



# ON COMMON GROUND: THE TIME AND PLACE FOR CONSTRUCTIVE CONVERSATIONS ON RACE Celeste Headlee

**In March 2015**, the CEO of Starbucks, Howard Schultz, announced a truly awful plan to address systemic racism. On the surface, it seemed like something I would support: Schultz wanted employees at thousands of coffee shops across the United States to have a conversation about race with at least one customer a day. He hoped his employees would explain to caffeine-addicted Americans “about the need for compassion, the need for empathy, the need for love toward others.” If that happened once a day, in coffee shops from Anchorage to Fort Lauderdale, Schultz said, then the nation would see “a significant difference.”<sup>1</sup>

This effort did not succeed at sparking heartfelt discussions: it was the wrong place and the wrong time. Talking about racism, about privilege and privation and oppression, is weighty and emotional work. It’s not something you bring up as you hand someone their Grande cappuccino with three shots, caramel syrup, and no foam. As the media strategist April Reign tweeted, “Not sure what Starbucks was thinking. I don’t have time to explain 400 years of oppression and still make my train.”<sup>2</sup>

While we may smile indulgently at Schultz’s failed plan to solve racism one awkward, unwelcome conversation at a time, the lesson of this botched attempt is an important one: choose the right location, the right time, and the right format. One thing Schultz got right was that these conversations really should happen in person. We love to send messages by email when we think the subject matter may upset someone. Email allows us to maintain physical distance; it permits us to say everything we want to say without fear of being interrupted as well. But hiding behind an email will make you feel better only in the short term. Digitally mediated communication often causes more problems than it solves.

The first email was sent in 1971, so researchers have had more than half a century to analyze our in-boxes. The jury has rendered its verdict: Email is not an effective format for difficult conversations. What's more, it doesn't provide the positive feedback we get from conversations on the phone or in person—the facial expressions and vocalizations that lower stress levels.

I know some people say they feel comfortable using email in the way that previous generations used handwritten letters. They spend time writing long missives, going back through what they've written to make changes, and thinking deeply about how best to articulate their views. As a writer, I can understand the desire to craft a careful message and take your time to ensure clarity. Perhaps a member of your family has a history of making casually racist comments when you meet but resists your attempts to discuss their behavior. A carefully worded email might help you broach the subject in a nonthreatening way and serve as an invitation to a discussion about bigotry. Or you could use email to ask a co-worker to sit down for a meeting on bias in the workplace, again using the remote nature of email to make them feel less defensive. In this way, email can be effective as an invitation to conversation.

However, while email may be appropriate in some situations, not all digital communication is of value as a platform for conversations about race, and I strongly discourage the use of social media for this purpose. Full stop. You can make statements about race, or express your carefully worded views, or link to a thoughtful article you believe could be helpful to others, but don't expect to have any kind of productive discussion with other users.

Not only are social media platforms often antagonistic environments, but the way we communicate on them—in brief snippets—makes for incredibly reductive dialogue. You may respond to a racist comment and believe you're fighting for a just cause, but in reality you are contributing to the simplification of complex issues. You're also contributing to the competitive atmosphere and "dunk culture" that prevents progress.

Do you honestly believe that, after centuries of racial inequity and violence, your biting tweet is going to move the needle toward justice and fairness? The only way to finally eradicate systemic racism is to expand understanding to include even those who believe it's in their best interests to maintain white supremacy. Turning racism into a binary battle between the good and the bad increases the chances that this issue will become a war, that those who are labeled as irredeemable will become immovable.

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I've heard from some that they've established positive relationships with strangers via social media, by exchanging private messages over long periods. I don't doubt the truth of those anecdotes, but they are exceptional. Statistically speaking, even if you communicate privately, through text or DMs, the chance that you'll have a productive conversation is incredibly low.

The quality of interactions on social media has been studied so many times that I could spend the rest of the book just citing the research. Instead, I will cite only one study, a rigorous investigation that concluded that when we use Facebook, "we get the impression that we are engaging in meaningful social interaction" even though that is not the case. "Our results suggest," the scientists wrote, "that the nature and quality of this sort of connection is no substitute for the real-world interaction we need for a healthy life."<sup>3</sup> Facebook, Twitter, and other social media platforms are useful for making connections that can become authentic relationships offline, and they are an effective tool for information sharing, but they are a disastrous choice for discussions of oppression, bias, and racial identity.

These are not the only dangers associated with social media, though, and digital communication in general. If you receive a private message that includes offensive language or a racist comment, resist the temptation to fire back an angry response. Digital communication is prone to miscommunication, so you have to choose your wording even more carefully on the computer than you do in person. What's more, digital communication is a permanent record. In conversation, you may say something out of anger that you later regret. After a sincere apology and time, those mistakes are usually forgotten. But if you express your fury on social media, your momentary emotion is preserved forever and could ultimately be conflated with who you are.

When you deliberate on whether to engage with someone on social media, your standard should go at least one step beyond “Would I say this if this person were standing in front of me?” Instead, the question you must ask is, “Would I say this if they were standing in front of me and my mother/partner/pastor/anyone whose opinion I value was also in the room?” You might consider asking them to explain their position further, to ensure there is no miscommunication. If the person in question is someone you know, you could even schedule a time to speak to them over the phone or in person.

However, if you are provoked by someone you do not know and have never met, ignore the message. Don’t reply or respond, even to explain why the person is wrong or racist. This may seem to contradict my instruction to call out racist comments when you hear them, but the truth is, the world of social media has its own rules.

Sometimes we’re tempted to respond to misinformation or hateful ideology out of a desire to correct the record. We want to let the broader public know our position: that this person is wrong, and the information is inaccurate. But as with so many things in the digital realm, the action we take out of a desire to help may ultimately makes things worse.

For example, if a tweet generates enough replies or retweets, even if those engagements are intended to denounce the original message, the platform’s newsfeed algorithm will give that tweet a higher priority and therefore show it to more users. Tweets can go viral on Twitter based on the number of people who reacted to a particular message and not whether the reactions were positive or negative. While the “like” to “retweet” ratio might indicate that people don’t approve of a particular message, getting thousands of re-tweets will likely earn it a place on the trending list. Your response saying “This message is racist and wrong” could cause the original tweet to be seen by more people.

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So let's leave social media out of this equation and focus on how best to discuss race in a setting that involves the human voice: in person, over the phone, through video chat. If the subject arises on any other format, I advise you not to engage. Request a phone call instead, or table the discussion until you can see each other through video conferencing or face-to-face. As the research suggests, face-to-face is the gold standard. That should always be your first choice.

Remember, you can usually walk away from a discussion with another person or postpone it, which means you should be able to choose the best time and place to talk about race. Your priorities should be privacy and comfort.

Privacy allows both people to talk without fear of attracting an audience who might not be invested in a productive and honest conversation. The possibility for radical honesty decreases as the number of people participating in the exchange increases.

Your secondary concern is comfort, and the intention here is also to encourage authenticity. Let's be honest: many people are scared to talk about race, especially with those they perceive as having a different background or ethnicity. When the topic arises, their fear may activate the amygdala and flip them into fight-or-flight mode. If that happens, it will be very difficult to break them out of their anxious state and the conversation might as well end there. As much as possible, I encourage you to choose a location and time that makes both you and the other person feel comfortable.

I was sitting in a hotel lobby once, in Texas, waiting for the shuttle to the airport. An older man was also waiting, tapping his toe idly against his scuffed blue suitcase. He asked me about the book I was reading, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, an autobiography written by Harriet Jacobs in 1861.<sup>4</sup> My fellow traveler wanted to know why I would read such a book, and whether I found it depressing.

I told him that I did think the story was upsetting, as history often is, but it had been written partly to inspire the abolitionist movement, so it wasn't entirely dispiriting. "It is about humanity's great cruelty," I told him, "but also about our capacity for courage and strength in the face of adversity."

"I get that," he answered. "But those books always make it look like every slave owner was a monster."

I had a choice to make in that moment. I remember gazing at him for what seemed like a long time, weighing whether to engage him on the subject of "good slave owners" or say something non-committal and return to my reading. In truth, my silence probably lasted only a few seconds before I opted to have the conversation and smiled at him.

“It sounds like you don’t think all slave owners were immoral, and I am interested to hear why you say that. Talking about this stuff is tough, though, so I’m going to get myself a coffee.” I gestured to the Starbucks kiosk on the other side of the brightly lit lobby.

“Can I buy you a drink?”

He wanted a cappuccino. When I returned with the drinks, he had moved, with his luggage, to a seat closer to mine. We talked for about fifteen minutes while we waited for the shuttle, and then another thirty-five minutes during the ride to the airport.

I have no idea how much influence the free cappuccino had, or if anything I said changed his opinion of slave owners, but I do think I gained a better understanding of his position as the descendant of a plantation owner in North Carolina. I also think he better understands my feelings, as the descendant of both a plantation owner and a slave.

By the time we parted, me heading for the security line and him for the Delta desk, he took my hand and thanked me for talking with him. “I’m going to remember our conversation,” he said. “I think I learned a lot.”

I can’t say for sure what he learned. Maybe he was simply ready to have a conversation about race and I happened to be there. But I do know it’s never a mistake to try to make people feel comfortable when you’re talking about something discomfiting. Allaying his fear may have made the conversation seem less scary, and our exchange might make him more willing to have another discussion in the future.

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That's why I suggest you openly acknowledge the difficulty of the conversation and consider what you can do to lower the tension. Move to comfortable seats, step inside to get out of the heat, or head outside to enjoy fresh air and a view of trees. Pause briefly to assess whether you're in the right place and whether it's the right moment. We can learn a lot about the best approaches to these discussions from research on workplace communication, specifically, feedback on performance. After all, discussions about race inevitably involve feedback of some kind. Feedback about your perceived race ("White people don't understand their own privilege") or about the place where you live ("New York is dangerous and there aren't enough cops to handle the crime") or about you ("This is not about race. I just think you'd be taken more seriously if you had straight hair"). Feedback is hard enough to take when it's true; it's exponentially harder to respond respectfully when the feedback is based on sweeping generalizations and stereotypes, like the statements above.

Imagine you're giving a workplace performance review and you must tell a good employee that they've made some mistakes. How would you go about softening that blow? What time of day would be best for that discussion? You can employ the same type of tactics to make the discussion about systemic discrimination and oppression feel less fraught. Certainly, every person is different, and the best time of day will vary, but science offers a few hints that might help guide your thinking. For example, we know the ability to control our behavior influences whether we react to criticism with openness or defensiveness,<sup>5</sup> and we know that we are less able to self-regulate as the day progresses.<sup>6</sup> Taken together, these findings suggest that people are more open to negative feedback in the morning than they are in the evening.

I can imagine many people respond to this idea by thinking, "The last thing I want to do in the morning is get into a discussion about racism." I understand that point of view, but I also believe we can work with our own cognitive tendencies to make this task easier. It may seem like a good idea to delay that talk until dinnertime, but that could mean everyone is simply too worn out and irritated to respond positively or to welcome new ideas.

Certainly, the best strategy is an individualized one. So pay attention to the other person's reactions, or, better yet, ask how they're feeling and if it's a good time to talk. And, of course, be mindful of your own energy level as well. You want to set yourself up for success. Choose a time when you can focus, when the conversation will feel less like an onerous task and more like a stimulating challenge. While it's important that we try to have more of these conversations, it's not your responsibility to take this burden onto your shoulders if circumstances are not right. Remember, the stakes are low in any individual circumstance; you are not tasked with solving racism. You must choose whether to engage or not. If you feel it's not the right time or place, then I suggest you walk away.

But it's worth the effort to engage with others. I know you may be tired of hearing this advice—to search for common ground, for ways to come together. Maybe you feel there is no common ground, that in the Euler diagram of you and that person who voted for Trump or Clinton or Sanders or Biden or McCain or Bush, two circles just exist alongside each other, never intersecting, sharing no interests or ideas.

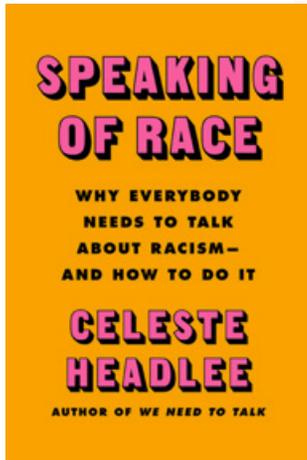
But when you begin to see others as more complicated than their graphic T-shirts and bumper stickers, you may be surprised at how large the common ground really is. When we disagree on consequential issues like white privilege or police brutality, we're inclined to believe we're miles apart on every issue. As rare as it is for two people to agree on everything, it's equally uncommon for us to *disagree* on everything.

The power of establishing common ground cannot be overestimated. It is fundamental to creating lines of communication with those who may never listen to someone who seems to belong to a different or opposing group. When you create a bond based on similarities, it not only makes someone more likely to trust you but can also allay their fear of abandonment and make them less afraid to alter their beliefs.

The purpose of this is to increase the number of conversations we have about race, to confront the white supremacist philosophies that are embedded in our government and our education and our commerce. **Finding common ground and areas of agreement, no matter how narrow, is a tool for starting these conversations. If you can pin down an issue on which you agree, it can create a foundation on which the rest of the discussion can be built.** 📌



# Info



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Celeste Headlee is an award-winning journalist and professional speaker, and the author of *We Need to Talk: How to Have Conversations That Matter*. She is cohost of the PBS weekly series *Retro Report* and season three of the Scene on Radio podcast “MEN.” Celeste serves as an advisory board member for Procon and the Listen First Project. She lives outside of Washington, DC.

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## Endnotes

1. Quoted in Alexandra Petri, "Starbucks CEO Has a Terrible Idea to Fix Race Relations," *Washington Post*, March 17, 2015
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