

Caring for Each Other

Real Conversations at Work



“We must create safe places that allow us to advance this conversation (of social justice and our value of diversity) to better understand how unfolding events impact us as individuals, as an organization, and as a community.”

- Dr. Eugene Washington

Chancellor for Health Affairs, Duke University, and President and CEO, Duke University Health System

Our nation is now in the midst of multiple simultaneous crises, and the resulting anxiety, stress, grief and anger are not things we can turn off when we come to work. As leaders, we need to acknowledge the climate and understand the potential associated trauma. Our work is to create an environment where our team members feel safe, seen, heard and respected. Inviting them into a conversation with us about how they're doing and what they're feeling is a first step in demonstrating that you care and that they matter.

Now is the time to put our mission and values into action. If we truly believe in our core value of “caring for each other,” having conversations should be a natural part of demonstrating compassion and empathy for our team members. Connecting through conversations makes relationships stronger, and strong relationships build trust. And, this is not just one moment in time—we can use that trust to authentically address other challenging topics we may face at work, such as stress and burnout, loss of a patient, loss of a colleague, and more.

Ensuring your invitation to connect is genuine and not a box-checking requirement or an “OK I did it” is very important. Be mindful that not everyone is ready to engage, and not every black person wants to be at the center of this attention. Readiness is key. If team members chose not to accept the invitation or are not interested having a conversation, do not force the issue. Keep an open door, mind and heart for whenever the time is right.

Your readiness is just as vital. The following provides some guidance on how to prepare for having meaningful conversations with your team members and colleagues at work.

Setting the stage

- **Create the space:** When inviting team members to share, be clear about your intention to provide a safe space for a conversation. This dialogue can be one-on-one or in small groups, and held in person or virtually. Express that you are there to listen, and that all feelings, concerns, hopes or anxieties are welcome and valued. Make sure team members know that they only need to share if they wish to do so. Set the expectation that their privacy will be respected, and details of the conversation will not be shared with others. Make a personal commitment that you will not judge them because of their point of view. If others are present, ask that they extend the same respect.
- **Acknowledge** the reality of all that's happening in the world. Invite your team members into the conversation by asking, “Would anyone like to share their thoughts or feelings?” Then be ready to listen without feeling the need to offer a counterpoint, to “fix” or to be the expert. Psychologist Harriet Learner describes this as “listening with the same passion with which we want to be heard.” Remember your purpose is to serve others in this moment.

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Setting the stage (continued)

- **Demonstrate humility:** Present yourself with an open heart and mind as you listen to your team members. Our perspectives are shaped by our life experiences and sometimes, we may need help to bridge the gap of understanding. Expand your perspective by doing your homework—take advantage of available resources and/or connect with someone who may have a different outlook. This can help open your mind to what your team member(s) may be experiencing.
- **Allow yourself to be vulnerable:** Admitting this is a difficult conversation and that you don't have the words nor the answers is not a sign of weakness. It's one of the most courageous things you can do. Sharing your truth and being honest about your own discomfort can take the pressure off of having to show up "perfect." Being fully present is the most important thing to do right now.
- **Sit with your own discomfort:** Recognize that these are difficult conversations. Try to listen without filling all of the silence. The more you are able to tolerate the distress of silence, the more likely the discussion is to involve more people sharing their lived experiences. If the answer to the question, "Whose discomfort will I lessen by speaking up?" is "My own," keep silent and listen intently.
- **Share your commitment to be there and learn:** Now and always, your team looks to our leadership to understand whether conversations around tough topics are welcome. Again, understand that some team members will not want to engage with these issues at work, or with leaders, and that's okay. Don't force a dialogue. Your role is to make it clear that you will afford safe space for issues to be discussed if and when they would like to.
- **Offer continued support and resources:** Know that having one conversation is great, but it is also insufficient. One conversation is an important start, and ideally it will open the door to further exploration, conversations, and a supportive culture. During this time of major crisis and social unrest, the resulting issues may be bigger than you as a manager can or should handle. Duke has numerous resources to help, at many levels. Remind your team members of free mental health, grief and trauma counseling available to them, via PAS (or BHS in Raleigh). If you'd like to view all levels of support and [counseling](#) on one page, visit the [Well-Being Pyramid tools](#). Additional resources for well-being can be found [here](#).

Questions to get you started

Real conversations should **never** be scripted, but here are some thought prompts to help you open the floor and invite team members into a discussion. The first two questions are specific to combating racism. The last three can help start any tough conversation.

- *Would anyone like to share their thoughts or feelings about what is happening in our country right now?*
- *Duke Health has power as an employer, a buyer, and a brand. What is one opportunity you see for us to make a positive impact? How can we lead right now?*
- *Does anyone want to share how these events are affecting you or your team/family?*
- *What do you find most difficult about right now?*
- *How can we support you? Each other?*

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This can be difficult, and you may be uncomfortable.

That's ok. It's natural to fear that you will say or do something wrong. Remember to give yourself the same level of grace you are providing to your team. You are not alone, nor are you expected to solve these longstanding issues. As leaders, we are here to listen first, then take the actions we can. Ignoring what is in front of us is not a recommended option.

Consider starting and/or ending the discussion with three deep breaths. Also, consider keeping a journal. After each conversation, write down what you discovered about your team members and yourself as well as determine one thing you may do differently as a result. This helps with processing what you've learned, which leads to growth.

If the conversation gets tough, all you need to do is acknowledge. Strong opinions and emotions just mean you've created a climate of safety, so you don't need to counter them. Simply pause, acknowledge, and express appreciation for the sentiments:

"Thank you for sharing. I'm glad you feel safe to share."

"I can feel how strong this emotion is for you."

"Who else has an opinion to share?"

And finally, thank your team members for sharing.

This conversation is likely very difficult for team members too. Commit to keeping your door open for additional conversations as they find themselves ready.

Authentic human connection requires no special skill—just a genuine interest in caring for others. You've already got what it takes, because you have chosen to work in the most human-centered profession there is...and you've chosen to do it at Duke Health, where caring for others is our core value.

For more inspiration, see our list of resources in the [Moments to Movement toolkit](#) on Leadership Café.