

Re-railing the Conversation on Race

In conversations about oppression, race, and racism, you are likely to encounter many derailing tactics (see the [Derailing for Dummies](#) website for plenty examples). Below are some strategies to help “re-rail” the conversation. Some of the ideas are particular to certain derailing tactics and others are useful for a wide variety of tactics. None of them are foolproof—if you are walking on a tightrope, there are a lot more ways to fall off of it than to stay on it, so while we hope some of these tools help you keep your footing and balance when you’re being pushed, we also suggest that you have in place a net of support, care, and solidarity below you for the times when even the best tactics aren’t enough to accomplish what you hoped.

Derailing

“Derailing” is the attempt to distract from the original trajectory of a difficult conversation. A person who is attempting to derail a conversation is usually doing so in order to interrupt a sense of internal discomfort they are experiencing, whether or not they are aware of it. In this sense, you could view derailing as a “flight” response – the person feels that they or their position is threatened, and so they say whatever is necessary in order to escape that feeling.

However, it is important to recognize that the person who is derailing is not a victim in the conversation. Usually their derailing helps to maintain a dominant position in the conversation, asserting that they are right, and in possession of some standardized and expert knowledge that you do not have, which makes you and your experience and feelings wrong. The ways a person can derail a difficult conversation (from “I know someone who looks like you but disagrees with you” to “you are just looking for ways to be offended, you must really enjoy it”), can range from silencing and devaluing your position to demoralizing and humiliating you. In any case, the end result is to discourage any further attempts to have a conversation.

Re-Railing

“Re-railing” is the ability to recover the original trajectory of a difficult conversation and impart the ideas, content, or feelings that you originally intended to share. Re-railing often begins by acknowledging that the other person is derailing, and moves to re-open the conversation that was being shut down. Effective re-railing will have some, if not all, of the following qualities:

- Re-opens the original conversation, while honoring the derailing contribution
- Alleviates some anger and defensiveness on the part of the person who is derailing
- Affirms the relationship between you and the person who is derailing
- Keeps focus on the issue
- Makes it a two-way conversation

- Produces an outcome

Feelings

When someone derails a conversation you are trying to initiate or continue about racism, classism, gender discrimination, or any other kind of oppression, you are going to feel feelings (whew!), and along with these feelings come physical sensations. Some of the feelings and sensations you may experience include (but are not limited to):

- Anger
- Tightness in the belly
- Face feels hot
- Difficulty breathing
- Exhaustion
- Disgust
- Mind starts to spin
- Stuck
- Shocked
- Frustrated/At a loss
- Ashamed
- Resigned

Effective re-railing tactics help you to acknowledge, instead of ignore, the emotional and physical responses you are having to the derailing tactics you are experiencing. Having multiple re-railing tactics at your disposal means that you can choose the re-railing tactic you wish to use based on your sense of what feels safe and manageable for you in that moment. Re-railing can be transformative and healthy when you take into consideration your own self-care needs.

Read on for Re-Railing Tactics...

Eyes on the Prize

Sometimes it is useful, if only as a self care practice in hard conversations, to set a goal for the conversation. Are you trying to simply speak your truth? To speak your truth and have it heard and understood? To persuade someone of a certain fact? To get someone to start thinking about something differently? To plant a seed for future reflection? To bring about a certain action or response? To address a particular comment or statement?

If “re-railing” is about getting back on track, it can be especially useful to know where we hope that track is headed. Goal setting can help us select other tactics effectively, maybe increase our chances of meeting our goal, and can minimize our sense of being overwhelmed or at a loss in these conversations by focusing our own contributions in the areas and directions that are most important to us.

Call It What It Is

Sometimes the simplest response to derailing is to call it out as just that—for instance “What you are saying is distracting us from the original point.” Or “The way you are talking about this is derailing the direction of our conversation away from a concern I am trying to address.” Or “The point you are making is tangential to the conversation, and I think it is taking our focus away from a really important topic that I would like to keep discussing.” Sometimes if someone knows what they are doing, they are better able to stop doing it, or at least have to consider the possibility that their contribution to the conversation is diluting rather than clarifying it.

Put It On The Agenda

Oftentimes in conversations with privileged folks, the privileged person will derail the conversation by diverting focus from the issue or concern you are trying to address. Some examples (by no means exhaustive) of this are statements like: “But I experience discrimination as a _____ (woman, poor person, European immigrant, Jew, first generation to go to college, rural resident, etc.)”; or “The situation you’re describing is a lot like another situation about which I have something to say”; or “But people of color do X bad thing, too.” These tactics serve to distract energy and attention from the substance of what you are trying to communicate, and one key goal is to return that energy and attention to where they belong. Whether as a gesture of respect for privileged people who are raising alternate or distracting concerns genuinely, or as a tactic for resisting disingenuous distractions from your main argument, the re-railing tactic of making an agenda can be a helpful focusing tool. One way to employ it is to say: “I hear you, and I’m happy to talk about what you raised, but I’d like to finish talking about what I raised first. Can we do that?” Or more bluntly: “Can we put that on the agenda for after we’ve talked more about this first thing, which is _____?” That way, you call attention to the fact that their comment is derailing or distracting from your key point and the privileged person is assured that their Very Excellent Point has not and will not be disregarded, which might help you say what you need to and enable them to listen better to the point you were making in the first place.

No Tag Backs

You have a right to stop the conversation at any point if it is harmful to you, or too frustrating, or too hard, or too disillusioning, or because you have to pee or just don't want to talk any more. When you are choosing to end a conversation, it is an opportunity to say something with a level of clarity or emotional honesty or directness that you might have been unwilling or unable to bring to the conversation at its midpoint. If it is important to you to speak your truth succinctly and strongly, or there is a single thought you want the privileged person to think about more deeply, you can take your exit as an opportunity to say it. Try something like: "I really can't talk about this anymore, but the one thing I need to say to you before we go is _____." Or "I can't continue this conversation right now, but it would mean a great deal to me if you would think about _____." Or "I'm out of here. _____!!!!" Sometimes when a privileged person is no longer in a position to reply, they can absorb what you've said more deeply either in the moment or over time, and by leaving, you can protect yourself emotionally from any vulnerability or hurt that speaking your truth so directly opened up.

Talking Stick

Talking sticks are really powerful tools for dialogue that have been used across cultures for centuries and centuries. Also known as 'one mic' agreements, the basic structure is that you have an object (which can be something of meaning or not) and people talk when they have it and don't when they don't. So the talking stick permits the holder to speak, but it also facilitates the silence of the listener(s). The use of the talking stick can help people listen more deeply and allow people to speak more thoughtfully. You can use this concretely—using an object that you pass back and forth among speakers or around a circle for all or part of a given dialogue—or you can incorporate the principle less formally by asking something like "Can I tell you about my experience without interruption, and then I'll listen to yours without interrupting?" If necessary, you can add further clarification like: "If it's OK with you, I'll tell you when I'm done talking and then you can tell me when you are done so we're sure we both get to say everything we need to and hear each other fully?"

Moments of Silence

A sister of the talking stick, moments of silence can help refocus dialogue, calm nerves, and slow down or overcome efforts to derail through distractions or dominating behavior. The easiest way to get a moment of silence is to ask for it, saying something like "Can we take a moment of silence to all just think about what we've heard so far and what we most want to say?" Or "This is a hard conversation and maybe we'd all benefit from a moment of silence to just sit with what we've heard and what we're feeling before we keep going?" Or "I'd like to respond to what you're saying but I've got a lot of thoughts and feelings in response and would like to gather my thoughts so I can speak to you clearly and honestly—can we take a few moments of silence before we keep going?" Silence can give people the space to practice speedy self care, slow down the back and forth and reactivity, gather their thoughts, and shift the energy of a conversation,. Silence can also help everyone, including, crucially to re-railing goal, the privileged people in these conversations, be more present to the actual content rather than their own status or reactions in the conversation.

Running on Empty

One re-railing tactic that can eventually function like a talking stick or moment of silence, is to just refrain from responding and let the derailder talk until they are done. If all of the listeners participate and meet the derailder with silence, often the derailder will hear him or herself more clearly, become aware of the space he or she is occupying in the dialogue, and eventually stop talking. After giving some space for that to sink in, sometimes a reply can be more deeply heard and more effective. It also can help mitigate the desperation and frustration of trying to break into a harmful, thoughtless, uninformed, or otherwise challenging array of comments from a derailder. It can be useful—though sometimes might come off as snarky—to ask the derailder if they're done speaking once you've let them run out of words. This tactic, of course, isn't always effective with derailleurs who can keep talking and talking despite not being receiving any response for minutes, and if the content of the comments are harmful enough, it may not be safe or healthy all the time to let those comments continue unabated.

Let's Play Jeopardy

A common feature of some derailing conversations involves the privileged person talking about things they don't know without expressing genuine curiosity. This shows up in statements like "I don't understand why people of color..." or "I don't know how you could think..." or "I don't know what you expect could possibly come out of x if y..." In these situations, it can be useful to ask the privileged person to express their interest or uncertainty in the form of a question (they may remember this requirement from Jeopardy, where you wouldn't answer "slave trade," but rather "what is the slave trade?"). Asking them to formulate their uncertainty or ideas in the form of a question can help them clarify the limits of their knowledge and voluntarily turn over the floor to the other party in the dialogue (you!). Also, from a slightly cynical standpoint, often people are more interested in answers to questions they pose than to interruptions or responses to their statements since they can retain a sense of ownership and control in the conversation even as they relinquish their dominance of the dialogue. Asking people to frame questions can also help draw attention to their lack of expressed curiosity (which is itself a feature of racism, privilege, and derailing), introduce the limitations of their own experience in a context that invites them to address those limits, and highlight the possibility a healthy, balanced dialogue represents for transforming those dynamics.

Can I Ask You Something?

The flip side of Let's Play Jeopardy is to try to help rerail the conversation by asking questions rather than making statements. This can help the derailder still feel like they are getting to talk as much as they want to, but gives you the chance to focus their comments and push them to explore their own views, experience, and positions more deeply and critically. It can also help evade the dynamic where the person of color becomes charged with educating the privileged person by sharing personally and making persuasive arguments—a responsibility that is unfair and can be exhausting and harmful—by allowing that person to drive the conversation without having to assume full responsibility for making a persuasive argument about the existence of racism or the importance of combating it. There's some white man named Socrates who did a lot of teaching this way and seemed to be on to something.

Do You See What I See?

This tactic invites the privileged person to acknowledge your experience as a foundation for re-railing the conversation and moving forward. You can ask very directly: “Can you recognize the validity of my experience?” Or “I hear what you are saying and am listening to you, but I’m telling you about my experience and want to know if you can acknowledge that this is how I experience (what we’re talking about).” If they agree, from there you might add a question like, “So if someone, anyone, experiences (what we’re talking about) as I do, what does that mean about (what should be done/the topic/our responsibility/how you’ve represented the issues/etc.)?”

This tactic invites the privileged person to first see the reality that you are speaking truthfully from a place of experience, and second, hopefully, to extend that reality to a broader concern or pattern. (For instance “If some people experience a comment like X as racist, and if that’s harmful to them, what does that mean about the value of making comments like X?” or “If anyone experiences [insert social reality] as racist or harmful, what does that mean about [that social reality]?”) This can help respond to derailing tactics in which the privileged person ignores or devalues the speaker’s experience, or in which they claim that that experience is exceptional or non-representative of a larger trend or issue. It can also be helpful to the speaker to have their experience recognized, and in recognizing that experience, the conversation may be able to continue in the direction the speaker was going before it was rerailed.

On the Upside

What’s that saying? You catch more bees with honey than by cursing them out and calling them white supremacists? One thing that can help anyone stay in a conversation in a more present and respectful way is to feel validated and valued for doing so. This is only a good tactic if you can do so sincerely, but if there is something you do respect or value about the privileged person, particularly as regards to how they are participating in the conversation (as opposed to the content of their statements), it can be helpful to acknowledge that and can open the person up to listening more deeply. Something like: “I respect you for staying in this conversation because I know you don’t have to” can sometimes get a conversation back on track, and it doesn’t have to cede any ground in terms of the actual issues.

Let’s Talk about Race

Many derailing tactics involve diverting attention from the subject at hand to the way the speaker is talking about the subject: you are too emotional, your tone is hostile, you aren’t speaking clearly, you’re giving uncommon examples, you’re too loud, you’re being over-sensitive, you’re taking things too personally, etc. One re-railing tactic is to acknowledge that these types of concerns are not in fact concerns about the topic itself and don’t in fact refute whatever point the speaker was making, only the way in which it was being made. One question worth asking a derailer in this situation might be something like : “Can we talk about the subject and not about the way I am talking about the subject?” You can follow up for clarity’s sake, “If I screamed fire when a building was on fire, would you speak to me about my tone or ask me where the fire was and how to help put it out?” The example points to the urgency of the issue at hand as it compares with the concerns about tone and delivery, as well as the way in which the focus on tone and delivery is both beside the point and potentially dangerous or harmful to the people with something at stake in the outcome of the discussion.

I Get So Emotional

Another tactic when you are feeling emotional (or when you are accused of being overemotional/oversensitive/taking things too personally/not being intellectual enough, etc.) is to actually just let your emotions—especially those like sadness and hurt—show. This can be a very vulnerable position, so it's important anyone choosing it feel sufficiently safe in the context and the particular moment to expose themselves in such a way (it might also be a tactic to choose only or usually when other allies are present to support you). Frequently when faced with genuine emotion and hurt, a derailer becomes more attentive and focused as they see the impact of their words on a real human being in front of them, and can sometimes let go of a hyper-intellectual, "rational," or oppositional stance and be more able to attend to the real human impact of the topic. While it can be dangerous and vulnerable for the speaker and so needs to be considered with care, some speakers find it is a relief to actually just show what they're feeling rather than exerting all the painful effort of keeping it in, and with the right supports in place, can be a powerful positive experience.

A sister tactic to this one is to ask a person who responds to your strong emotions a straightforward question: "How do my feelings make you feel?" Sometimes this allows the privileged person to acknowledge their own fear, anxiety, and defensiveness—or at best their very real concern and care about the topic at hand—and you can then ask them the "Do you see what I see?" question above.

What I Hear You Saying Is...

Many people keep speaking because they are concerned they are not being heard, and many people say things they haven't thought about deeply. One useful tactic in conversation is to repeat back to the derailer what they're saying. In this tactic, you would clarify their point, including any holes or inconsistencies, but without misrepresenting it. It's important they recognize your paraphrase as accurate, not a distortion or condescending version of it, but as a correct reflection of what they're saying. However, if you can distill their argument to a more simple point, it may be easier to address and/or easier to demonstrate how it is a derailing point with regard to your original conversation. It helps the privileged person to know they've been heard, helps you to know that you're actually hearing them correctly (and therefore responding to what's actually going on), and helps both of you move forward with more clarity and focus.

Following up a "What I Hear You Saying" with an analogy ("Well if that is true, then this bad thing that is obviously bad would also be true") can be a very effective one-two tactic.

It's not you, it's everyone

Often derailers will point to their own good will or intentions, or to elements of their own experience, to discredit or distract from a central point in your argument. Frequently these tactics shift a conversation about institutional or structural oppression to one that is more about individual bias. Sometimes you can refocus the conversation by distinguishing between bias and institutional/structural racism. Doing so can not only refocus the conversation on the big picture, but can also help the privileged person feel less personally attacked and therefore more open to honest dialogue and engagement.

Implicit vs. Explicit

Often when you try to discuss race with people who do not want to, they will derail the conversation by accusing you of being “obsessed with race” and by questioning why other people of color cannot just let go of the past and move on, instead of seeing racism in every situation. They might even ask you, “Why are we always talking about race?” In these situations, it can be useful to point out that the person may be confusing subtext for what is explicit. When you live in the soup of a racist culture, it can feel like you are always “talking” about race, when in reality you are not: you are simply managing your emotions in relationship to the racist actions and words of others. In truth, an honest conversation about race and racism between people who enter the conversation on equal footing is incredibly rare. Reminding the person you are talking to that the conversation you are trying to have means taking a risk and being brave, may encourage them to call on their own inner resources and try to go a little deeper with you.

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Sometimes you just gotta say what you feel. :)