

Things NOT to Say to Black People

COMMENTS

1 “I have Black friends, and they don’t care if I say the N-word.”

The N-word — and any derogatory language — is never acceptable at work, especially if it’s racially charged or in any way discriminatory. And to make an assumption that what one Black person says is okay is representative of all Black people implies that all Black people think and feel the same way — an assumption you would never make about someone of your own race.

And to imply that having “a Black friend” gives you a free pass to be offensive is a very outdated concept. Most people “know” a Black person — this does not excuse inappropriate behavior or actions.

2 “I’m so sick of affirmative action — it’s just reverse racism.”

To discuss affirmative action in a negative way with a Black employee — particularly one you don’t know very well — will likely make them feel uncomfortable. The assertion is that you believe they only got their position due to the color of their skin, rather than their skills and experience.

“Reverse racism” is a common, inaccurate synonym for “affirmative action.” And statistics show that the complaints against affirmative action are in fact unfounded. Despite making up about 13 percent of the population, Blacks remain underrepresented in senior management roles across the country, representing just 3.18 percent of all senior executives.

3 “Why don’t you wear your hair natural?”

Hairstyle choice is a personal choice for women. And whether a Black woman chooses to wear her hair natural or relaxed does not represent “the acceptance or rejection of their Blackness,” sharesCarolynn Johnson, chief operating officer at DiversityInc. “There are other reasons: financial, medical or just personal choice.”

In fact, the topic of hair has become a legal issue. A U.S. Court of Appeals recently ruled in favor of a company that refused to hire a woman who had dreadlocks, sending the message that it’s legal for companies to refuse employment based on hairstyles.

4 “So, can I touch your hair?”

This question could very well make someone feel alienated or like an outsider for deviating what has long been considered “the norm” for professional hair.

Curiosity can very easily cross the line in this situation. Lissiah Taylor Hundley, diversity and inclusion strategist for Cox Enterprises (No. 18 on the DiversityInc 2016 Top 50 Companies for Diversity list), recalled a sometimes uncomfortable experience when she wore dreadlocks to work.

“Fortunately for me, no one blatantly expressed their bias or issues with my hair; however, looks and questions can be just as impactful,” she said. “I often received comments or questions from employees about my hair. The curiosity alone just flooded me.”

And while curiosity may be natural, touching someone at work for any other reason would be considered invasive and inappropriate — this situation is no different.

5 “I think all lives matter.”

While this comment could be well intended and meant to be inclusive, it sends the opposite message. Think of it this way: you wouldn’t go to a rally for Susan G. Komen for the Cure, a non-profit organization that raises money for breast cancer, and say, “All cancers matter.” Your Black colleague who may support Black Lives Matter also believes that all lives matter. This conversation is better left unsaid at work.



You wouldn’t go to a breast cancer rally and say, all cancers matter.

