

Talking About Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Science: A Guide for Faculty

This guide was developed by Drs. Stephanie Haddad and Cassandra Nuñez, Co-chairs of the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee of the Department of Biological Science's Center for Biodiversity Research. It was created to help faculty to talk about race and inequities in science with their research team. If you've never brought up these topics before, this might feel uncomfortable; but your trainees notice the lack of sensitivity to racial and cultural matters, particularly when events have been part of the world news.

This document is based on the work and ideas of Dr. D'Anne Duncan, the Assistant Dean for Diversity and Learner Success, Nicole Foti, a PhD candidate in Sociology, and Dr. Isaac JT Strong, the Director of Graduate Faculty Development all at the University of California, San Francisco. If you would like additional information, please consult their webpage at: <https://mentoring.ucsf.edu/faculty-racism-dialogue#Continuously-Ask-for-Feedback>

Power Dynamics

It is important to recognize the role power plays in these conversations. We live in a society with multiple intersecting structures of power— race and ethnicity, gender identity, sexuality, dis/ability, immigration status, religion, class/socioeconomic status, among others— which create more opportunities for some and fewer opportunities for others. These structures of power produce inequities and systems of oppression. This power dynamic is particularly pervasive in academia, where those in leading positions, such as faculty, often occupy one or more identities that hold power within these structures— for example white, male, cisgender, heterosexual, and/or from a family or community with higher education and/or wealth. There is also a power differential between faculty/PIs and their lab members or research team. It is important to recognize your position in these structures of power and oppression because your positionality informs your perspective and can produce significant biases that shape how you talk about race and inequity.

Preparing for the Discussion

When preparing for the discussion take some time to think about your own implicit biases and reflect upon how those biases might affect your approach to the discussion and reactions to feedback. You might want to consult some resources before initiating the discussion:

- [Implicit Bias - Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#)
- [Implicit Bias: Scientific Foundations](#)
- [Reducing Implicit Bias Through Curricular Interventions](#)

Understand that DEI topics may be very painful and difficult for some people. As such, expect some people to express strong emotions during discussions on these topics and maintain your willingness to listen and continue the conversation.

It is crucial to 1) recognize that others will have had very different experiences than your own and 2) respect and affirm those experiences. This must be done throughout the conversation and continuously as part of your lab's culture. Others' experiences are no less legitimate and must be acknowledged.

Having the Discussion

Open the discussion by providing context for why you think this discussion is important. This is your opportunity to set the tone for the discussion and to ensure that people are aware that these conversations can be tough and uncomfortable, but they are important to have. It is okay to admit your own limits here and make clear that you are committed to engaging in conversation to better understand these topics and to make progress with your research team.

Demonstrate that mistakes will be made by everyone (including you) and that that's part of the learning process. It's important to set the tone that mistakes are OK as long as we learn and grow from those mistakes. *There are important things to consider when certain mistakes are made to avoid inflicting more harm on those involved (see **Managing Conflict** below.)**

Explain the importance of active listening and make sure to engage in it yourself. Active listening focuses the attention on the speaker to improve mutual understanding without debate or judgement. During active listening, the listener is quiet—the active listener does not respond or question. It can be difficult, but it is important—you are sending the signal that what speaker has to say is more important than your ability to respond along the way. Active listening does not mean you can't speak at all—clarifying questions are important—but there should be no interruptions when someone else is speaking.

Have a goal in mind for your research team and use a backwards-design approach: identify the intended goal; think about how you will know if you've reached your goal; then, determine what you need to do to get there together. State your goal(s) for your research team, as well as identify your desired outcomes of the conversation.

- As a supervisor of the lab, you have some degree of obligation/freedom to define what you want for your lab moving forward.
- Goal(s) should surround Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI). You should prepare for these conversations by thinking through what you want diversity, equity, and inclusion to look like in the context of your lab. Note: you will likely need to do some research on your own. You can get started with this resource:
 - [Principles of Inclusion, Diversity, Access, and Equity](#)
- The lab needs to agree to the overall goal(s). The plan needs to come from both directions—both lab leadership and lab members.

Actively engage your team: have the lab discuss and agree on how they will all work to meet the goals you've outlined together (make sure to take notes during this part).

Questions to help guide the discussion:

- What does it mean to be inclusive?
- What do you think it means when inclusivity is not implied to all, when all are not explicitly told that they are welcome in a space?
- What does inclusivity look like for your lab or research team (behaviors, physical space, how feedback is given and received)?

- What do you do when there is a challenging experience? Can you, as a lab, set up guiding principles that can help you navigate situations that may come up in the future while keeping to your values and goals?

Summarize the agreements you reach. Work as a group to review and modify the agreement, adding in details as you see fit.

- Put it in writing!
- Make it readily accessible for all current and future team members.
- Signal that this work is important by coming back to the agreements with your team periodically to assess how you've done and what you've learned that can help you refine or add to your plan.

Make sure to solicit feedback. Feedback can be difficult, as it is often perceived as a personal critique. If you feel yourself reacting personally to feedback, try to take a step back and critically examine why you may be reacting personally. It is okay to say, "You've given me a lot to think about," or "Can you tell me more about that?" One strategy you could give your team is to use "I language." (for example, "when x happened, I felt...", or "when you do x, I feel...").

Managing Conflict

If there is a situation where something is said that causes harm, offends, or is problematic to someone, it is important to acknowledge the impact. It does not have to be resolved then and there, but it must be addressed. If needed, you can follow up with everyone after you have time to consult other people. If you can manage doing so in the moment, it is always good to ask clarifying questions that will help people understand intentions and impacts (on both sides). *Remember that your silence reflects that you do not consider the harm to be important or worthy of discussion.*

When someone says something that you are unsure how to respond to, or that you think might be troubling for someone else in your group, ask the speaker to explain more or expand on their thoughts. This helps to address the statement, while allowing everyone there to understand more of the context and intentions.

- "What do you mean by that?"
- "Can you expand on that more?"
- "What leads you to say that?"
- "Can you help me understand what you meant by what you just shared?"

It may be a good idea to have these questions at the ready should conflict arise—you'll likely be having an emotional reaction yourself, so having the questions on hand can help you to navigate the situation more effectively. Your students/lab members are looking to you to see how you handle such conflict and may model your behavior so it is important to be as prepared as possible.

Resources:

- [Disarming Racial Microaggressions: Microintervention Strategies for Targets, White Allies, and Bystanders](#)
- [Research Brief: An Interview with Robin DiAngelo about "White Fragility"](#)

Recognizing that “intent” and “impact” are two separate things is crucial. Someone might not intend to offend anyone by something they say or do, but their words and actions can still inflict harm on others. Many microaggressions are not intended to be demeaning or offensive; they may be well-intentioned, but misdirected. Not intending harm does not absolve someone of their responsibility for that harm; rather, acknowledging the impact can begin a powerful conversation that rebuilds trust, embraces vulnerability, and encourages growth and understanding.

Possible phrases to use when confronting conflict with the intent/impact framework:

- “While I did not intend to cause you harm by what I said, it is clear to me that harm was caused. I am sorry for that and I want to learn how to avoid something like this in the future. Can you help me to understand the impact that what I said had on you?”
- “Perhaps [person] did not intend to offend anyone when they [did action], but I want to point out that [action] can be very offensive and I want us to be able to address it here and now.”
- “I was really hurt when [person] said [microaggression]. I want to assume good intent in this situation—that [person] did not intend to say something that would be hurtful—but I want to explain why [what was said] is hurtful.”

Resources:

- [Disarming Racial Microaggressions: Microintervention Strategies for Targets, White Allies, and Bystanders](#)

Maintaining the Conversation

It's important to think through how you plan to keep the conversations going in a way that works for you and your team. As a supervisor/manager, how do you express what you need from your team members? How can you remain receptive to hearing and addressing their needs? Consider some of the suggestions below, but work with your team to establish what will work for all of you.

- Entire lab or team goes to future DEI campus events, followed by a team discussion.
- Integrate these conversations into regular team meetings or designate future times to meet and discuss. Be careful to not let this work become separate from the science being done by your team members.
- Schedule a second meeting with your team one month after the initial conversation to see how things felt and how things are going.
- Establish a yearly/half yearly group meeting to revisit shared agreements and expectations that your team creates during your initial meeting.
- Keep learning with discussions about the DEI literature (with scientific articles, books, university reports, etc.) during a recurring special lab meeting—these meetings could be scheduled once or twice per semester or once monthly.

When new member join your lab, you will need to include them in these conversations. Recognize the power differential that may lead a new graduate student or postdoc to feel uneasy. Try to anticipate barriers to engaging in this work and be explicit with new team members about your expectations.

- Create a ["Welcome to the Lab"](#) letter that includes your team's agreements/expectations.
- Consider talking about this work when people are interviewing to join your team.

Ask for feedback from your team, remembering to not rely on underrepresented members to have all the answers but also to listen when they do make a suggestion.

If you want specific feedback, be mindful to plan out what you want to know, how you're going to ask for that feedback in an inclusive way, and what you are going to do with that feedback. Make sure to address that feedback in a timely manner and discuss your reasoning behind why you might take some suggestions and not others. Do not solicit feedback if you are not willing to consider it and address it honestly with your lab members.