

The Washington Post

# TOP WORKPLACES

JUNE 18, 2021



Talking through difficult dialogues

Top company officials assess long-term changes

## The Great Return

How new attitudes on flexibility and equity are reshaping the workplace



## Forging a way forward in a changed workplace

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# How to have courageous conversations at work

**A** year after my post-divorce, mid-pandemic move, I'm finally hanging some art on the wall in my home office. But it's far too late to establish appearances. Over the past year, my co-workers have already seen my bare wall, bare face, towers of clean unsorted laundry and delivery boxes, work-inappropriate coffee mugs, Mean Mommy scowl, ashy roots. I'm definitely bringing my whole self to work.

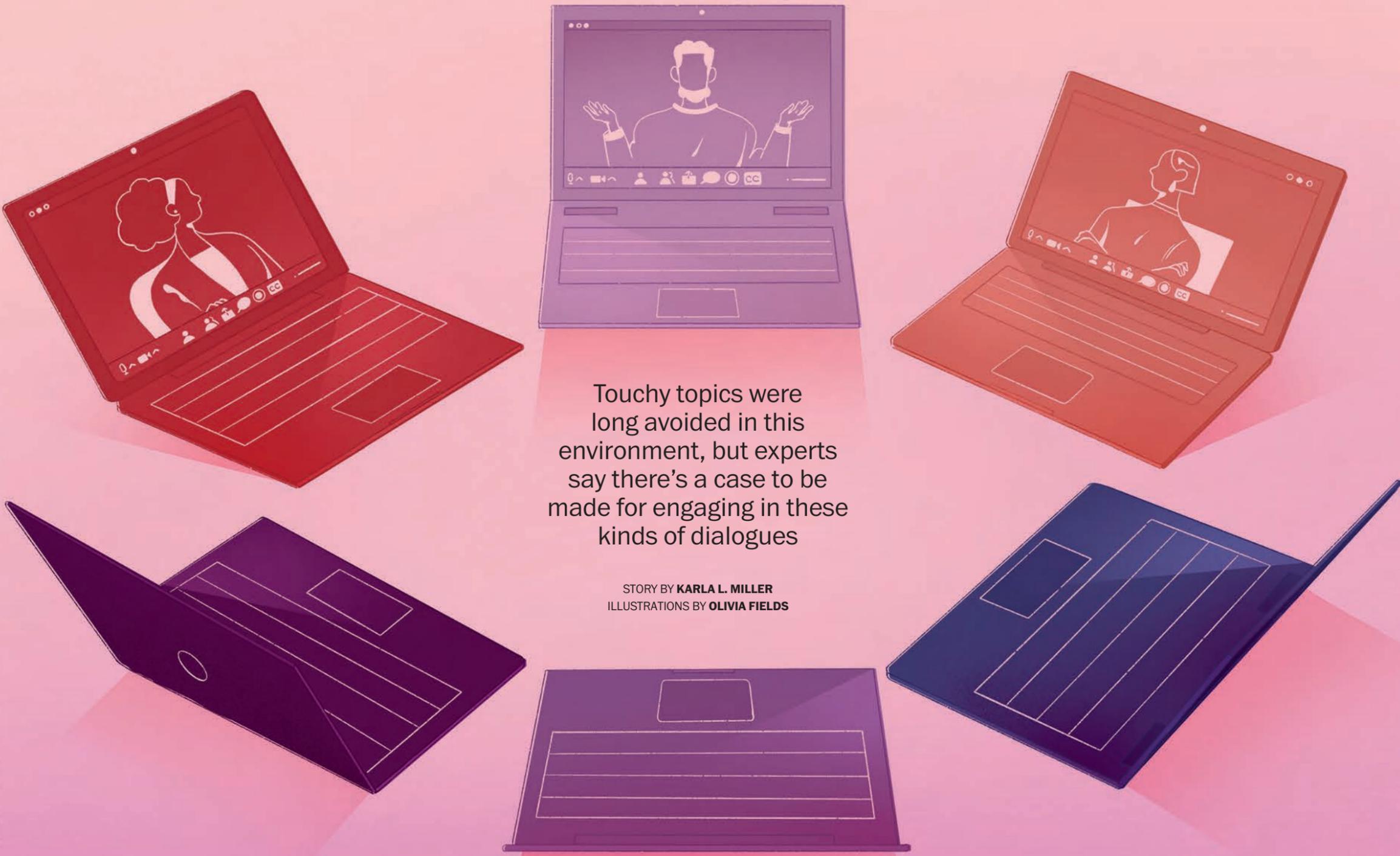
In a traditional commercial office setting, "people are used to seeing the code-switched version of their peers," says Kwame Christian, conflict resolution expert and director of the American Negotiation Institute. In the U.S. corporate workplace, that code is largely patterned after straight White men. At some workplaces, employees are all encouraged to include their pronouns in their email signatures; at others, LGBTQ workers still feel safer obscuring their partner's gender in break-room conversations.

Women rein in their resting B face and toe-heel the line between "assertive" and "aggressive." Autistic professionals scrutinize every conversation for cues they've missed or accidental offense they've given. And Black knowledge workers are constantly tuned in to the white-noise frequency of the U.S. corporate workplace, where "professional" is understood to mean straightened or close-cropped hair; accent-free English; and carefully curated conversations about news, sports and social events, bland as unseasoned potato salad and never, ever angry.

Like actors or athletes, most of us go through some kind of ritual to help us flip the mental switch to work mode: shaving, putting on work clothes and makeup, taking in news or work-related podcasts during the commute. At the end of the workday, we undo the rituals and strip down to our private selves. But those of us shifting to 100 percent remote work during the pandemic have ditched many of those rituals — along with many of the conventions that govern what we reveal of our personal lives and opinions.

Even as we're literally masking up in public, in our home offices, the workplace masks are coming off.

Boundaries between work and home life, steadily eroding over the years, finally just crumbled altogether



Touchy topics were long avoided in this environment, but experts say there's a case to be made for engaging in these kinds of dialogues

STORY BY **KARLA L. MILLER**  
ILLUSTRATIONS BY **OLIVIA FIELDS**



**“We’ve become so conflict-avoidant as a country that we write off all difficult conversations because they make us feel bad.”**

Ashley Virtue, director of external relations for the National Conflict Resolution Center

screens for medical appointments, therapy, teacher meetings, socializing and news updates, then pivot directly to our work screens, threads of our prior interaction still clinging to our minds. We talk freely with colleagues about our crushing numbness and lack of motivation, anxiety about covid, family drama.

And we’re talking about other things, too: The murder of George Floyd and conviction of Derek Chauvin. Protests. The 2020 election. The Capitol riot. Mass shooting after police shooting after mass shooting after assault on Asian elders after mass shooting after outing of influential sexual predator after mass shooting.

And without the usual mental and visual cues of an office setting, our reactions to the deluge are more raw. Unfiltered. Unfettered. Unmoderated. Unmasked.

Until the past few years, there has been an “unspoken rule that you don’t bring certain conversations into the workplace,” says Ashley Virtue, director of external relations for the National Conflict Resolution Center. Now, not only are colleagues openly discussing inequality, politics and other too-hot-to-handle topics at work, but in some cases, employers are making those conversations part of the formal discourse, hosting forums and drawing up official statements of values promoting diversity, equity and inclusion.

But is work really the appropriate place to have these delicate and potentially volatile conversations? And should employers be encouraging them?

#### NOW OUT IN THE OPEN

For Christian, it’s not whether people “should” be having social and policy discussions in the workplace. “The reality is, people are talking about race and politics at work.” And nowadays, “the industry standard is for companies to have to say something” on politics, racism, sexual discrimination and other issues — in public and within their own walls.

These discussions aren’t new, but traditionally, “those conversations weren’t had *by the masses* at work,” says Tina Gilbert, managing director of Management Leadership for Tomorrow.

“Politics and social policy have always been part of how business is conducted,” through backroom deals, golf meetings and high-priced lobbyists, Gilbert points out. What’s changed, she says, is “who’s been allowed to have the conversations.” Social media sites give individuals and grass-roots advocates direct access and a public platform to call out employers on their policies, personnel decisions and affiliations — and the pressure is on employers to respond. Roast a corporation on Twitter, and within minutes, its social media managers will respond with self-deprecating banter, an apology or a policy change announcement as the situation requires.

In addition to refining their public responses to political, social and other issues, U.S. employers in recent years have been conducting internal forums — “courageous conversations” is the popular nomenclature — on discrimination and inequality, fueled by national news events. In an April 15 webcast with The Post’s Jonathan Capehart, Tim Ryan, CEO of accounting and professional services firm PwC, discussed his firm’s series of conversations.

Ryan became CEO in July 2016, the same week in which Alton Sterling and Philando Castile were killed by police, and five police officers at a subsequent protest in Dallas were killed by a Black Army reservist. Two weeks later, the entire firm shut down for a rapidly organized day-long forum on race. Ryan recalled eye-opening accounts from Black PwC employees who carry their business cards in case they’re pulled over, to show they can afford the cars they’re driving — something no White professional working for a Big Four accounting firm would likely need to do. That day’s discussion spurred Ryan to keep the conversation going with other

executives, eventually leading to the formation of CEO Action for Diversity and Inclusion, an executive-driven group committed to advancing diversity and inclusion.

Ryan told Capehart that as a CEO, you “have to stand up for what you believe is right, at the end of the day. . . . I view this as a matter of what makes our business stronger or makes our economy stronger, and also what is consistent with our values.”

Two years after that first forum, Ryan spoke at the funeral of a PwC employee, Botham Jean, a Black accountant who was shot and killed sitting in his own home in Dallas by a White police officer who mistook his apartment for her own.

The conversation is far from over.

#### FINDING THE COURAGE TO CONVERSE

“We’ve become so conflict-avoidant as a country that we write off all difficult conversations because they make us feel bad,” says Virtue. But, she says, there’s a difference between “staying in a conversation that’s going nowhere versus staying in a conversation that makes you uncomfortable.”

For people new to these conversations, the fear of saying the wrong thing is strong. But not participating in the conversation is no longer an option, either. “If you say something, you get punished, and if you don’t say something, you get punished,” as Christian puts it.

As a White, straight woman with my own mix of privileges and impediments, I understand the impulse to avoid engaging in uncomfortable discussions. From childhood, my go-to response to conflict has been to freeze, rather than fight or flee, masking my fear, anger or other feelings until it was safe to indulge them. Controlling my reactions protected me from exposing any flaws or vulnerabilities.

This *modus operandi* generally served me well as a child. Unfortunately, later in life, when a boss wanted to discuss a performance issue, or a friend brought up something thoughtless I did, my lack of reaction looked like indifference. And as with many people, my subconscious wants to catastrophize “you did a bad thing” into “you are an entirely bad person,” so being called out in any capacity feels existentially threatening and makes me defensive.

Christian says his goal in any discussion is to express his thoughts, anticipate that others will disagree, and engage from there with a focus on having a productive conversation — not on being “right.”

It makes me wonder: In shutting down or getting defensive over being called out, how many opportunities have I missed to get a broader view of the conflict, clear up misunderstandings and be part of making things better? Was I staying neutral, or dodging accountability? What if, instead of trying to avoid being Wrong or a Bad Person, I had engaged in the conversation and ridden out the discomfort?

Whether you have something difficult to say, or you’re being told something that’s difficult to hear, Christian has two tips: Slow down — “if you’re heated, the first thing you want to say is the wrong answer” — and run your thoughts by “your personal board of directors.”

Everyone on my personal board of directors has my back in different ways. The board includes some sarcastic and hilariously swearsy friends and family who fiercely back me up no matter what; a therapist and other friends who support me by kindly pointing out flaws in my logic and inconsistencies in my actions; and the childhood voice that sends up alarms and locks down my emotions in an effort to protect me. Knowing I have that resource gives me the courage to face conversations I might otherwise avoid, to sit

with discomfort and listen to hard truths.

All of which is to say that employers have a right, and perhaps a duty, to provide opportunities and guidelines for candid conversations about the systemic inequities that affect their employees and the broader community. Like it or not, their people are having these conversations anyway, so establishing the company line helps stay ahead of resulting misunderstandings and controversy.

And there’s a business case to be made for engaging in these conversations, says Brian Elliott, vice president of Future Forum, a consortium formed by workplace communication platform Slack. Having diverse voices in the boardroom “helps you tackle broader markets and adjust to change.” But more than that, he says, “building trust is a big component of creativity.” Team leaders who don’t understand or acknowledge how a particular news event is affecting the focus and well-being of certain groups of employees aren’t going to inspire that trust.

Plainly put, inequality is baked into all our systems: justice and law enforcement, education, politics, economics, labor, real estate, health care. Even when equal treatment is mandated by law, historical and ongoing discrimination against marginalized races, genders and abilities means the impact falls far short of the intent. Removing that systemic inequality means addressing it at the point of contact with people in those various systems — so, for many, “the conversation begins at the workplace,” says Gilbert.

Right now, aside from some eye-rolling about “woke corporations,” public opinion generally favors companies that explicitly promote diversity, equity and inclusion in their internal and external statements. But to have a lasting effect on systemic inequality, the hard conversations will have to continue — with our colleagues, and within ourselves.

#### TIPS ON HAVING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

Assuming all parties are coming to the table in good faith, “the best things in life are on the other side of difficult conversations,” says Christian. His three-point “Compassionate Curiosity” framework for having difficult conversations:

- Acknowledge and validate emotions on the other side. You can be empathetic to the fact of someone’s fear, anger or anxiety, even if you personally don’t feel it’s justified.

- Complaints always reflect an underlying need that has not been met,” says Virtue. Whether it’s a need for respect, security, reassurance, validation, or just acknowledgment of things they’ve done or been denied, recognizing and acknowledging those needs makes the conversation more productive, she says.

- Get curious with compassion. Christian advises asking open-ended questions with a compassionate tone and no agenda: “If you don’t know what you want to say, it means you should be asking a question.” And listen to the responses. (Again, you don’t have to agree to hear.)

- Focus on joint problem-solving. Ask “What’s next?” and look for a solution together. Addressing a specific behavior, and casting it in the context of adhering to the employer’s stated values, takes the personal sting out of the conversation.

In conducting bystander intervention training with the U.S. Navy for NCRC, Virtue faced the challenge of teaching personnel how to address discriminatory behavior in colleagues with whom they had “literal ride or die relationships.” The game changer, said Virtue, was when trainees realized that by bringing up the problem before it gets out of hand, they were actually watching their buddy’s back.

In other words, to borrow a phrase from Christian: Shift the focus from calling them out to calling them in.

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