

What to say when you don't know what to say

Empathetic Listening for Leaders



Listen and express empathy

- "What I hear you saying is..."
- "Could you tell me more about...?"
- "That sounds..."

Be curious about impact. Try to imagine what it might feel like to be in their shoes. Connect with their emotions. Pause your defensiveness.

Clarify what they need

- "Did you want to just share this with me or do you want me to work on addressing this?"
- "What would be helpful to you right now?"
- "What kind of outcome are you hoping for?"

Find out if the person or people are looking for an action or decision from you or if they just needed to share.



Make a plan

- "I don't know exactly what to do but I'm going to start by..."
- "Thanks for telling me. I'm going to try..."
- "I'm honored you shared that with me. I'll try to work on..."

Describe the first or next steps and how you will learn and explore solutions. Commit to a time when you can follow up on the issue if they asked for action.



For example

Let's say you're a Black, Indigenous, and/or Person of Color (BIPOC) leader and one of your team members, who is a person of color, comes to you with a frustration about the lack of diversity in your organization.

What to say:

BIPOC Team Member: I really hate that we are the only BIPOC in this organization.

BIPOC Leader: Yeah, I feel that too. It's a really hard spot to be in. It can be really lonely. I can share more about what it's like for me, but do you want to tell me more about what it's been like for you?

BIPOC Team Member: I just feel like we say we care about diversity but nothing changes. I'm tired of waiting. Am I just a token? Even telling you this is hard because I don't want to put more pressure on you, but I don't know who else to tell who would get it.

BIPOC Leader: It sounds like the situation is really impacting you, and you are discouraged. Is that right? I appreciate you being honest with me and I care about this being a healthy work environment for you. What would support from me look like right now?

BIPOC Team Member: I appreciate you just being a listening ear. I wish the leadership would take measurable and consistent action instead of just making statements that don't change anything.

BIPOC Leader: That makes sense. Can you be specific about what measured progress looks like to you? I have some ideas but I want to hear what you think.

BIPOC Team Member: More people of color around here would be a great start. Our last 3 hires didn't add any diversity, even after all the statements.

BIPOC Leader: Ok. As a first step, I'd like to talk to HR about our recruitment strategies and what we can do to reach more diverse applicants since I know this is a priority for them. I'll circle back to you next Friday to let you know what you can expect in the future. I would also like to stay available to support you when you feel lonely. Want to set a regular time to check-in?

BIPOC Team Member: That sounds great. I don't know if I need an ongoing check-in time but maybe could I just email you if I want to talk something through?

BIPOC Leader: Absolutely. I'll follow-up soon, thanks for sharing with me.



For example

Let's say you're a white leader and one of your team members, who is a person of color, comes to you with a frustration about the lack of diversity in your organization.

What to say:

BIPOC Team Member: I really hate that I am one of so few BIPOC in this organization.

White Leader: I imagine that must feel lonely. Do you want to tell me more about what that is like for you?

BIPOC Team Member: I just feel like we say we care about diversity but nothing changes. I'm tired of waiting and being an "only" here. Even telling you this is frustrating because I know you won't understand. It's just reinforcing the problem... and now I have to explain why this is hard and that's exhausting.

White Leader: Thank you for sharing that with me, I can see how it would feel like we aren't making progress. And you're right, I don't know what it's like to be in your shoes, but I do care about this being a healthy work environment for you. Let's see what we can do right now. What support do you need while we are in between what we hope for and where things are now? Would you mind if I give this feedback to the leadership team?

BIPOC Team Member: Yes, I guess you can share this with the leadership team but please don't tell them it was me. I guess I just needed to say something, I don't know what you can do.

White Leader: How about this. At my next leadership team meeting, I'll say I noticed the issue and want to lead the changes that need to take place. That way nobody knows you talked to me. I would also like to stay available to support you when you feel lonely. Want to set a regular time to check-in? If talking to me isn't ideal, we have access to a coach who has been in your situation before. I can approve professional development funds to pay for that for you.

BIPOC Team Member: Sure, it would be nice to stay connected with you . I'd love a mentor who I won't have to explain everything to.

White Leader: Ok, great. I'll reach out to the coach. And I will also let you know how the leadership team reacts to my feedback after we meet next week. I don't want you to feel this way anymore so I'm committed to working on this. Thanks again for trusting me and for sharing.



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Other phrases to try:

Empathy:

- Is there anything else you want to share?
- That sounds exhausting and hard. I'm so sorry that's happening, I agree that's not OK.
- I care about you enough to risk saying the wrong thing so...
- When you shared with me, I felt...
- I am here with you but I don't have words right now.

Clarity:

- What support do you need from me?
- Would it be helpful if we...?
- Would it be OK for me to share this with...?
- I imagine that is... is that right?

Planning:

- Can I help by... ? Can I respond by...?
- I'm going to need some time to process this. Can I think about this and get back to you on ____date____?
- To get to that outcome, the first things we need to do is ____. Would you like me to do that?

Need more support?

We coach leaders who want to be more equitable and empathetic. Find more information at www.leadershiptraininginitiative.com

