

# Having the Tough Conversations

Lessons learned and next steps from the Inaugural Birth of Brilliance Conference



With Conference Tri – Chairs:

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- Kim Flowers, LCSW, IF-ECMH RPF-M
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# Objectives

1. Explore some barriers to difficult conversations around race and equity.
2. Identify and acknowledge the types of missteps that are likely to occur when attempting difficult conversations around race and equity, and some ways to recover from these missteps.
3. Examine how the Birth of Brilliance conference committee used affinity groups as a supportive option for continued difficult conversations and for keeping the learning going from the Birth of Brilliance Conference.

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# Disclaimer...

## We are not experts.

What we are going to share is based on our own research and preparation as well as our experience in planning and executing the BoB conference and supporting the facilitation of the affinity groups thus far.

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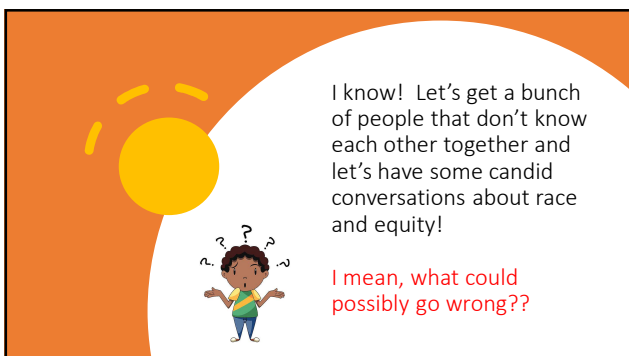
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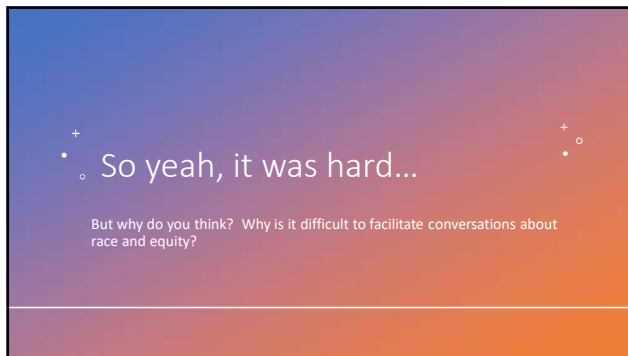
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• So yeah, it was hard...

But why do you think? Why is it difficult to facilitate conversations about race and equity?

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## Top Ten Reasons Why It's Difficult to Facilitate Conversations on Race

- Participants are at different levels in their ethnic/racial identity development and therefore at varying levels of understanding.
- Dealing with differences elicits anxiety in individuals and tension across cultures, creating a battleground for conflict.
- Participants come looking for quick fixes
- People refer to their own experienced to develop meaning of other people's experiences, with often results in invalidation.
- People are afraid to risk looking like a fool...or being called a racist.

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## Top Ten Reasons Why It's Difficult to Facilitate Conversations on Race (cont.)

- We've been socialized not to talk about race...leads to colorblind ideology.
- Talking about race can elicit feelings of shame, blame, and guilt and feeds their resistance to grow.
- Our identities are tied in to our assumptions, attitudes, and beliefs.
- What is not said is often more important than what is said - and more difficult to bring out.
- Race is an emotionally laden topic and you are an emotionally invested facilitator

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+ • **"In integrated spaces, patterns of white dominance are inevitable"**

Kelsey Blackwell in "Why People of Color Need Spaces Without White People"



These patterns include things like:

- being legitimized for using academic language
- an expectation of "getting it right" (i.e., perfectionism)
- fear of open conflict
- scapegoating those who cause discomfort
- and a sense of urgency that takes precedence over inclusion

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"The values of whiteness are the water in which we all swim. No one is immune. Those values dictate who speaks, how loud, when, the words we use, what we don't say, what is ignored, who is validated and who is not. Unless we are actively and persistently dismantling these constructs, we are abiding by them. In integrated spaces (where we are less likely to be ourselves given the divisions that white dominance has created), we fall into the roles society has assigned us. As a person of color, and perhaps the only one in the room, it's exhausting to always be swimming upstream. To survive in this society, we learn to hold our tongue, to "code switch" to fit in. This is about survival and the basic human need to feel that we belong."

Kelsey Blackwell in "Why People of Color Need Spaces Without White People"

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"...an unfamiliarity with the unwritten rules of engaging in white spaces means we simply don't know how to show up. We've received feedback verbally and nonverbally that we just don't fit in. We're too loud. We're too quiet. We're too direct. We're too verbose. We're too passionate. We're too restrained. Label after label – difficult or emotional or meek —are put on us to fit the social order."

- We need places in which we can gather and be free from the mainstream stereotypes and marginalization that permeate every other societal space we occupy.
- We need spaces where we can be our authentic selves without white people's judgment and insecurity muzzling that expression.
- We need spaces where we can simply be—where we can get off the treadmill of making white people comfortable and finally realize just how tired we are.
- We need spaces to prepare for the the difficult conversations internally before a difficult conversation with everyone and to debrief and get support after difficult conversations

Kelsey Blackwell in "Why People of Color Need Spaces Without White People"



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Why do white people need affinity groups?

- People of color need spaces to grieve, lament, mourn, and share their emotions in community away from white people.
- White people created white supremacy so white people need to do the work to dismantle it.
- White people talking about white supremacy can re-traumatize people of color.
- People of color are exhausted from teaching white people about racism and white supremacy.
- Affinity groups help us to live into the feeling of being uncomfortable.

<https://justiceunbound.org/5-reasons-for-racial-affinity-groups-in-anti-racism-work/>

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But when can we be together?

*"People who have always been entitled to space and to place have no idea what it's like to have never been entitled to space."*

*I'm entitled to gather to determine the way and the path to my freedom. You will let me do that and not obstruct it. You will not put your needs and your desire for some kind of picture above my necessity. Doing so obstructs my ability to understand what it is to first be with myself. To be with people that I have not been allowed to be with just as I am.*

*Put aside your urgency—we've been separated for 400 years, kept from one another—for this to just be over."*

Reverend Angel Kyodo Williams  
Author of: *Being Black: Zen and the Art of Living with Fearlessness and Grace*

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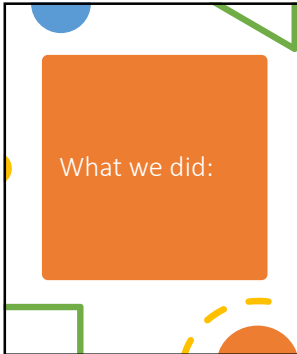
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### What we did:

- Community Building – Brave Space Intentions
  - Getting to know each other (larger group)
  - Developed large group community wishes
- Broke into affinity groups (BIPOC/White)
  - More intimate getting to know you
  - Developed group agreements
- Content (whole group content with whole group systems related reflection, then affinity group personal reflection)
  - Isolated clips from the keynotes to dive deeper into
    - Dr Pryce - Privilege and Power
    - Ki Gross - Your role in the social change ecosystem
  - Discussed current events
    - Afghanistan
    - Critical Race Theory
  - Reviewed resources from other outlets that were relevant to the discussion
- Reflected, reflected, and then reflected.**

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### What Is A BoB Affinity Group?

- A group formed around a shared interest or common goal
- Reflective ad brave space for courageous conversations in smaller groups
- A way for folk to discuss what they learned and how they're implementing
- A think tank for ideas and implementation
- An opportunity to dig deeper into issues of equity and culture alongside people with similar backgrounds
- An opportunity for I and we growth
- A place to deepen our learning and wrestle with ideas and concepts from this conference and the world

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### What a BoB affinity group is NOT

- A place for destructive and non solution focused venting that fosters divide
- A place to shame and blame those who are different from us
- A place to point out others' weaknesses and short comings
- A place where your learning comes primarily from the emotional labor of others
- A space for passive learning or voyeurism

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Meet our panel

Marilee

Kim

Precious

Melanie

Aisha

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Jumping in and lessons learned

- Stumbles
- Cultural Ideas around structure
- Our own insecurities
- What You Call It Matters
- Coming together is important
- Outside Facilitation
- It is worth the time



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What the participants have experienced...

"It has felt like a balm and a place to rest and share in a time that is so charged. I'm really appreciative of the genuine and loving posture everyone enters this space with."

"I feel like it has been a safe space to help with processing things that are going on in the world."

"I appreciate the ability to jump in and be well received. I truly appreciate the opportunity to learn and the space to be brave. I feel it's an honor to be a part of the group where everyone has a level of vulnerability they share."

"Grateful for the new things I learn and continued conversations."

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Affinity/Caucus  
Resources

- <https://www.compasspoint.org/blog/race-caucusing-organizational-context-poc%2F25805995:experience>
- <https://arrow-journal.org/why-people-of-color-need-spaces-without-white-people/>
- <https://www.awarela.org/toolkit>
- <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Hw63nY3Wq4SAU-VYbfoKcOVjGedr7W/view>
- <http://convention.mycapc.org/houston2018/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Guidelines-for-Effective-White-Caucuses.pdf>
- <https://www.racialjustice4tools.org/resources/act/strategies/caucus-and-affinity-groups>
- [https://www.usa.org/files/pdf/r/race\\_based\\_affinity\\_groups.pdf](https://www.usa.org/files/pdf/r/race_based_affinity_groups.pdf)
- [https://www.colorado.edu/center/teaching-learning/sites/default/files/attached-files/facilitating\\_difficult\\_race\\_discussions.pdf](https://www.colorado.edu/center/teaching-learning/sites/default/files/attached-files/facilitating_difficult_race_discussions.pdf)
- <https://justiceunbound.org/5-reasons-for-racial-affinity-groups-in-anti-racism-work/>
- <https://www.impactjournal.org/2017/05/01/white-supremacy-and-affinity-groups/>

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Birth of Brilliance

Thank you!!

And please come to the  
Birth of Brilliance  
Conference – February 24,  
2022!!

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