

## **Thank you Mr. Schultz: Why we shouldn't abandon Starbucks' "#RaceTogether"**

By Susan D. Landay, October 22, 2015

### **Starting "The Conversation"**

In early April, 2015, Howard Schultz, CEO of Starbucks, reflected on the fatal shootings of Michael Brown and Eric Garner and tried to do right. He introduced the "RaceTogether" campaign as a way to get people talking about race relations in the U.S. Unfortunately, this well-intentioned effort turned into a PR nightmare.

More unfortunate than that, however, is that in all the hubbub that followed, The Conversation never got off the ground. Rather, pundits talked at length about the failure of the campaign, the supposed damage to Starbucks' brand, and the trend of corporate leaders becoming champions for social good. Then, as quickly as the campaign was launched, it seems to have been forgotten.

Before the whole incident becomes nothing more than a business school case study, let's talk. Let's talk about what we can learn from the Starbucks' experience and how we can, at last, get The Conversation started.

### **Learning from the Starbucks effort**

1. *Timing.* Based on the company's Twitter feed, customers tended toward two responses: "I can't have this discussion before my morning coffee." And "Please don't slow down the line, I've got to get to work!" Beyond these time sensitive issues, trying to have a deep conversation on-the-fly simply isn't going to happen.

2. *Training.* Conversations about diversity and race can become emotional. While not every conversation needs to be facilitated by an expert, it helps to have a few tricks up your sleeve -- to set goals, suggest a process, and know how to respond appropriately if a discussion heats up.
3. *Framing.* When coining the phrase, #RaceTogether, Shultz framed the issue primarily as one of race. Granted, race might be the elephant in the room when it comes to issues of diversity, but when initiating conversations about how people are treated, experts suggest easing in, having all participants talk about a time they felt different. After all, diversity is not just a black and white issue.
4. *Initiating.* Whether they identify with a minority or not, most people don't really know what to say to get a conversation about diversity or race started. They don't know what questions to ask or how to ask them.

## **Paving the way for safe discussions about diversity**

### **Set it up**

*Pick a comfortable place* – your office, lunch room, meeting room, even Starbucks would work, as long as you're in a location that's quiet and friendly and have given yourself enough time to not feel rushed.

*Allot adequate time* – take your time to build a safe, welcoming dynamic among participants, and allow them to tell their stories and share their experiences at leisure, without rushing. Build in enough time for the group to discuss, reflect, validate, and offer support to one another.

*Explain the goals* – let participants know why they're talking about diversity. Share the findings about direct correlation between diversity and financial success. In their report, *Diversity Matters*, McKinsey & Company studied 266 public companies across a range of industries in Canada, Latin America, the UK and the U.S., and found "Companies in the top quartile for racial and ethnic diversity were 35% more likely to have financial returns above their respective national industry medians.

*Identify the many ways in which people differ* – You might say, "We live in a diverse world. Only some of our differences are visible, like skin color, gender, ethnicity, height or weight, physical disabilities,

and age. Others are not, but still affect how we feel or are treated: ethnicity, socio-economic position, sexual orientation, virginity, use or non-use of alcohol, allergies, depression and/or emotional illness, intellect.”

## **Establish ground rules**

*Set expectations* – Try to be completely transparent here – explain that conversations about diversity and bias can be tricky, but the goal is to tease out experiences of feeling different or excluded and identify ways to create a more welcoming, diverse and compassionate community.

*Create safe space* – So that everyone can feel comfortable sharing their experiences, have the group set up their own Ground Rules. You could give them a list of your ground rules, but it’s not as effective. When the group helps to establish the rules, they feel more a part of the process. The following rules should be on your list – if your group does not think of them, you may want to add a few of these yourself:

- Speak only for yourself
- No personal attacks
- Listen – make sure everyone feels heard and validated
- Only one person speaks at a time
- Avoid guilt and blame
- Affirm others’ perspectives
- Avoid assumptions

*Distribute “OUCH” cards* – Developed by Dr. Devona Williams, author of the Spice of Life Diversity Training Tool, OUCH cards let discussion participants visually signal if someone’s comment has been hurtful, without interrupting them.

## **Ask the right questions**

The trick is to provide meaningful questions and prompts that will draw out experiences of feeling different, build mutual understanding, and identify ways of creating a more welcoming community. For instance:

*Personal experience prompts*

1. When did you first become aware of racial/ethnic differences?
2. Share a situation when you were in the minority.
3. Describe a time you witnessed discrimination.
4. Your best experience with a person of a different race/ethnicity.
5. What makes you different?
6. How do your thoughts about diversity differ from your parents’?
7. A time you went out of your way to make someone feel included?
8. Describe a time you felt lonely in a big group of people.
9. Why do you seek out people similar to you as friends?
10. Which would be harder for you: looking different or feeling different?

*“In their shoes” prompts*

11. What would be hardest about having an unseen difference or disability?
12. What would be hardest about being gay?
13. Should companies/schools close for all religious holidays? Why or why not?
14. Is it easier to be male or female? Why?
15. Name 1-2 ways the elderly experience discrimination.



*Envisioning a better tomorrow*

16. How can we promote acceptance of differences?
17. How might you personally combat discrimination?
18. What gives you hope that people are becoming more accepting of diversity?
19. What’s your generation’s biggest challenge when it comes to acceptance?
20. What are the benefits of diversity?

In an effort to make these discussion topics more accessible and inviting, Office Oxygen collected them and had them imprinted on a “Diversity Thumbball” – when using the ball, whoever catches it responds to the prompt under their thumb.

## Be prepared to diffuse sticky conversations

Even with discussion prompts that are structured to promote positive conversation, rather than spark controversy, interactions can become emotional. Expert diversity facilitators suggest a range of techniques to ease difficult situations.

1. Fall back on your ground rules.
2. Ask how an experience made you feel.
3. If two parties disagree, suggest that they switch roles and make the counter argument.
4. Utilize “OUCH cards” to build the group’s sensitivity to hurtful comments.
5. Keep a flip chart of difficult topics that can be addressed at a later time.
6. Ask others for input on how they have handled similar situations.
7. Have personal stories ready to share with the group if people are slow to start.
8. If people are too emotional or angry, stop to take a break and regroup.
9. Thank participants for sharing their personal stories.

## A well-deserved thank you

As challenging as it can be to start a conversation about diversity on a small-scale, doing it on a national scale is exponentially more difficult. I applaud Mr. Schultz on his bold and brave effort, which he said, “was to stimulate conversation, empathy and compassion toward one another, and then to broaden that dialogue beyond just our Starbucks family to the greater American public by using our scale for good.”

I, for one, am not ready to toss out the #RaceTogether initiative or call it a failure. As a nation, we can and we should start talking more openly about diversity. Inspired by Mr. Schultz, who called us to action, we now have the tools and resources to do so— maybe not when we’re in the queue at Starbucks--but definitely after that first cup of joe.

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