b>Call it something else</b>	“The Neighborhoods – Oh, well, what can you expect from ...”	<p><b>Affirm:</b> We all want to live in a great neighborhood with good schools and built environments.</p> <p><b>Counter:</b> Institutional racism often deprives POC of opportunities that most white people have. For instance, banks are more likely to give loans to white people than black/POC people. Also, property managers are more likely to overlook minor issues on background checks for white applicants than black applicants.</p> <p><b>Transform:</b> Advocating on housing equity could help POC’s to have the same housing opportunities that white people have.</p>
<b>It’s better this way</b>	“Well of course that neighborhood is more ‘ethnic’ – people want to live near their own.”	<p><b>Affirm:</b> We live in a world when a person’s zip code is a strong predictor of life expectancy. People want to live in a place where they feel safe and happy, and healthy.</p>

		<p><b>Counter:</b> Practices such as redlining and exclusionary zoning have led to the concentration of some ethnic groups in certain areas/zip codes.</p> <p><b>Transform:</b> Let's continue to advocate for equitable policies that will lead to closing the gaps so that race, gender, income, or ethnicity does not predict individuals' health outcomes or life expectancy.</p>
<p><b>It doesn't count if you don't mean it</b></p>	<p>"I was only joking."          "Well, it's just the truth – I didn't make it that way."</p>	<p><b>Affirm:</b> Bad jokes are insensitive and do hurt people's feelings.</p> <p><b>Counter:</b> Apologizing when we make a mistake allows us to learn from our mistake and maintain a healthy group dynamic.</p> <p><b>Transform:</b> The concept of race and racism is very complex. We are all trying our best to be cognizant of the oppression that white people have inflicted on people of color for generations. We all have biases, but acting on our bias can be discriminatory and damaging. Let's continue to be conscious of that when interacting with our group members.</p>
<p><b>I'm one of the good ones</b></p>	<p>"I work with those people every day"          "Some of my friends are _____"</p>	<p><b>Affirm:</b> Working with people of color does not make us good people or anti-racist.</p> <p><b>Counter:</b> We live in a society that has been embedded in racism and oppression, and statements like that do not foster relationship building or trust establishment.</p> <p><b>Transform:</b> Our words are powerful, and the way we talk about people of color matters. We are working toward a just and fair society, and our words and actions need to reflect that we are not only allies, but also co-conspirators.</p>
<p><b>Sick and tired</b></p>	<p>"Here we go again."</p>	<p><b>Affirm:</b> It can be easy to be sick and tired of an issue if it does not impact us.</p> <p><b>Counter:</b> The majority of white people do not have to endure trauma related to issues such as police brutality, racial discrimination and systemic racism.</p> <p><b>Transform:</b> Instead of using our privileges to deprive people of color of their right to express themselves and raise awareness of the trauma that they are experiencing, let us use our privileges to be allies and co-conspirators.</p>

<p><b>But What About Me (BWAME)</b></p>	<p>“But What About Me... ...Why can’t we have this much discussion about _____ issues?”</p>	<p><b>Affirm:</b> Centering people of color when we are talking about oppression does not mean that other people who are being oppressed are being ignored.</p> <p><b>Counter:</b> It is important to acknowledge that some white people also experience adverse events in life. However, their skin color is not one of the things that makes their life difficult.</p> <p><b>Transform:</b> When black people are doing better, then everyone is doing better. Lets continue the fight for equity instead of equality.</p>
<p><b>The exception</b></p>	<p>“Now we have a black president“</p>	<p><b>Affirm:</b> Having a black president is certainly progress since we have never had one in the history of our country.</p> <p><b>Counter:</b> However, having a black president does not automatically makes us an anti-racist society nor erase the decades of oppression that black people have experienced in our country.</p> <p><b>Transform:</b> The majority of black Americans still live in poverty due to discriminatory policies that prevent them from accumulating wealth like their white counterparts. Let’s continue to fight for policies that are fair, that have the potential to undo the impact of unfair and unjust policies on black communities.</p>

**Thank you to Rachel Azanleko-Akouete for developing the above examples!**

**PRACTICE SCENARIOS:** Use the scenarios below, or situations you are experiencing to develop a response using the Affirm, Counter, Transform model.

1. In discussing current public health issues with a relative, she mentions that outbreaks of diseases like measles are the result of “illegal immigrants” bringing disease across the border.
2. You live in a racially diverse neighborhood, but those who attend neighborhood association meetings are all white. Neighborhood leaders say it’s too bad, but the meetings are open to everyone and they can’t make people of color attend if they don’t want to.
3. You are working with colleagues to develop a client satisfaction survey. One of the questions asks whether the client would consider utilizing the program again. A colleague says “we want to be careful how the question is worded, because we don’t want to encourage these people to have more children.”

4. In a discussion of the deaths of **George Floyd/ Trayvon Martin**/Michael Brown/Tony Robinson/so many others, someone says that black-on-black crime is a far greater problem for African Americans than police shootings.
5. Your friend is stressing about getting into graduate school. She says that because of affirmative action, it would be so much easier if she was a person of color.
6. Someone says “Blacks don’t care about the environment. It’s not their issue.”
7. You are serving on the majority white planning committee for an upcoming conference. You think your black co-worker would be an asset to the committee, but one of the organizers says “We already have two African-Americans on this committee. I think our next member should be Asian or Latino.”
8. In a discussion on the educational achievement gap, someone cites research on early brain development and the word deficit among children growing up in poverty. She then says that poverty and under-involved parents are the real reasons why children of color fail in school.