

TOUCHSTONES

Touchstones are an established set of mutually agreed-upon principles that guide how participants will treat, and be with, each other in “deep dialogue” using the Coming to the Table Approach. They aim to address participants’ needs and expectations to feel safe and/or brave enough to speak openly and honestly and help us all make more space for each other. There shouldn’t be too many, nor should they be too rigid, lest they feel like a straitjacket. Touchstones are reminders of standards of behavior, not hard rules. They are a means to an end, a way toward relationship. If they become an end, they should be revisited. Below are examples that can be used or modified to meet the needs of your group. Developing your own Touchstones is a good way to build group cohesion. The above description is adapted from, and more information about Touchstones can be found in, [The Little Book of Racial Healing](#).

- **Be 100% present, extending and presuming welcome.** Set aside the usual distractions of things undone, things to do. Bring all of yourself to the experience. We all learn most effectively in welcoming spaces. Welcome others here and presume that you are welcomed.
- **Listen deeply.** Listen intently to what is said; listen to the feelings beneath the words. *“To ‘listen’ another’s soul into life, into a condition of disclosure and discovery—may be almost the greatest service that any human being ever performs for another”* (Douglas Steere). Listen to yourself also. Strive to achieve a balance between listening and reflecting, speaking and acting.
- **Try it on.** Make an opening for new ideas by trying them on for size. Give yourself the time to get to know them, to consider how they fit you.
- **Always by invitation.** It is never “share or die.” You will be invited to share in pairs, small groups, and in the large group. The invitation is exactly that. You will determine the extent to which you want to participate in our discussions or activities.
- **No fixing.** Each of us is here to discover his or her own truths. We are *not* here to set someone else straight, or to help right another’s wrong, to “fix” or “correct” what we perceive as broken or incorrect in another member of the group.
- **Identify assumptions; suspend judgments.** Our assumptions, although usually invisible to us, often undergird our worldview; our judgments, frequently automatic, can block our growth. By pausing to identify assumptions and suspend judgments, to the degree possible or reasonable, we can listen to the other, and to ourselves, more fully.

- **Speak your truth.** Say what is in your heart, trusting that your voice will be heard, and your contribution respected, even if it is different from or even opposite of what another has said. *Own* your truth by speaking only for yourself, using “I” statements.
- **Be aware of and allow for the difference between intention and impact.** Give yourself and others the grace of assuming that no one present *intends* to harm others, while also being ready to acknowledge that words or behavior/actions (nonverbal communication) can have a harmful impact.
- **Whenever possible, acknowledge uncomfortable responses: say “ouch!” or “whoops!”; then explain.** Let others know when you are responding with pain to remarks in the group, either from others (“ouch!”) or yourself (“whoops!”), especially when your feelings are impeding your ability to stay connected to others. Help them understand the reason for your reaction.
- **Respect silence.** Silence is a rare gift. After someone has spoken, take time to reflect and fully listen, without immediately filling the space with words.
- **Maintain confidentiality.** Create a safe space by respecting the confidential nature and content of discussions in the circle. What is said in the circle remains here.
- **Respect Difference:** Recognize that different cultures have different norms for speaking in groups (such as interrupting, or degrees of assertiveness). There may be differences regarding power dynamics. Over-emphasis on norms of politeness and “safety,” for example, can be an unconscious way to reinforce white fragility and prevent expressions of anger.
- **When things get difficult, turn to wonder; try “both/and”, rather than “either/or.”** When someone else’s truth challenges your own, try turning to wonder: “I wonder what brought her to this place?” “I wonder what my reaction teaches me?” Also, allow for the possibility of multiple experiences and perspectives: let “both/and” create a larger, shared space.
- **Expect “non-closure.”** Stay in the present. We probably won’t get to the end of the road today.

Remember that Coming to the Table is the first step. *Staying* at the Table, *staying* conscious and committed, is the key to racial healing & transformation.

These Touchstones are adapted from ideas, concepts, and practices used in a [Circle of Trust](#). Another resource is [Visions, Inc](#). This version was initially developed for Coming to the Table by Ann Holmes Redding, Ph.D. & Pat Russell, Psy. D., and has been updated to reflect experience in their usage.