

Why We Need to Talk about Race

It may be hard, even painful, but we must talk if we're to begin the necessary healing.

Reviewed by Terrence Fernsler

Let's Talk Race. By Fern L. Johnson & Marlene G. Fine. Softcover. 179 pages. New Society Publishers, newsociety.com.

Why review a book that's targeted to white people about how to have conversations about race? Because white people in the United States have a difficult time talking about race, for a variety of reasons. Because, as the Building Movement Project tells us, over 80% of nonprofit leadership positions are white in a nation in which only 60% are non-Hispanic whites. Because the nonprofit sector has a diversity problem that it's acting too slowly to rectify.

Racism is a deeply rooted issue that intersects with all social concerns in the U.S. Embedded racism will remain an obstacle to fulfilling nonprofit missions until we are willing to have open conversations about it.

"Normalcy" in the nonprofit sector is currently predicated on white dominance, which excludes important perspectives in finding solutions to critical social issues –

health, education, poverty, gender bias, global warming – and investing in the future of an increasingly diverse society. It concentrates power in those who have a head start by virtue of white privilege. Perpetuating this normalcy is a threat to community relations and democracy.

The book explains three types of racism: interpersonal, structural, and internalized. Each contributes to miscommunication and repression whenever those accustomed to dominant norms don't recognize (not to mention understand) the perspectives of people living with legitimately different beliefs about certain institutions and practices. The authors explain how this creates barriers to social equity and justice. They provide guidelines in how to listen with full attention and in a respectful, welcoming, open-hearted way.

This book is a reasoned attempt to help us overcome fears about discussing racism. Building relationships is especially important when spanning racial differences. *Let's Talk Race* helps white people learn to step out of our comfort zones about an often difficult but critical topic in the nonprofit sector and find joy in building relationships when talking about race.



A Short Guide for White People

Each chapter in *Let's Talk Race* lists things to say and not to say when discussing race. A few examples:

Things Not to Say and Do

- Avoid such comments as "I'm Jewish so I know what you go through as an African American" or "I grew up poor so I understand your experience." The experiences of each group are unique.
- Don't say, "I'm scared to get pulled over by the police too." Recognize the stark differences in each other's experiences.
- Don't say "I don't see color." That erases the experience of the other person.
- If you're having a conversation about the Black Lives Matter movement, don't say, "All lives matter." That goes without saying. The point is that Americans have failed to see that Black lives matter – not that they matter more than other lives but that they matter at all.
- Don't expect to be thanked or applauded for doing and saying the right thing. They're not your good deeds. They're your responsibility.

Things to Say and Do

- Focus on other people's feelings rather than your own.
- Listen to the voices and stories of others without interrupting, judging, or interpreting from your own perspective.
- Be open to and curious about African American history. Seek out sources of information that have been created for and by people of color.
- Learn to sit comfortably with different and even conflicting interpretations. The goal isn't to achieve consensus on "truth" but to develop trust and empathy for others.
- Agree to disagree – and be willing to live with the lack of closure you might feel. It's a complex issue, and complexity requires the ability to live with tensions and paradoxes.
- Take the first step now, with courage. **S**

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