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SAY THE RIGHT THING:
HOW TO HAVE EFFECTIVE CONVERSATIONS ABOUT OUR DIFFERENCES

A CORPORATE LEADERSHIP CENTER AND CEO PERSPECTIVES EVENT WITH KENJI YOSHINO

JUNE 13, 2023 | CHICAGO



ABOUT THE EVENT

On June 13, 2023, Corporate Leadership Center and CEO Perspectives welcomed Kenji Yoshino, the Chief Justice Earl Warren Professor of Constitutional Law at NYU School of Law and Director of the Meltzer Center for Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging, to share insights every leader needs to manage diverse teams, foster a culture of inclusion and belonging, and overcome fear of saying the wrong thing.

The audience included CEO Perspectives and Leading Women Executive Fellows, along with other leaders from the Corporate Leadership Center community.

Here are key takeaways from the enriching event:

Say the Right Thing

Yoshino offered research-backed insights and advice from his recent book with David Glasgow: *Say the Right Thing: How to Talk About Identity, Diversity, and Justice*.

As the author describes it, the book is a "practical, shame-free guide for navigating conversations about our differences in a time of rapid social change." Such a resource is critical in the current climate of fear about *cancel culture*. The goal is to move toward a *coaching culture* with the same high standards for conduct but with a focus on helping rather than punishing.

Yoshino summarized the book's seven principles supporting a coaching culture:

- Beware of conversational traps such as avoidance and deflection
- Build resilience through multiple strategies
- Cultivate curiosity with humility, rather than making assumptions about individuals and groups
- Disagree respectfully and with empathy
- Apologize authentically, with no hedges such as "if" and "but"
- Apply the Platinum Rule by treating people as they wish to be treated
- Be generous to the source of ostensibly unjust behavior

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SYNOPSIS

An "ally," in this context, is someone who leverages their advantages in support of others without those advantages. All of us have advantages of some kind, so all of us can be allies and may need the help of allies in the future. Yoshino and his co-author have shown that the allyship principles travel very well across sectors, from professional sports to acting to farming. Each application suggests that a culture with allyship is more positive and productive than one without.

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Still, many who desire to be effective allies fall short. Why? There are two main reasons:

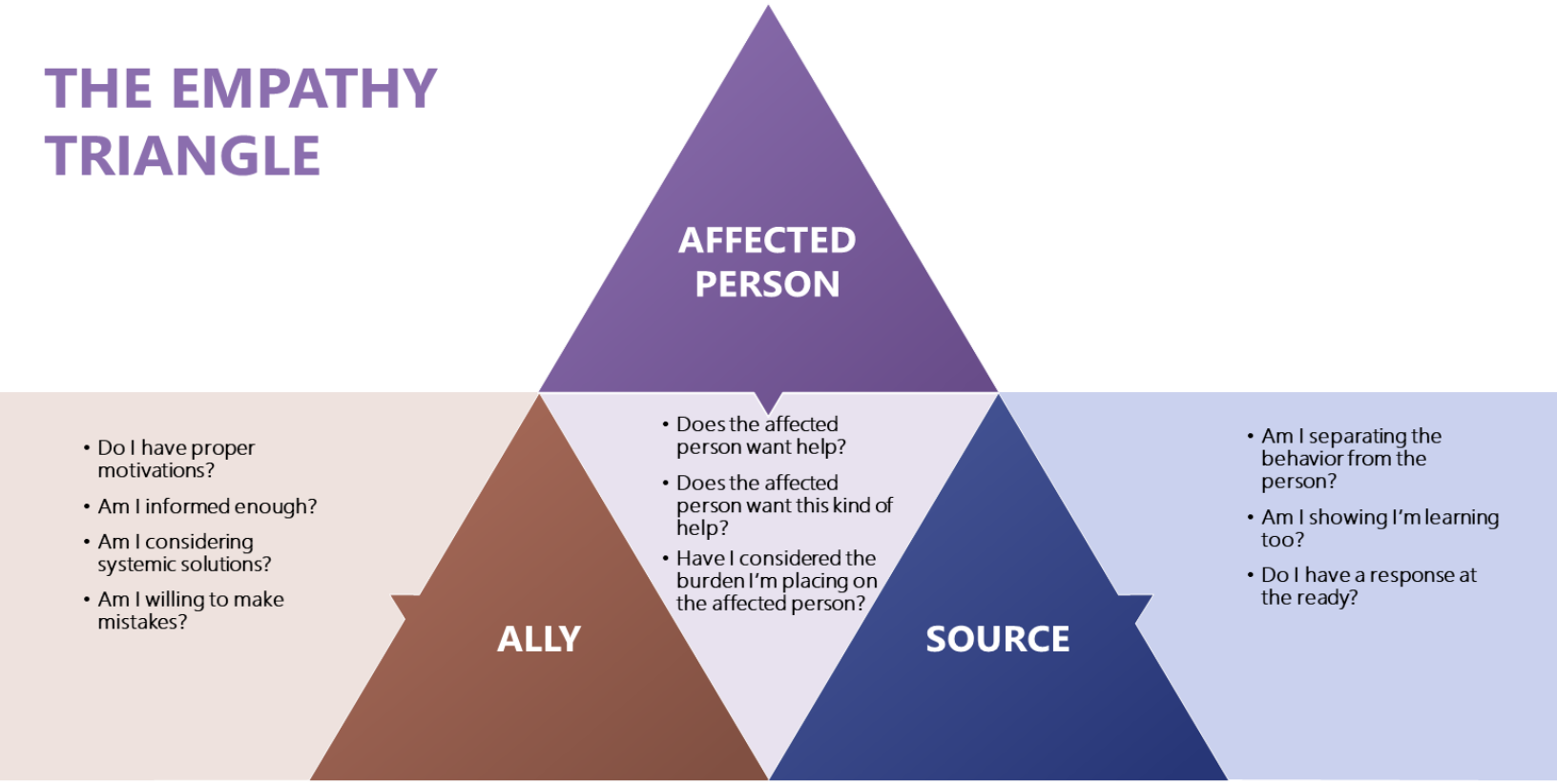
- We are fearful of making mistakes – we are afraid we will say something inappropriate, hurt someone, or be canceled, so ultimately do nothing in situations that call for allyship. Because silence is now construed as complicity, it's important to move from bystander to upstander.
- When we try to act as allies, we are often uninformed, which can result in unintentional missteps, potentially even exacerbating a situation we seek to mitigate.

The goal, then, is to equip yourself with the proper tools to be an effective, proactive, confident ally.

Follow the Empathy Triangle

Yoshino and Glasgow developed the Empathy Triangle in collaboration with Microsoft to help people act as effective allies in a broad range of situations involving potential injustice. The triangle enables you to ask key questions related to three stakeholders in any situation: the ally, the person affected, and the source. Here are the questions and contexts for each.

THE EMPATHY TRIANGLE



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ALLY

Ask yourself these questions when you are motivated to act as an ally in a specific situation.

Do I have the proper motivations? Virtue-signaling or "cookie-seeking" — behavior aimed at earning rewards from others — are common, but represent extrinsic motivations versus trying to create a better culture. Ask yourself, "Would I engage in the same behavior if no one saw it?" A "yes" represents greater intrinsic motivation likely to result in sustainability and true allyship, whereas a "no" suggests a more performative objective.

Am I informed enough to act? It's easy to set the bar for being an informed ally too low or high. When it's too low, we tend to make mistakes or exacerbate. When it's too high we are afraid to act, depriving others of our allyship. The goal is to scale the level of informedness to the level of intervention you seek to make. If someone says something offensive, for example, you can call that out with relatively little background. But, for example, if you're aiming to create a panel of allies for neurodiversity, set a higher bar.

RELINQUISH THE IDEA OF "GOOD AND BAD" PEOPLE AND THINK OF SOCIETY AS "GOOD-ISH" PEOPLE ON A GROWTH JOURNEY TOGETHER.

Am I considering systemic solutions? Think in systems rather than short-term solutions. Yoshino had his teaching assistant audit whether Yoshino was calling on men disproportionately in class. It turned out that he was. He improved after that finding but regressed to the disparity when tired, stressed, or excited—like a rubber-band snapping back to original shape. So Yoshino developed a more sustainable system: he created a list of randomized student names before each class and called on people in that order.

Am I willing to make mistakes? Be compassionate with yourself, using a growth mindset (from Carol Dweck's work) that allows for improvement. That's hard to do in this domain. Based on Professor Dolly Chugh's research in the psychology of "good people", aim to (1) say, "I'm not good at ____ yet" (such as "using correct pronouns" as a fill-in); (2) make comparisons to yourself over time versus to others farther along, to gauge improvement; (3) relinquish the idea of "good and bad" people and think of society as "good-ish" people on a growth journey together.

AFFECTED PERSON

As a potential ally, ask yourself these questions about the person affected by another's actions.

Does the affected person want help? This is an important, counterintuitive question that can help to prevent saviorism. To illustrate the point, Yoshino described the work of researcher Monica Schneider, who studied white teaching assistants who provided unsolicited help to Black students, finding that the students felt worse afterward and resented the helpers more than Black students who received no help or were helped by Black teaching assistants. Ideally, meet with an affected person one-on-one and ask if they want help. Even if they don't want assistance in the short term, they will know that they can "bank" you as a future ally.

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Does the affected person want this kind of help? We tend to assume the affected person would want the same kind of help we would. For example, blind people have pointed out that when they ask for help — such as directions to a venue — well-intentioned people often say, "it's too hard" or volunteer to walk them there; neither is what was requested. To provide the right kind of help, follow the Platinum Rule rather than the Golden Rule, helping those affected as they wish to be helped by asking what they need.

Have I considered the burden I'm placing on the affected person? Aspiring allies sometimes inadvertently burden those they are trying to help. A common example is would-be allies imposing a cognitive burden by asking those affected to educate them. But there can also be an emotional burden, such as when the ally becomes so upset by a situation that the affected person ends up comforting the ally. In this type of situation, aim to self-regulate emotion by taking a moment or even leaving the situation temporarily, to keep the attention on the affected person.

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SOURCE

Why should you be an ally to the source of injustice? The simplest rationale is that someday any of us could be the source. Still, in instances of rank discrimination or bigotry, or when the source has no interest in learning, you don't need to be an ally. An estimated 20% of people fall into this category. Here are the questions to ask when helping the source.

Am I separating the behavior from the person? Focus on the behavior rather than the person. For example, if someone is confusing two people who are the same race, you could ask them to try harder, thus focusing on the action. Do your best to bring the person into the dynamic, ideally in an affirming way. Statements like "I believe you're inclusive, so your behavior surprised me" create positive, potentially motivating cognitive dissonance.

Am I showing that I'm learning too? "Do-gooder derogation" refers to when someone believes another is talking down to them regarding virtuous behavior, and consequently denigrates that person with words or actions. A French study of meat-eaters and vegetarians showed that the former rated the latter more negatively when they felt judged by them. A better approach is to show that you're on a learning journey too and willing to learn from past and present interactions.

Do I have a response at the ready? Engaging the source can be tricky, and it's important to act in a timely manner lest you miss the opportunity. Yoshino offers multiple strategies for responding effectively, including a short retort ("Excuse me?"), emphasis of the impact ("That comment didn't land well with me because . . ."), education ("I feel differently. Can I share my perspective?") and appeals to organizational values ("That's not in line with our firm's position."). Choose the style that works best for you and have some practiced responses ready.

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Q&A WITH KENJI YOSHINO

Deb DeHaas led a Q&A with Yoshino, including questions from the audience.
Here are some highlights:

The landscape and language of identity, diversity and justice are fast-moving — how can we stay current?

Strive to maintain a growth mindset and rip up your list of assumptions every year to keep up with changes. Having a diverse, intergenerational network is critical. Say to those within it, "If I mess up, don't call me out, call me in. If I'm resistant, remind me of this request." It's also important to offer and use offramps from difficult interactions: "I'm not bringing my best self right now. Can we pick this up later?" But it's avoidance if you don't take the onramp later.

Workplace situations that call for allyship can be challenging — what advice do you have to handle these?

It's agonizing when it feels like the only options are agreement or apology. In my book we place categories of interactions on a controversy spectrum: taste (like which city has the best pizza) is least controversial; facts, policies, values, and questions of equal humanity are more controversial, in that order. It's challenging when people are at different places on the spectrum, such as when one sees something as a policy issue but another views it as a matter of values or equal humanity. Since you can't go where the other person is, acknowledge potential differences in perspective to achieve better shared understanding.

Before 2015, when Congress legislated full marriage equality, people asked me to speak on policies related to the topic but to leave values and emotion out of it [Yoshino is gay]. If they recognized it meant more to me than policy alone, it helped me feel better just speaking on policy. After marriage equality became protected by law, I recognized people were resisting the change based on their values, such as those rooted in religion. Respecting where the other party sits on the spectrum elevates debate quality without depriving it of substantive arguments.

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How can we create space for mistakes in our organizations and avoid promoting cancel culture?

First, it's important to create a culture that emphasizes being an ally to the source of potential injustice, not just to those affected. But people may still resist that, seeing the source as a bad actor. As mentioned earlier, the simple rationale to support sources is that any of us could end up in that position. If everyone cancels everyone else, it's a circular firing squad that's bad for all. Many senior executives live in fear of saying the wrong thing and being canceled, so appeal to them to create a culture of grace. It not only benefits the broader organization, but someday those leaders may need it themselves.

How do you integrate DEI with your ideas?

Right now, we need a strong affirmative case for DEI, given the current backlash that pits diversity against other values such as merit, freedom of speech, religious liberty or unity. It can be helpful to think of it as "good versus good," as philosopher Isaiah Berlin suggests. Both sides can have merit. If you take the long view, we can see the resistance to DEI initiatives as evidence of their success, in line with "First they ignore you. Then they laugh at you. Then they fight you. Then you win." It's in the "fight" stage now.

How can we avoid allyship burnout?

One way is to draw on psychologist Susan Silk and mediator Barry Goldman's Ring Theory of support. She points out that the affected person in any situation should be viewed as at the center of concentric social circles — or rings — and the first ring out is allies. The next ring out consists of friends and family members of the allies. Then it's about following a "comfort in, dump out" policy such that you direct care toward inner circles and proactively seek support when needed from outer ones. This ensures allies don't burden those affected to address their own needs.

Any final thoughts?

Being a successful ally requires having compassion for yourself and willingness to make mistakes. It means having empathy for the source, at the very least so you don't contribute to their "villain origin story" of cancellation. Compassion is a much more effective way to promote accountability; see compassion and accountability as complementary forces, not opposing ones.

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