

Empathetic Leadership: Navigating the Derek Chauvin Trial Verdict with Your Employees

In the wake of the Derek Chauvin trial verdict, you may be unsure of how to navigate with your employees, network, and personal circles the conversations that are sure to come. Derek Chauvin's trial over the death of George Floyd is an historic moment in American history. To support inclusion, build trust in the workplace, and work as an ally to all employees, employers must be mindful of the effects that this trial and its verdict may have, or are likely already having, on their teams. Here are our best tips for navigating the moment:



NAME IT

Address the elephant in the room. Do it quickly, acknowledging the emotions that many individuals may feel around the outcome, and reinforcing expectations and client or customer commitments.



BE FLEXIBLE

Many individuals will be deeply affected by the resurgence of conversations around the death of George Floyd and the deaths of recent others, such as Daunte Wright, regardless of the Derek Chauvin trial outcome and, in the days that follow, may be distracted and experiencing a number of emotions. To support them, minimize any non-critical events or meetings over the next few days, and adjust your deadlines or deliverables, giving all employees space to work independently and at an adjusted pace. Work with your DEI leaders and employee resource groups to provide one-on-one support or virtual team support sessions. Remind your team of your organization's EAP program, if available, should they need additional support.



LISTEN

Listen to your employees, listen to your body, listen to what you are learning in the news. Prepare yourself by considering which healthy coping practices work for you, then give yourself space to breathe, sit still, and feel your emotions before finishing your workday. Remind your employees that they should do the same. If you are a leader, check in on your team. Send a note or give them a quick call to inquire on what they may need that day to be productive. Avoid mentioning the trial specifically, although some employees may want to share their thoughts with you. Simply listen to understand, show support, and share resources to help the employee cope with how they are feeling.



KEEP FOCUSED ON WORK

While these conversations will naturally arise in the workplace and should be welcomed, stay attuned to conversations that are not conducted respectfully or may be taking too much time away from work, and put the focus back on business. This can be done by saying, "All right, I know we all have emotions around these events but let's table the conversation and focus on our goals for today." If statements are made that may create environments where employees feel unsafe or marginalized, it's important to plainly and resolutely address them. Encourage employees who feel uncomfortable to speak up. Remind everyone of the consequences of disrespectful behavior and follow through with consistent counseling and disciplinary actions.

Remember that in times of stress employees carefully watch the words and actions of leaders. This moment presents an opportunity to build greater trust, increase inclusion, and practice your inclusive leadership skills. No matter the verdict, it will be helpful to relate your efforts around respect and understanding to the diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts that are already underway in your organization. Reiterate your core values and demonstrate leadership through empathy.



PROCESSING THE CHAUVIN VERDICT

Words to help you prepare for and navigate the Derek Chauvin trial verdict. Adapted from Cole Arthur Riley of [Black Liturgies](#).

(1) Keep a mantra. Start by reminding yourself that your feelings are real, that your emotional reactions are justified.. You may consider repeating these phrases as a sort of personal mantra for the moment: “My feelings are real and justified. These occurrences do not diminish my value. I deserve to be safe.”

(2) Cope proactively. Coping is often considered a reactive process, but we can prepare ourselves for potentially derailing events by considering, ahead of time, which healthy coping practices will help us manage our emotions. Perhaps that means cooking, cleaning, drawing, exercising, breathwork, listening to music, praying, playing, writing, reading, gardening, walking, or talking with a friend. Find what works best for you in this moment, and know that it may not be what has worked for you in the past.

(3) Take cues for rest. Now that the verdict is in, the pundits and the opinionated alike will share their thoughts on every media outlet available. Be deliberate about turning off the TV and radio and unplugging from social media. Finding yourself in a constant cycle of these events can be stressful and even traumatic.

ADVICE FOR CIVIL CONVERSATIONS

When we feel deeply about an event or issue, we can often fail to find the best words for what we are feeling and what we believe. Tempers flare, emotions run high, and many otherwise respectful conversations can dissolve into hard feelings and a loss of respect. In these situations, it helps to have a [framework](#) to have positive discussions. Joseph Grenny, co-author of the book *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High*, offers the following tips on how to share personal opinions at work:

Frame your conversation as a chance to learn from each other, not to change each other's minds. Simply being curious about another's position is sufficient motivation to engage. That may sound like:

"I know what I think about this issue, but I'm curious about why you feel so differently. Would you be open to sharing your position with me?"

Explain that you aren't trying to change the person's mind or attack their position. Then ask for permission to talk about the sensitive topic. Here are some examples:

"I'm not wanting a debate, and I'm not trying to change your mind. I just want to understand. I see this issue very differently. Would it be OK if I explained my perspective?"

Show respect. Others will not engage with you if they don't feel respected by you. Over-communicate your respect for the other person and their opinion:

*"I value you and your perspective. I want to hear from you. I don't assume I'm right."
"What have you experienced or learned that led you to feel that way?"*

Look for areas of agreement rather than disagreement. If the conversation takes a more dramatic turn, look for the greater principle governing both opinions. Say things like:

*"I want to find the goals we share and then look at the issue with those goals in mind."
"Sounds like, for you, this ties to a lot of things that are also very important to me."*

Most importantly, don't forget the "pause button." It's important when you're having emotion-forward conversations to take a moment to breathe before responding back to the person you're speaking with. In conversations where there can be differing views, taking a breath will help you be more mindful when you speak. And it's also okay to determine that you'd prefer not to continue the conversation at that time, or ever.

Navigating uncomfortable or emotional discussions with coworkers is never easy, but knowing the key steps to follow to frame those conversations with dignity and respect will help you become a better communicator, listener, leader, and ally.

For assistance in facilitating conversations or ensuring cultures of safety and inclusion, contact info@thediversitymovement.com.

