

## Diversity in Practice

### *yes, but...*

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Barack Obama delivered a speech on race March 18 entitled, “A More Perfect Union,” that captured the nation’s attention. In this speech, Obama called for a national conversation on race that is honest, collective, and immediate. Although Obama was widely praised for the courage and candor of his words, it is in the nuance of the “yes, but ...” responses to his speech where we see our country’s real racial fault lines. Voices like Bill O’Reilly on Fox News commented that, *yes*, a national conversation on race was a laudable goal, *but* white America was reluctant to talk about race because the margin of verbal error was too small and the threat of being labeled a racist was too high.

Many African-American voices (for example, [blackcommentator.com](http://blackcommentator.com)) said, *yes*, the speech was brilliant and necessary, *but* they noted that African Americans were already engaged in a national conversation on race, just without their white counterparts.

Commentators like Daniel Schorr ([npr.org](http://npr.org)) added yet another voice by, *yes*, applauding the speech, *but* simultaneously expressing disappointment that Obama can now no longer claim to represent the “post-racial generation that had transcended America’s past racial division.”

I heard many of these and similar sentiments echoed in social settings and workplaces across this country. Always a *yes*, followed by a *but*.

Yes, we should talk about race, but who is going to start the conversation? Yes, I think race is an issue, but is it really the most important issue we face right now? Yes, we need to deal with race, but do we really need to talk about slavery? Can’t we just talk about what is going on today?

Yes, I want to bring up race, but I don’t want to be labeled as the angry minority. Yes, his speech was amazing, but do I really want to take on the task of educating all the white people in my workplace?

The “yes, but ...” responses pull the curtain back on this difficult-to-define, uncomfortable-to-broach, and impossible-to-ignore subject of race and reveal a few poignant truths:

It is easier to talk about race in theory than it is to approach the historical and festering wounds of our racial histories that lie along our nation’s racial divides. The necessary conversation we need to have is not a conversation on race itself — it is a dialogue on the consequences of racial stereotypes, racial prejudice, and racial identity.

It is easier to parse and critique Obama’s speech with co-workers than to discuss the possibility that racial bias continues to play a role in the racial composition of legal workplaces.

A national theoretical conversation on race is safer than a personal interaction with a neighbor or colleague.

The landscape of racial dialogue still has a perceptible line separating minorities and whites, with the former viewing race as an inseparable piece of everyday realities that needs to be constantly negotiated for survival and success, and the latter viewing race as a conversation into which they will enter when conditions are right and the emotional space is made safe.

The “yes, but ...” responses illustrate that we are all already talking about race - we are just talking past each other and not listening to each other.

For minorities, talking about race is a necessary reality, one that is raw, pained, and heavily laden with our own experiences, as well as the shared memories of our parents, grandparents, and communities.

For whites, talking about race is a difficult choice tinged with the risks of misunderstandings and blame, but it is still a choice.

We are talking about race as us versus them — a zero-sum game where each side realizes it can't win, but it fights like hell to not lose.

It is in this context that diversity and inclusion attempt to create a new paradigm, a “we” that melds the “us and them” into a new definition of community.

Obama is right that we need a collective, honest, and immediate conversation to get us to this new paradigm. But before we can talk with each other, we need to actually trust each other. In this extraordinary election year, our cultural truths have confronted us. We don't yet trust “them” to understand “us.” We cannot have a conversation yet because we do not have trust yet.

Minorities have to be able to trust that our experiences will not be discounted or softened to make the majority more comfortable.

Whites who grew up with race as background noise, a reality to be encountered only when a minority entered the room, have to be able to trust that honest verbal errors will not create character stains.

This trust cannot be created collectively or immediately; it has to be built one brave uncomfortable honest personal conversation at a time.

And, when enough of us can have real conversations on race in our neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces, we will be able to, on a national scale, say yes without the but.