

The Paradox of Diversity Training: When Good Intentions Backfire

Most of us assume that increasing awareness about racism and bias naturally leads to greater understanding and inclusion. But the research suggests it isn't always that simple.

A growing body of evidence raises an important question:

Can the way we talk about difference sometimes make people more defensive instead of more open?

Some researchers suggest that part of the answer lies in what we make people focus on first. Psychologists call this **salience**—whatever is most noticeable or front of mind at a given moment.

If a workshop begins by emphasizing racial differences or asking people to confront their group's role in inequality, those differences immediately become the focus of attention. While the intention is to build understanding, some research suggests that starting with group differences can unintentionally strengthen an "*us versus them*" mindset for some people.

None of this suggests we should stop talking about racism or discrimination.

It suggests we should think more carefully about **how we begin the conversation**.

What seems to work better

Research increasingly points toward a different approach:

- Build a shared sense of "**we**" before discussing difficult issues.
- Focus on specific behaviours and practical solutions rather than assigning group blame.
- Create opportunities for genuine relationships and conversation.
- Let empathy grow through connection rather than accusation.

When people feel they belong, they are often more willing to listen, ask questions, and change.

What this means for the Chain of Dignity

This aligns closely with the Human Dignity Project's ***Chain of Dignity***.

The first links—**Noticing, Naming, Knowing, Curiosity, and Care**—help people build understanding and human connection before asking them to take action.

Only after trust has been established do **Action** and **Change** become sustainable.

In other words, lasting change is less about making people feel guilty and more about helping people feel connected.

An important reminder

This remains an active area of research. Many scholars argue that openly discussing racism and inequality is essential, even when those conversations are uncomfortable.

The real lesson isn't to avoid difficult topics.

It's to recognize that **how we introduce them matters**.

When we begin by strengthening our shared humanity, people are often better prepared to hear, understand, and respond to the harder truths that follow.

*Inspired by research discussed by Conor Friedersdorf in **The Atlantic** (2023), drawing on work by Karen Stenner, Rebecca Hetey, Jennifer Eberhardt, Frank Dobbin, Alexandra Kalev, and Elizabeth Levy Paluck.*

*Source: Conor Friedersdorf, "The Paradox of Diversity Trainings," **The Atlantic**, January 18, 2023.*

<https://www.theatlantic.com/newsletters/archive/2023/01/diversity-training-paradox-intolerance/672756/>