

HOW TO START A RACIAL DISCUSSION GROUP

The Goal: To create a space where race can be discussed with openness, sincerity, and care. This space is not meant to solve racism. It can't. It is meant to provide an ongoing platform for the internal work of understanding, acknowledging, and unlearning internal bias, prejudice, discrimination, microaggressions, macroaggressions, systemic and institutional racism, and overall white supremacy - within our industry and the greater society.

1. Figure out logistics.

- **Who**— Because racism affects us all - and shows up in many forms - this should be a cross-racial, cross-job space. Invite actors, stage managers, crew, musicians, creatives, producers, FOH, security. All should be welcome. Encourage stories and perspectives from everyone in the room. The more the merrier, however, consider organizing a group large enough to have a wide range of perspectives, yet not too large, to where intimacy and trust is sacrificed.
- **When**— If at the theater, this should be at a time that is most convenient for everyone in the building. Between shows? After the Sunday matinee?
- **Where**— If at a theater, find a quiet location that lends itself to privacy. If virtual, use a meeting platform, such as Zoom.

2. Focus in on a discussion topic.

Race is a vast topic. It may be helpful to give the group a focus point, and then let the discussion go where it organically goes. Will you read and discuss bell hooks' *All About Love*? Will you watch and discuss Ava DuVernay's filmography? Racial issues as they arise in current events? Ta-Nehsi Coates articles? Racial issues within the industry, or the cast and company itself? There are endless entry points into discussions about race. There is room for creativity.

When discussing social justice issues, **it is always valuable to have voices in the space that have been directly impacted** by the topic you're discussing. For example, if you're discussing *The New Jim Crow*, reach into your network to find someone who has directly experienced incarceration. Having directly affected voices in the space will deepen and enrich the quality of your conversation. *Please compensate this person for their time.* If you are unable to find a directly affected voice, consider searching YouTube or Google for videos of folks telling their stories - which, technically, can work wonderfully in a Zoom setting.

3. As a group, create a set of agreed guidelines for discussion.

This helps to set boundaries, and gives the group something to refer to when guidelines are overstepped. Ex: *Be emotionally present; Confidentiality; Good will - assume folks are doing their best. Take care of yourself - step out if need be.*" If in a physical space, someone can write the created guidelines on a piece of paper and display them where everyone can see them. If in a virtual space, they can be written in the chat box.

NOTE: Beware of guidelines that privilege the privileged, and silence the silenced. For example: *Be Nice.* Because conversations about race can be very

uncomfortable for some white folks, any suggestion of racism can be perceived as “rude”, or as “an attack”. Though the intention of “being nice” is understandable, within difficult conversations this can be an insidious guideline, keeping white folks unchallenged and comfortable, and utilized as a way to monitor and control the valid emotions and expressions of marginalized individuals.

4. Schedule ongoing gatherings.

Commit to meeting on a regular basis. Once a month? Twice a month? Every Sunday?

Understanding race and creating a culture in which it can be discussed openly - and with emotional care and safety - is an ongoing practice and takes persistence. The more you do it, the better.