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Coaching, Antiracism and the Backlash Against DEI

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SPECIAL REPORT

COACHING, ANTI-RACISM & THE BACKLASH AGAINST DEI

There's no question that Diversity, Equity & Inclusion initiatives are under attack, particularly in the U.S. So how can coaching help maintain forward momentum in this time of backlash?

What are the unique strengths and insights that BIPOC coaches bring to the field?

What specific tools and strategies can help coaches support BIPOC clients who are dealing with racism, microaggressions, etc.? What do coaches need to address when coaching across racial differences? How does white fragility show up in the coaching engagement?

How can coaching education programs prepare coaches to challenge racism, support BIPOC clients and manage secondary racial trauma?

In this special report, choice explores the realities of anti-racism today and the important role coaching can play in making the world a more accepting place for everyone.



INCLUSIVE & IMPACTFUL

Practical strategies for bridging racial and cultural differences

USING SIL COACHING

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Coaching across racial and cultural differences is more important than ever, yet it has also become more complex. As conversations around equity, diversity and inclusion are increasingly scrutinized – and, in some cases, outright rejected – coaches must navigate these shifting landscapes with care and integrity. This means fostering understanding, confronting biases, and creating spaces where all clients feel valued and heard.

For coaches working across racial lines – whether as white coaches supporting BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) clients or individuals navigating cross-cultural dynamics – bridging these gaps requires deep self-awareness, cultural humility and a commitment to ongoing learning. Drawing from my experience as a Puerto Rican woman working in both Puerto Rico and the mainland United States, I understand firsthand the challenges and opportunities that arise in these coaching relationships.

This article explores practical strategies for coaches who want to approach racial and cultural differences with authenticity and effectiveness. From identifying implicit bias to building trust and psychological safety, the following insights will help coaches create inclusive and impactful coaching experiences.

IMPLICIT BIAS IN COACHING

Implicit bias operates beneath the surface, shaping how we perceive and interact with others – often without our conscious awareness. In coaching, these biases can subtly influence the questions we ask, the assumptions we make, and the strategies we recommend. Even the most well-intentioned coaches are not immune, making it essential to recognize and address these biases to foster genuinely inclusive coaching relationships.

Overcoming implicit bias is not about eliminating all preconceived notions overnight; it's about cultivating an ongoing commitment to self-awareness and growth. Coaches must take proactive steps to uncover their biases and understand how they may unintentionally impact clients from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds.

KEY STRATEGIES:

- ▶ **Engage in Self-Reflection:** Regularly examine your biases and how they may show up in your coaching practice.
- ▶ **Seek Feedback:** Ask clients or trusted colleagues for honest feedback on how you navigate cultural differences.
- ▶ **Participate in Anti-Racist Training:** Continual education on systemic racism and bias is necessary for all coaches.

- ▶ **Analyze Your Coaching Patterns:** Are you offering different advice to clients based on their racial or cultural backgrounds? Reflect on patterns that may indicate bias.

CULTURAL HUMILITY OVER CULTURAL COMPETENCE

Traditional coaching models often emphasize cultural competence – the idea that one can acquire a comprehensive understanding of different cultures. However, cultural humility offers a more dynamic and realistic approach, recognizing that learning about others is an ongoing, evolving process rather than a fixed achievement.

Rather than assuming expertise, coaches practicing cultural humility embrace curiosity, actively listen to their clients' experiences, and remain open to growth. This approach prioritizes respect, adaptability, and the ability to engage with clients on their own terms, creating more meaningful and effective coaching relationships.

KEY STRATEGIES:

- ▶ **Adopt a Learning Mindset:** Approach racial and cultural differences with curiosity rather than assuming expertise.
- ▶ **Honor Lived Experiences:** Let clients lead discussions about their cultural identities rather than making assumptions.
- ▶ **Acknowledge Power Dynamics:** Recognize how racial power imbalances can affect the coaching relationship and strive to mitigate them.
- ▶ **Ask, Don't Assume:** Instead of making broad generalizations about a client's cultural experiences, ask open-ended questions to allow them to share their perspective.

BUILDING TRUST & PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Trust is the cornerstone of effective coaching, and when racial differences exist between coach and client, cultivating psychological safety becomes even more essential. Many BIPOC individuals have encountered microaggressions, discrimination and invalidation in professional and personal spaces, which can make them wary of fully engaging in coaching relationships. Coaches must take intentional steps to ensure that clients feel heard, respected and supported, without fear of judgment or dismissal.

Establishing trust requires coaches to go beyond surface-level assurances and actively create an environment where clients can be their authentic selves. This means acknowledging the realities of racial dynamics, demonstrating genuine curiosity and empathy, and consistently reinforcing a sense of safety throughout the coaching process.

KEY STRATEGIES:

- ▶ **Validate Experiences:** Acknowledge racial realities without minimizing or dismissing them.
- ▶ **Listen Deeply:** Practice active listening without defensiveness or the need to 'fix' racialized experiences.
- ▶ **Avoid Performative Allyship:** Authenticity is key – clients will sense if your approach to racial discussions is surface-level.
- ▶ **Be Transparent About Limitations:** If you are unfamiliar with aspects of a client's racial or cultural experience, admit it and express a willingness to learn.

Coaching in a time of Backlash

By embracing these practices, coaches can not only improve their individual relationships with clients, but also contribute to a broader movement of equity and inclusion in the coaching industry and beyond.

- » Commit to ongoing self-reflection and education on racial bias.
- » Prioritize cultural humility over cultural competence.
- » Build trust by validating experiences and creating psychological safety.
- » Address racial barriers with openness and a growth mindset.
- » Continuously refine your approach to ensure inclusivity in your coaching practice.
- » Recognize the impact of the current political and social climate on coaching.
- » Equip yourself with tools to address resistance and bias in organizational settings.
- » Foster open, non-defensive dialogue about race with clients and colleagues.

Coaching Questions

for Addressing Racial & Cultural Differences

Use these thought-provoking questions to create an open and inclusive dialogue with your clients about race, culture, and identity.

- » What aspects of your cultural identity feel most relevant to our coaching work?
- » In what ways have your racial or cultural experiences influenced your professional and personal growth?
- » What challenges have you faced in work or life related to race, and how have you navigated them?
- » How can I, as your coach, better support and honor your cultural and racial identity?
- » Are there any topics related to race and culture that you would like to explore in our coaching sessions?
- » What has been your experience with bias or microaggressions, and how can we address them in a productive way?
- » What does an equitable and inclusive coaching relationship look like for you?

Microaggressions

Recognizing and responding to them in coaching

Microaggressions are subtle, often unintentional comments or behaviors that convey bias or reinforce stereotypes. In coaching, these can undermine trust and psychological safety. Here's how to recognize them and respond effectively.

COMMON MICROAGGRESSIONS & BETTER APPROACHES

Microaggression: "I don't see color; I treat everyone the same."

Better Approach: "I recognize that race and culture shape experiences, and I want to be mindful of how that influences our work together."

Microaggression: "You're so articulate!"

Better Approach: "I really appreciate the insight you bring to this conversation."

Microaggression: "Everyone can succeed if they just work hard enough."

Better Approach: "I understand that systemic barriers impact opportunities differently for different groups."

Microaggression: Interrupting or dismissing discussions about race as "too political."

Better Approach: "Let's explore how your experiences around race impact your goals and challenges."

HOW TO ADDRESS MICRO-AGGRESSIONS AS A COACH

Listen and Validate: If a client shares an experience of bias, acknowledge their feelings and experiences.

Self-Reflect: Be mindful of your own biases and how they may show up in coaching conversations.

Apologize and Learn: If you commit a microaggression, own it, apologize sincerely, and commit to doing better.

Create a Safe Space: Ensure that your coaching environment encourages open and honest conversations about identity and lived experience.

Coaching is most effective when both coach and client can bring their full identities into the relationship, fostering deeper self-awareness and growth.

WHEN RACIAL DIFFERENCES PRESENT CHALLENGES

Even in the most well-intentioned coaching relationships, racial and cultural differences can sometimes create misunderstandings or tensions. Rather than viewing these moments as barriers, coaches should approach them as opportunities for deeper learning, growth, and connection. Successfully navigating these challenges requires open communication, self-awareness, and a commitment to fostering an inclusive coaching environment.

KEY STRATEGIES:

- » **Check Your Defensiveness:** If a client points out racial insensitivity, acknowledge it and commit to growth.
- » **Refer When Necessary:** If a client expresses the need for a BIPOC coach or a coach with a particular lived experience, respect that request.
- » **Emphasize Mutual Learning:** Frame racial differences as an opportunity for growth rather than a division.
- » **Set Boundaries Around Harmful Narratives:** If a client expresses views that dismiss or invalidate racial experiences, address them with firm but compassionate coaching techniques.

A CALL TO INTENTIONAL ACTION

Coaching within organizations presents unique challenges and opportunities when it comes to racial equity. In an era where DEI (Diversity, Equity and Inclusion) initiatives are being rolled back or eliminated, it is even more critical for coaches to foster inclusive and equitable practices. This requires intentionality and courage to ensure that anti-racist and culturally humble coaching remains a priority even when it is no longer institutionally mandated.

Rather than relying solely on formal DEI programs, coaches can seek out everyday opportunities to promote inclusivity, challenge bias, and support employees navigating racial dynamics in the workplace. This means embedding equity-focused conversations into leadership coaching, team dynamics, and conflict resolution efforts. The absence of branded DEI initiatives does not mean the absence of need; rather, it calls for a deeper, more strategic commitment to ensuring fairness and belonging in professional spaces.

To make a meaningful impact, coaches working in corporate and institutional settings can:

- » **Encourage Inclusive Leadership:** Support leaders in fostering equitable environments where all voices are heard and valued.
- » **Frame Inclusion as a Performance Driver:** Highlight research-backed benefits of diverse teams, emphasizing innovation, productivity, and employee retention.
- » **Equip Clients with Tools to Navigate Resistance:** Provide frameworks for handling difficult conversations about race constructively, ensuring progress rather than escalation.
- » **Model and Encourage Culturally Humble Practices:** Demonstrate an ongoing commitment to learning and self-awareness, showing that inclusivity is not a one-time initiative but an evolving process.

The Role of Identity in Coaching

A coach's and client's racial and cultural identities inevitably shape the coaching dynamic. Understanding and acknowledging these influences can enhance trust and effectiveness in the coaching relationship.

WHY IDENTITY MATTERS IN COACHING

Identity Shapes Perspectives & Assumptions – Our lived experiences inform how we interpret situations, set goals and define success.

It Impacts Power Dynamics – Clients may feel more or less comfortable sharing openly depending on how they perceive their coach's identity.

It Influences Trust & Psychological Safety – Acknowledging identity-related experiences fosters a coaching space where clients feel fully seen and heard.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR COACHES

Reflect on Your Own Identity – How does your racial, cultural and socioeconomic background influence your coaching style?

Avoid Assumptions – Let the client define what aspects of identity are relevant to their coaching experience.

Acknowledge Identity When It Matters – If a client brings up race, ethnicity or culture, engage with openness rather than discomfort.

Be Willing to Learn – You don't need to be an expert in every culture, but you do need to listen and validate lived experiences.

Coaching is most effective when both coach and client can bring their full identities into the relationship, fostering deeper self-awareness and growth.

By embedding these principles into coaching work, professionals can ensure that equity remains a guiding force – regardless of external pressures or changing political climates. This moment demands resilience and intentional action from coaches who believe in doing what is right, even when it is difficult.

Coaching across racial differences is not about having all the answers – it's about fostering an inclusive and growth-oriented space for all clients. By embracing cultural humility, addressing implicit bias and committing to trust-building, coaches can bridge the racial gap. Ultimately, integrity in coaching means showing up authentically and being open to learning so every client feels seen, heard and valued. •