

The Critical Role Of Interracial Friendships In Times Of Conflict

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Three women in the foreground at an event.

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Having a good friend at work leads to greater engagement, according to a [2022 report from Gallup](#). Friends at work add ease and joy to our day, irrespective of what jobs we do.

The current political climate has driven a deep wedge into these crucial relationships.

As we grapple with the complexity of Israel-Hamas war and rhetoric that tests the boundaries of understanding and acceptance, it is more important than ever to create spaces for friendships to begin and grow - in particular, intercultural and interracial friends.

I spoke with ten leaders who are at the forefront of fostering understanding, bridging between communities, facilitating dialogue and diminishing the 'us versus them' mentality that often accompanies political strife.

Interracial friendships can strengthen entire communities and workplaces, facilitating empathy, collaboration, and progress, especially during times of political conflict.

Unfortunately, in our highly segregated society, strong interracial friendships are rare,

especially among white Americans. A 2014 study showed that 75% of white Americans have no Global Majority (i.e., Black, Indigenous and People of Color) friends.

“Interracial conversations lay the groundwork for embracing our differences and facilitating meaningful relationships,” said Nancy Yu, an international human rights advocate. “Only when we make time to practice holding space and acting in solidarity for one another can we exchange authentically, thrive as individuals and evolve as a community.”

Role Of Interracial Friendships During Political Conflict

Diversity in the workforce encourages creativity and innovation. Research and lived experience point to this indelible truth - different perspectives often lead to unique solutions, vital in a global economy that relies on constant innovation. When colleagues from diverse backgrounds collaborate, they embody the principle that diversity is a strength, not a hindrance.

We now need to bring that principle forward to build solutions during this wave of political conflict.

Kay Coughlin, a business coach who has been a part of progressive moments for years, says, “Women of color and white women need each other in community, but for different reasons. We've been taught to be separate, to keep to ourselves, but in that divided state, none of us are at our best. And when we are divided, none of us can really begin to heal. With interracial community building, what I'm seeing is a profound, expansive willingness to open hearts and minds to the wholeness that is possible when women of color and white women spend time with each other deliberately and thoughtfully. Our world needs as much of this work as we can get at all times, but we certainly need it even more at this moment.”

Coughlin is putting values into action, collaborating with Amena Chaudhry to create learning spaces for leaders who are ready to disrupt -isms at work.

Chaudhry is a Pakistani-American anti-racism leader, with deep experience in higher education - one of the spaces that is seeing turmoil and tension resulting from a lack of intercultural and interfaith dialogue.

Pushing Past Segregation Towards Community

In the 60 years since civil rights laws banned discrimination and segregation, according to reporting by Time magazine, America continues to become even more segregated by race, ethnicity and class, as well as on social media networks where we are rarely shown a contrary point of view.

“That mental and cultural shift doesn't happen simply because a law was passed,” says Dana Brownlee, a LinkedIn Learning workplace antiracism course author. “For all our hashtagging, yard signs and book clubs, most of us live racially segregated lives, and we

won't create space for those uncomfortable but necessary conversations until and unless we begin to have deeper authentic connections with people who don't look like us.”

The first step is creating intentional time and space. Brownlee adds, “In a post-summer of 2020 world that's long on talk and short on action, we need authentic relationship building to begin to move the needle on antiracism progress. One of my favorite quotes is Margaret Mead's ‘Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world.’ In fact, it's the only thing that ever has.”

Building and maintaining interracial relationships requires a conscious effort. It requires individuals to step outside their comfort zones and confront their own prejudices. In the workplace, leadership has a critical role in nurturing an environment where these relationships are encouraged and valued.

Several experts I spoke with pointed to the [Interracial Sisterhood Retreat](#), an intentional community being built by and [Karen Fleshman, anti-racism educator](#), two leaders who create spaces for women and gender-expansive people of all racial, ethnic, and cultural identities to grapple with differences and collaborate on progress.

[Minda Harts](#), an author and speaker, highlights the tangible values of these connections. She's clear that, “These conversations are imperative to addressing the career challenges and mental health of women of color, and changing the mindset and behavior of white women.”



Future Cain Headshot
Future Cain

Interracial Dialogue To Shift Societal Norms

Interracial relationships play a vital role in fostering an environment of inclusivity and mutual respect. These connections help dispel stereotypes and dismantle prejudices, allowing individuals to evaluate their coworkers based on their abilities and contributions rather than their racial identities.

Jen Murray supports the need for interracial friendships and solidarity inclusive of gender expansive and queer people. “Our world grapples with increasing polarization and divisive dichotomies,” she says. “Now more than ever, we require interracial siblinghood to awaken new possibilities for breathing. Collective well-being and belonging hinges on communities committed to co-liberation. This inter-identity convening invites us to explore gender expansiveness, queer narratives, and loving justice using a heart-centered approach. These communities offer a powerful kaleidoscope of accountability, realness, transformation, and togetherness.”

Murray uses the word “siblinghood,” she says, “for the purposes of breaking free of unconsciously operating in binary ways.”

During moments of political conflict, when racial tensions are heightened, the bonds between individuals of different races can promote understanding and peace. All the leaders I connected with emphasized the ways in which these relationships act to diminish the 'us versus them' mentality that often accompanies political strife.

A senior DE&I leader in corporate America, Jennifer Velez, highlighted the intersectional nature of our lives. “Our individual struggles are deeply rooted and interconnected,” she says. “Seeing racism as a separate issue from homophobia and gender-based hate-misses the mark. It fails to acknowledge the intersection that many of us live within. Black trans women, the most oppressed group, often aren’t included in the conversation when we talk about the importance of Black Lives Matter. We know that when we uplift Black women, we uplift most of society. Imagine what could happen if we were to uplift Black trans women.”

The willingness to imagine a new way of connecting with each other, and uplifting diverse identities has the power to transform society.

A Call to Face Conflict

The work, even when it is intentional, is not without challenges.

Sierra DeSalvia, a conflict coach, says “When we take the time to pause, look and listen to what has happened, what's happening now, and how it all impacts those in our community, we gain the very wisdom we need to design our way out of these cycles. Every pain point or challenge faced has an alternative, has an inverse option. It can be scary to face conflict, tension, and hard truths. But it is only in facing things together that we can move through them to the other side.”

When individuals engage in interracial relationships, they often become advocates for one another's cultures. They challenge the status quo and demonstrate that race should not be a barrier to connection and understanding. Through their interactions, they promote a culture of learning and openness, which can be particularly poignant in addressing the impact of conflict.

In a world where political conflict can easily erode the ties that bind communities together, interracial relationships stand as testaments to the resilience and beauty of human connection.

At work and within the broader community, these relationships are not just beneficial; they are essential for the growth and prosperity of society. They remind us that beyond the political fray, there is a common humanity that can unite us in the pursuit of a more equitable and harmonious world. By valuing and fostering these relationships, we commit to a future that embraces diversity as a cornerstone of progress and peace.

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I work at the intersection of data, workplace equity and systems change, focused on using data for driving inclusive change. My journey has been fueled by the belief that each of us has a vital role to play in dismantling systemic barriers. Over the past decade, I've worn a lot of different hats, including lecturing at The University of British Columbia, research fellowships in India and Lima, and serial entrepreneurship. In 2013, I co-founded Project Feast, a workforce development startup upskilling immigrant and refugee women, launching India's first teacher education platform in 2015, and Future for Us in 2019, bringing together over 20,000 women of color professionals. leading to and shifted to collaborated with Teach for India and the Central Square Foundation to launch a nationwide teacher training platform.

In this blog I explore how to shift from belief in DEI to practice, and build a future of work that works.