

Written by Sandra Kerr OBE

 @SandraKerrBITC

**BUSINESS  
IN THE  
COMMUNITY**

 THE PRINCE'S  
RESPONSIBLE  
BUSINESS NETWORK



# Let's Talk About Race

A POCKET GUIDE TO GETTING  
CONVERSATIONS STARTED



# Foreword:

## Sandra Kerr OBE



This guide is comprehensive enough to get us all past the starting blocks, which is progress from where we currently are – being uncomfortable and not talking about it. We need the conversations to identify challenges, opportunities and create innovative and practical solutions.



One of the key findings from Business in the Community's *Race at Work* survey (2015) of 24,457 people was that employees from all ethnicities in the workplace said that their employers were not comfortable talking about race. The survey found that conversations around age, gender and sexuality are much easier to have than conversations about race. I then began conversations with people from many different racial backgrounds about their experiences of talking about race. I also asked them to share what they think some of the barriers are and what some of the solutions might be.

This pocket guide is a result of some of those conversations as well as my personal views on this subject. Recommendations from *Race in the Workplace* (2017) said that a guide should be produced for talking about race. My hope is that this guide will help to get Britain talking about race and ethnicity, discrimination, diversity and inclusion in an environment of 'uncomfortable confidence and respect' and spark many new conversations which would not have happened otherwise.

They say that courage is feeling the fear and doing it anyway. I want this booklet to help people to feel the discomfort and start the conversations anyway. It is pocket-sized because it's not designed to cover every possible scenario that you may encounter or want to discuss. My best hope is that it's an effective icebreaker and conversation starter which will enable leaders, employers and policy makers to openly discuss issues of race within their organisations.

Thank you to all the anonymous contributors who helped me to create this guide by sharing your stories with me.

# Introduction: Let's talk about race

## Why does talking about race in the UK matter?



Getting race equality right in the UK is worth £24bn per year



**Getting race equality right in the UK is worth £24bn per year to the UK economy** – 1.3% of GDP. Employers with more diverse teams also have 35% better financial results. Group-think policy ideas are ineffective and very costly to review and put right. One in four children in primary and secondary education in the UK are from a Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) background; that is the future talent pipeline for the UK. One in eight in the working age population are from a BAME background yet only one in 10 are in the workplace.

When we look at senior levels in the private and public sector, the BAME representation is one in 16. This pyramid needs to be squared so that there are role models across all industries and sectors to inspire the next generation of talent.

There are persistent unemployment rate gaps, with some ethnic minority groups experiencing employment rates which are twice as high as their White counterparts. We know that disparities in pay, progression and access to senior roles and executive and board level opportunities persist.

**We need to identify where action is needed without avoiding the 'elephant in the room'**, which is often, 'How come there are no Black people in this senior team or the team just below it?' Or 'Why are all the people shortlisted for this senior promotion opportunity White?'

# Action for Employers



Create a  
Strategy and  
Action Plan for  
your organisation



Include  
having  
conversations  
and dialogue  
within the  
Action Plan

**Demonstrate your organisation's commitment to an inclusive workplace** where employees can progress and use their experiences and talents regardless of their ethnicity. Share the data that you have if there is any. If not, review the UK demographic data and set some aspirational goals to focus on what your workforce should look like to ensure you have access to the widest pool of talent available. (There is great demographic data available on the Government's Ethnicity Facts and Figures website). Maximise the opportunity to reflect and connect to your customers, clients, communities, suppliers and contractors. Embark together as an organisation on a campaign to collect better data – you may as well collect data on all the other protected characteristics in the Equality Act 2010 whilst you are doing this and get all your employee data up to date.

**Encourage the promotion of dialogues and conversation about the nine protected characteristics** in the equality legislation. This will signal to the organisation that conversations about race are important and encouraged. Questions for debate might include: '*How do you transform talk into action?*'; '*How can the actions that are agreed be owned by leaders and individuals across the organisation?*'; '*What exactly is unconscious bias?*'; or '*Are there areas of the business where we should set targets?*' Encourage everyone to share a bit about their family background at roundtables, so that everyone who comes to the table comes ready to share. This is a great opportunity to find common experiences as well as gain insight and appreciate difference.



Two-way mentoring models (such as reverse mentoring, reciprocal mentoring and mutual mentoring)

...provide a perfect opportunity to build relationship and rapport and learn more about someone with a different cultural heritage or background at the same time. Leaders can also gain some valuable insight from someone from a BAME background's experience, including different perspectives on the organisation that they, as senior leaders, have already successfully navigated. Both parties can benefit from a reciprocal mentoring relationship. The leader gains useful insight into the perspective and experiences of BAME people in the workplace and the BAME person can draw on the experience of a senior leader who has already navigated a successful career.

Learn more about someone with different cultural heritage or background



Use research reports and employee data



For employers who lead service industry organisations (with client facing aspects of their business)

Employers need to use evidence from research findings, their own employee data and employee survey findings to create a context for conversations. As you talk, you can identify where there are disparities, agree action to facilitate improvements and close any performance gaps. Making data collection routine can also help to address the stigma and fear of self-reporting.

Employees may need different types of support around talking about race. They may work with clients or customers who express racist views about whom they want to serve them or care for them. Having a clear policy and dialogues to discuss appropriate responses to such behaviour can ensure that employees feel supported by the organisation, whilst at the same time deliver great customer service. There are also teachers working with student groups who may need guidance about speaking with BAME students or parents. These employers should embed a commitment to create discussion groups and forums to develop good practice and share examples of what works well.

# So let's get talking

## Contextualise the conversation



Come to the conversation with curiosity



Establish the importance of respect from all parties



Just pick a 'terminology' and start

**No-one knows everything there is to know about race and ethnicity**, and asking questions is how we all learn more. Before you ask, consider if your question has relevance. What is the context in which you are asking the question? What do you really want to know? Why do you want to know? How will the information help? Share the answer to these questions when you are framing questions. Transparency, openness and respect builds trust and rapport.

**Seek to build rapport and use common courtesy.** Our *Race to Progress* survey (2012) highlighted that all employees wanted respect, regardless of their ethnicity. All parties should approach the conversation respectfully with genuine curiosity.

When we surveyed the BAME population as part of the *Race at Work* survey, there were more than 7,000 responses. We asked them what terminology on race was preferred. The terms 'ethnic minority' and 'BAME' (pronounced 'Bame', as it can become tedious to spell out all of the letters in the acronym) received the most votes. However, it is very important to note that one in three people said they don't mind what terms you use!

One in 3 BAME people don't mind what terminology you use



Here are the results when we asked about terminology. *'In life which of the following, if any, best describe how you would like to be referred to?'*

**Our survey returned the following results:**

30%	said they don't mind
26%	said other
18%	said ethnic minority
16%	said BAME
8%	said BME
6%	said Person of Colour

So, using any of these terminologies are going to be OK with one in three people. This also opens up the opportunity to survey your organisation and find out which terms everyone prefers. **If you think about it, you only really need a term for public speaking or written narrative.** You don't even have to pick one of these; you can use them both interchangeably, as I often do in presentations and conversations.



**'There is only One Race, the Human Race.'**



**'Is it OK to say Black?'**



**'Choose your moment. A big public meeting probably isn't it.'**

**What is the true definition of race?** Is it more about colour, people and what people look like? What is multiculturalism? What about Asian people; is there a preference there for terminology? Mixed race or mixed heritage? You can use the findings from our *Race at Work* survey, or you could survey your own employees to find out what their 'preferred' words are and, based on the evidence, use those for your employer narrative and presentations. Remember, everyone has an ethnicity, including White people. In the UK, people from the White ethnic group are the majority of the population (86%) as opposed to everyone else who are therefore in the minority and thus make up the ethnic minority population which is 14%.

**Conducting your own employee survey with your employee network group gives everyone permission to use agreed terminology** based on evidence and everyone is aware that 'this is the language our business uses'. You can also search on the internet, look in the dictionary and add this insight to discussions around what you find out during your conversations.

**Is this really the right time or place to start a conversation about race with an individual?** Is there a chance that you will become distracted or not be able to actively listen to the answers or seek clarity with some follow up questions? If the answer is yes, wait for another time.



# Everyone can share information on ancestry and heritage



'Nobody likes  
to be put on  
the spot.'



'A global expert  
on international  
issues? Umm, I  
don't think so.'



'I do not speak  
for every BAME  
person. I can only  
speak for myself.'

**Unless you are a gameshow contestant, most of us don't like being put on the spot.** And this is even more likely to be the case when it comes to talking about race. If there is a room full of people or some large meeting, don't ask a question about race loudly so that others overhear unless you have asked the person if it's OK to do so before the meeting.

**Don't expect people to be an expert on world events just because they reveal that their cultural heritage is linked in some way.** Only expect them to be as up to date as you are, if at all. Why not ask them if they have ever visited their family's country of origin and ask if they still have family living abroad? This could also spin off into conversations about second languages and all sorts of things that people from all backgrounds talk about, be it from family heritage or studying at school or university. Remember, many people whose parents, grandparents or great-grandparents migrated here from outside of the UK may have never visited the country of some of their ancestors.

**This is something I say continually. Individuals can only speak from their own experience.** It's important to not think they are speaking for everyone from a similar ethnic origin in the UK. And as to what is happening with similar ethnic groups abroad? See the global expert paragraph above. We are all individuals and can only speak for ourselves, not an entire race, gender or age group.

# Respect the lived experience



Listen to understand



Go to Cultural Awareness Days when you can

We are all individuals and can only speak for ourselves



**Don't dismiss or even attempt to explain away someone's lived experience.** Check for clarity of what you have heard or play it back to confirm understanding. This isn't a competition regarding who has had the most pain or discrimination. Appreciate and acknowledge what you hear, even if you don't relate to the experience that has been shared or don't feel that you really 'get it'. It's the individual's experience – they have lived it, so accept what you hear on that basis.

**These events provide a great opportunity to learn about diverse communities and individuals.** As the purpose of these events tends to be to educate and inform, it has to be one of the best places to go to ask questions – so go along and ask away.

I know courtesy shouldn't have to be mentioned here but it's important that those sharing and those listening are polite – 'thanks for sharing' and 'thank you for asking' are just two suggestions.

# Let's reduce the chances of causing offence

Some things best avoided....



Please don't ask women what they are wearing under their religious dress



Please avoid the 'Where do you come from? No, where are you really from?' questions

**From multiple conversations in research for this handbook this seems to be a question sometimes asked of women who wear religious dress.** In fact, don't ask anyone – man or woman! And if you missed the opportunity in primary school to touch a black girl's hair, it's a bit late to do it now. There are of course exceptions to the above for hairdressers, or asking a friend for permission to do so (with the understanding that 'no' is an acceptable response).

**Why not offer up some insight on your own cultural heritage first?** Or you could simply ask '*What country does your family originate from?*' and follow this up with where your own family originate from. This sets a pattern for the depth of response you're looking for, rather than the awkward situation of hearing about where someone lives right now..... when you are really interested in their diverse racial background.

I appreciate that no offence is meant by this question. However, asking individuals who were born here '*Where do you really come from?*' and whose parents and grandparents were born here where they really come from implies they don't come from here and are not British if they are not White. To find out more about this, look up micro-aggressions which I am not covering here as this is only a pocket guide.

# Have fun:

A message from the Author



‘I don’t see colour.’



‘This whole agenda just needs to be colour blind.’

‘I don’t see colour, I just see character, skills, talent...’ I have heard people from all backgrounds say this at different times. If you can see what the colours are in the Union Jack, you can see colour. So, don’t bother to say that – it’s not true and adds nothing to a conversation about race.

‘The whole agenda just needs to be colour blind’. Why, when we won’t even wear clothing in colours that we don’t like? See the paragraph *above*. Colour makes life interesting. Let’s acknowledge it, embrace it and enjoy it but do not diminish it or pretend it doesn’t exist when we all know that it does.

Have fun. It doesn’t have to be an uncomfortable, stilted conversation and will be a richer and much more interesting one if everyone in the conversation is sharing information about themselves during the discussion. I have smiled to myself as I have written some of this pocket guide, and I am not saying ‘don’t try this at home.’ Laughing together about things is OK too.

Why not use this guide to start a conversation?



Share what you have learned from previous conversations to spark a new conversation



## Why not use this guide to start a conversation?

Even if it is to say that it is too simplistic or doesn't go far enough. If it starts a new conversation it is fulfilling its purpose. Please go online for more complexity – this is just an ice breaker guide. You can use this pocket guide as the basis for your own guide tailored to your own organisation.

## Share what you have learned from previous conversations to spark a new conversation.

It's a great opportunity to then ask, 'Is this something that you have experienced?' And offer up any experiences that you may have had. Why not use this small pocket guide as a conversation topic? Ask, "Have you seen that new booklet? What do you think? No, you haven't seen it? Let me show you mine. I'd love to have a coffee and discuss it with you."

So what are you waiting for?  
Let's get talking.

Other materials that can help you to start a conversation include:

*Is Britain Biased?* Infographic  
*Race at Work* (2015)

*Equality, Diversity and Racism in the Workplace* (2016)

*Race in the Workplace* (2017)

<https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk>