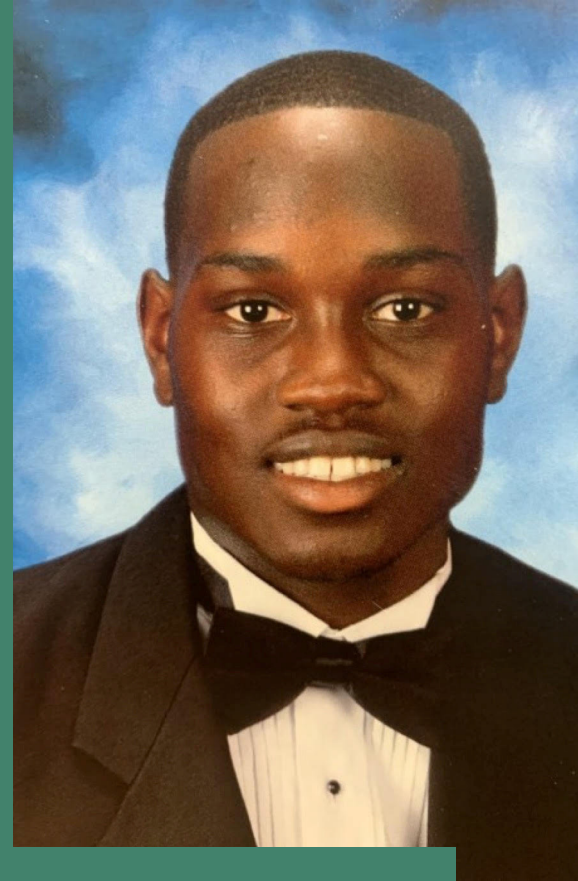


## The Ahmaud Arbery Murder Trial Verdict: Processing It, Leading Through It, and Supporting Your Team

By Roxanne Bellamy

*Roxanne Bellamy is Senior Content Strategist for The Diversity Movement and has been a runner for more than 15 years.*



### A recap of the case

Ahmaud Arbery was a 25-year-old runner who was shot and killed by two people while out for a run two miles from his home in Georgia last February. During his run, he entered a house that was under construction, left quickly without taking or damaging anything, then was pursued by three people in two vehicles who lived in the neighborhood. He was shot three times at close range during a struggle.

[He did not commit a crime, nor was he armed.](#) He was Black, and the people who killed him were White. They were not arrested until nearly three months later, when video footage of the shooting was released to a local news station and quickly went viral. Now, the people who killed Ahmaud Arbery are [on trial for murder](#), and their consequences will be determined by twelve jurors -- only one of whom is Black and eleven of whom are White.

It's also worth noting that the judge in the case, Judge Timothy Walmsley, publicly stated that "[there appears to be intentional discrimination](#)" [in the juror selection](#): discrimination which has exacerbated people's feelings of frustration, anger, and hopelessness in regards to continued inequity in the criminal justice system. Ok. That's the short version of the story.

To learn the long version, I recommend you turn to [The New York Times](#), [Runner's World](#), the "[The Rest of His Life](#)" episode of This American Life, or even the "[Killing of Ahmaud Arbery](#)" page on Wikipedia. I can't possibly tell the story better than they have, nor can I tell it dispassionately without losing my professional composure, so I won't try. But I will tell you, as a long-time runner, this story hits me hard in the gut, and its implications regarding civil rights in America hang heavy in the air for me -- and millions of other people across the world -- this week. Leaders and managers should be aware of when the verdict is read and the impact to employees in the workplace should the defendants be found 'not guilty'.

## Strong feelings v. professional poise

I am not a Black man, but as a woman, I have been followed by White men in a pick-up truck while running for exercise. Ahmaud Arbery and I may have little in common, but we do have that. And I'd be willing to bet there are thousands of people just like us -- followed, chased, and even literally hunted because they are women, queer, Black, gay, disabled, poor, strange, or a dozen other things that make them stand out and draw attention due to the predatory bias of those who are watching.

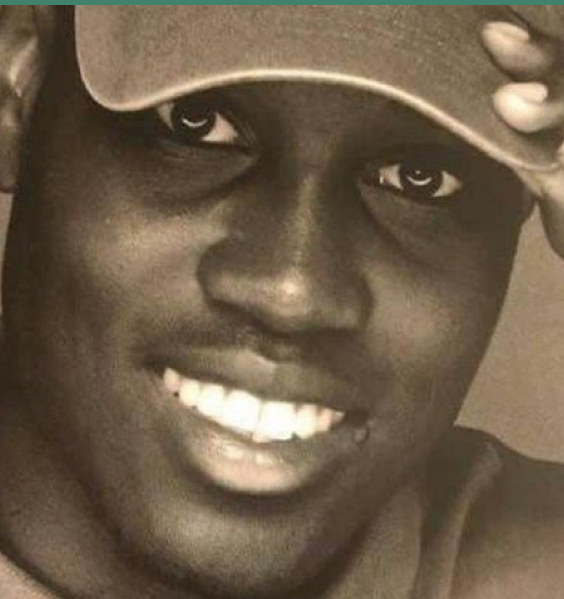
This story rings a bell in my heart that makes me feel angry, sad, disgusted, hopeless, and fearful. It forces me to face the number of times I've felt unsafe doing the things I love, like running, camping, hiking, or simply existing as a person, outside and alone. It makes me feel despair at the number of people who must also feel unsafe outside, or inside for that matter, as they navigate the world.

Yet I am also a professional human being, adept at shedding my strong feelings and opinions when I'm in a professional space. I don't want to alienate my coworkers by making them feel awkward, uncomfortable, or embarrassed. And I certainly don't want anyone I work with to feel like they have to take care of me right now. I don't need caretaking. I just need space to feel.

I am telling you this because I want you to know, as business leaders, middle managers, and employees, what your colleagues, teammates, and clients might be feeling this week -- or when the next trial happens for the killing of a Black man, or the next one, or the one after that -- regardless of each individual verdict. This trial, and every one that is like it, will likely spark feelings or trigger trauma from the murder of George Floyd or the heartbreaking list of hundreds of similar incidents in the United States just in the past decade.

And more, it often brings to the surface a wave of memories of personal experiences, fueled by hatred, bias, or just carelessness, that didn't necessarily make the headlines but made us feel under-valued, unseen, worthless, or vulnerable. Remember: it's not just your Black employees who might feel this way. You don't know where the intersection may exist with other people's identities. In short, we're each working through our own strong feelings, and at work, we're trying to demonstrate poise. Here's what that means for you as a leader.

*(Left): Ahmaud Arbery, (Right): Travis McMichael, Gregory McMichael and William "Roddie" Bryan in courtroom during jury selection in their trial on murder charges in the killing of Ahmaud Arbery. (Courtroom pool photos by Stephen B. Morton/Associated Press)*



## What to do during the trial and when the verdict is announced:

- 1) Acknowledge the situation.** Your action can be as simple as sharing awareness and EAP resources in a company newsletter or using your team's morning meeting to acknowledge that you know the Ahmaud Arbery murder trial is taking place, and you recognize that the trial and its verdict may trigger strong emotional reactions.
- 2) Give people space to feel and share.** Use one-on-one meetings to check in with employees, and give them dedicated time and space to share, if they feel the need or desire to do so. Don't press them to speak, but be open to listening. Don't insert your own opinions, but ask open-ended questions. Ask them what you might do to continue being helpful and supportive as they move through their feelings.
- 3) Reinforce support resources at work, including EAP if available.** While you want to be a good listener and an ally, you cannot be responsible for other people's mental health or wellness. Remind all employees about mental health benefits and resources where they can seek support.
- 4) Be flexible as people process these events.** If the verdict comes back as 'not guilty,' be ready for an influx of strong feelings like anger, frustration, and outcries of injustice -- and not just from your Black employees. Provide opportunity for flexibility in meetings and in deadlines. People process grief and anger differently. Let them name what they need to be successful in navigating strong personal emotions while also managing work expectations. You may also choose to minimize 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.
- 5) Lean on your ERG leaders for ideas on how to best support your employees.** Consider working with your DEI leaders and Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) to provide one-on-one support or virtual team sessions in small groups where people can feel safe connecting with each other.
- 6) Host a department-wide or company-wide event.** Depending on your team, you might consider a candle-lighting ceremony, an informal gathering for story sharing, or a chance to volunteer as a group with local nonprofits and charitable organizations. Sometimes, the best way to move through strong feelings is to put our hands and hearts to work. Use [VolunteerMatch](#) or [Catchafire](#) to find opportunities for active volunteerism.
- 7) Get politically active!** Look for opportunities to participate in peaceful protests or [sign petitions](#) in support of [justice for Ahmaud Arbery](#) and his family. Contact Georgia politicians and express your thoughts on the trial. Follow the links included here to contact Georgia's highest-ranking elected officials: [Governor Brian P. Kemp](#), [Senator & Reverend Raphael Warnock](#), [Senator Jon Ossoff](#) or any of [Georgia's 14 Congressional Representatives](#).

Although you may feel unsure how to navigate these moments with your employees and personal circles, remember it's the practice -- not perfection -- that counts. To create more inclusive, productive, and positive environments where people do their best work consistently, we must create spaces where they also feel safe to bring their full, authentic selves to work, even when that 'self' is distracted, upset, sad, angry, or scared. Following these guidelines will help you demonstrate your commitment to inclusion and employee-centered cultures, even when it isn't easy.

**For assistance in facilitating difficult conversations or ensuring cultures of safety and inclusion, contact [info@thediversitymovement.com](mailto:info@thediversitymovement.com).**