



Getting Past the Bumpiness™: White Fragility and Skin Color

Presentation Description: Americans are undergoing seismic shifts in how we relate to each other, particularly toward those who are considered “Other,” as one’s “otherness” relates to skin color, socio-economic standing, and country of origin. Many understand that it takes personal discomfort and self-reflection to begin the difficult conversation about how to be more inclusive of people considered “Other.” Those conversations are challenging because most are fearful of impacting sensitivities—people do not want to feel “uncomfortable,” either for themselves or others. Sometimes, we’ll do almost anything to avoid experiencing discomfort.

On the other hand, Ellie Krug’s work has revealed that most Americans are very compassionate and caring toward everyone, including those who are “Other.” It’s just that we don’t know how to exercise that compassion or empathy with anyone who’s outside of our comfort bubbles. Thus, most don’t personally interact with humans who are “Other.”

When it comes to talking about skin color or “race” (the reality is that there are no separate human “races”; rather there are just humans who look different from one another), we are especially reluctant, even reticent, to take risks. This is particularly true for white-color people.¹ Often, this reluctance manifests in the form of anger or denial, what one commentator has described as “white fragility.”²

Yet, in order to understand America in the ‘20s—when much of the country is finally waking up to understand various inequities—we *need to talk about skin color* and how the color of one’s skin impacts their opportunities for success on many fronts. The discussion must also logically start with historical facts that show white-color Americans have had a distinct advantage since the country’s founding. The conversation must be paced, compassionate and factual, rather than being emotional or aimed at shaming or guilt.

How can we begin these exceedingly difficult but necessary conversations? And in the process, can we accept the idea of “compassionate conversations” by all parties involved, with the ultimate goal of providing *grace* or a reprieve from judgment? Can we further understand that being human means we will sometimes stumble?

This innovative training is about having such conversations. To engage in the training requires openness to new to ideas and some fearlessness, along with a willingness to be uncomfortable. Doing such hard work will result in better understanding how America got here and how individuals, organizations and the community at large can go forward.

Why This Training Works: Of all the possible training topics, teaching on white fragility/challenges around skin color is among the most difficult. This is because many white-color humans are not used to discussing their skin color and fear being shamed or

judged (or both) for things they feel they cannot control (but which certainly have benefitted them).

It helps that Ellie is a white-color transgender woman who fell from the “top of the pyramid” as a high-power male trial lawyer to a much lesser societal status when she transitioned genders in 2009. This personal history—which dramatically changed her perspective about “Other” in our society—gives her added credibility for this difficult discussion. Moreover, Ellie’s background as a national speaker on human inclusivity having conducted nearly 1000 presentations, along with her experience as a mediator and Circle leader, adds to her credentials.

The training also works because Ellie provides concrete tools and suggestions on how to identify and then dismantle structural racism. This training is thus both eye-opening and solution-focused. More than ever, Americans are in search of real solutions, and Ellie responds to that head-on.

Learning Objectives:

1. To understand the concept of “white fragility” and how it adversely impacts/deters important societal conversations around skin color, socio-economic class/disparities, and country of origin.
2. To understand the difference between “racism” (not intent-based) and “discrimination” (intent-based) and how “good people” can engage in “racism” without even knowing or intending for it.
3. To easily comprehend what “white privilege” means and doesn’t mean.
4. To offer strategies for white-color people to better understand institutional challenges facing people who identify as Black, and further, so that they may be able to interrupt racism.
5. To explore the concepts of “exceptionalism”, “individualism” and other lenses through which white-color humans rationalize the success of Black Americans or immigrants and others who aren’t white in color.
6. To understand the importance of offering non-white-color people grace relative to how they may feel about having been historically marginalized.
7. To develop self-awareness that skin color, socio-economic class/standing, and country of origin should not be factors in how one human interacts with another human.
8. To provide tools on how to have conversations with all humans relative to skin color and how societal barriers, including structural/systemic racism, affect Black Americans and other persons of color.

Mechanics: This training can be provided in two modalities: introductory or multi-part.

- A. Part 1—Introductory: This is a 90 to 120-minute introduction to white fragility that focuses on historical facts illustrative of white dominance in America. The training includes information about common racial stereotyping/explaining “exceptionalism” or “individualism,” and offers preliminary ideas on how to interrupt white dominance, including structural/systemic racism. Because of the novel topics (for many white-color persons) involved in this training, we usually ask that live or online attendance be limited to no more than 50 people. In some instances, we allow larger audiences.

- B. Part 2—Deep Dive: Following Part 1, this minimally 120 to 180-minute segment involves discussing “homework” assignments around historical marginalization of African Americans and others and provides an opportunity to explore personal journeys around skin color. Because these conversations can be triggering on several levels, the number of participants is usually limited to no more than 30 but for online trainings, this number can be increased to 50 attendees. In some instances, we allow larger audiences.

Handout: Getting Past the Bumpiness™ attendees are presented with a multipage handout. (Unless otherwise arranged, the Sponsor will bear the cost of copying/distributing the handout.)

Audience Size: This is an audience size-sensitive training; Part 1 (Introductory) audiences are usually limited to no more than 50 attendees in either theater seating or tabletop settings or online. Part 2 (Deep Dive) live audiences are limited to 30 attendees in tabletop settings for live trainings and to 50 for online trainings. We are flexible on these numbers, however, and in some instances allow for larger audiences.

Technical Needs: Both trainings require AV equipment for short videos and various images that will be displayed during the training. (Ellie can supply the videos and images via email or by connecting to her laptop.) Ellie also doesn’t utilize a podium and asks for space to “roam” as she speaks. For Part 2/Deep Dive trainings, Ellie will hang signs on the training room walls with blue painter’s tape (she supplies both the tape and the signs). See above for seating configurations.

Duration: Part 1 (Introductory) trainings from 75 to 90 minutes. Part 2 (Deep Dive) trainings from 120 to 180 minutes with the possibility of expanding to an all-day workshop that could include training on inclusivity, allyship, and courageous conversations.

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Notes

1. Ellie uses the phrase, “white-color,” to describe humans with white skin because many white-identifying people don’t believe that white is a color. Rather, they believe white is “base” or “normal” and those who identify with skin colors other than white are “Other” because they deviate from normal. It is important to understand that everyone is simply “human” with variations in skin color.
2. According to academic writer and lecturer, Robin DiAngelo, “white fragility” refers to the discomfort that many white-color humans experience relative to discussing or learning about white-color human dominance in societal, governmental, and other arenas. White-color humans rarely ever experience racial stress—being judged because of their skin color. When the conversation concerns how white-color people have benefitted from various white-dominated systems, many white people shut down due to feeling as if they are being judged or shamed. This “fragility” often prevents important conversations from going forward.

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