

Conversations That Need to Happen

Two Rotman School of Management professors have the type of conversation we need more of.



SARAH KAPLAN: Most of us recognize that there is lots of inequality out there. My thought is that in order to make change, we're going to have to talk about it — and it can't just be the people who are being disadvantaged talking amongst ourselves; we also have to have conversations with the people who have historically been in positions of privilege.



JAN MAHRT-SMITH: I fit the bill: I don't think I could have come from a more privileged position in society — yet I never even realized that I was privileged. I guess true privilege is when you don't even recognize that you're privileged.

SK: You do fit the bill, but at the same time, that doesn't mean you need to speak on behalf of all white straight men.

JMS: Great; I'll speak for myself, then!

SK: I think we should view this conversation as a type of role modelling, because it's a difficult conversation for people to have. Part of what I want to do is show how hard it is—but also, that it's worth trying. So, tell me, first of all, why you were interested in having this conversation with me? What

is motivating you — given this background of privilege that you have just illuminated?

JMS: It was triggered over the last two years or so by feeling like there was an increasingly negative slant to efforts for change by those with privilege — and how many of the things we do as white men are either to correct a wrong, to avoid a mistake or to liberate either side from the shackles of society. As males, we've created this society where we're sort of 'stuck' in our privilege, where we have to act in certain ways. We have to defend ourselves and constantly worry about somebody taking something away from us — but I don't experience that. Every time I'm part of a conversation, I walk out happier, because I have more tools, so the next time I walk into a situation, I'll be less stressed. I make friends. I understand what relationships are about. So, I want to have a conversation about how much less stressful and how much richer my life is when I address my privilege.

SK: Can you tell me a little bit more about what makes it stressful to be in these conversations?

JMS: It's the fear of messing up — of saying something that indicates that I'm still full of learned biases and prejudices. Personally, I don't like to be shown to have biases and, of course, professionally, what if I say the wrong thing and

you turn around and report me to my boss? Are you going to not talk to me for a couple of weeks because I've used the wrong terminology? Now, I'm less worried about that, simply because I understand something about both who you are, in terms of what groups you belong to, and where your obstacles are, and also about who I am. I've learned that I can mess up and I will be forgiven. And I've learned that if you mess up, I can go to you and say, 'This felt wrong, please don't talk to me like that.' And that's normal.

SK: I agree. I think it would be so much more powerful if we all had the ability to engage in these conversations with an understanding that we will make mistakes. I've had conversations with other men who have also talked about it being stressful in the ways that you described. And there's a part of me that wants to celebrate the men who are trying; but there's another part of me that feels like, 'Oh, boohoo. You feel bad; meanwhile, I've spent my entire life having to take on board weird critiques, sexist comments, not getting the promotion, being sidelined'. That other part of me thinks, 'Why should I glorify or even appreciate those efforts, because they are small relative to the damage that the current system has done?' I personally really struggle with how to balance that, because I've had so many conversations with men who've said, 'I felt at risk' or 'I've been criticized for trying, so I don't even know if I want to try anymore'. Do you have a thought about that?

JMS: I do, and I worry about the same things. I walk in and I'm welcomed with open arms to a discussion, and I walk out thinking, 'Okay, so now what am I supposed to do next, so that this is not an empty gesture'? My two thoughts on that are: First, I actually need to keep getting more involved. It's not a one-time thing where I get to say, 'Okay I've spent my time understanding, I have leant my voice of support, and that's it'. Sometimes I don't see people going to the next step. They feel like, 'I've reached this minimum level of being a champion for inclusion', and they get stuck there. Second, I have to start taking some real risks. I have to put something of myself out there and be willing to go and be criticized.

SK: I agree. There's a lot of movement right now to 'involve men', and they do it with things like #GoSponsorHer or whatever...

JMS: ...which are non-risk kinds of activities...

SK: Exactly. To me, what's so frustrating about those efforts is that they are cost-free for the people undertaking them; and what you're saying is, 'If I'm really going to participate in this conversation, I have to do things that are actually costly to me, or risky, or take my valuable time, or refocus my attention away from other goals that I might want to achieve'.

JMS: That's right. And that's what gets a little scary but maybe that is where I just need to go next and realize 'Hey, there is a reward associated with this, as well'. I might lose, but there will be something good and positive there, as well.

SK: I recently saw an interesting quote: When you're accustomed to privilege, equality can feel like oppression. Meaning that, if you're the one in a privileged position, making equality happen may mean that you get fewer opportunities, and that there's a different kind of language being used that's not the comfortable language for you. It may entail a new way of interacting, a new way of characterizing what leadership means, for which you don't fit the definition. So, some men...

JMS: ...they would experience that as a taking away of opportunity...

SK: For them, the cost is real. What I don't know how to address are men who are just trying to get jobs, and maybe they are the men who historically would have gotten the job more easily. They feel stressed out. They think they're working hard and they probably are. But there are others — women, ethnic minorities — who are working even harder or are smarter and those people don't want to lose out on those opportunities either. I think what's so beautiful about the way you've been talking about it is that you're saying it's *not* zero-sum, it's just a good way to be in the world. But if we're really going to make this change, some people who have gotten where they've gotten because of privilege may not get there anymore.

JMS: I think the only thing we can do is talk to them as individuals and say, 'You, personally have a lot to gain by be-

ing part of this conversation'. I think the only real loss is if you're not trying to be part of it. If there's any non-zero-sum part to it, it is being engaged and viewing it as a skill set to being able to navigate whatever the future landscape looks like. For somebody to say, 'I didn't get this job because some woman got it,' is basically admitting, 'I don't yet understand what it takes to become a leader today and that's why nobody wants to hire me.' One of the reasons some people say equity and inclusion are important goals, but then don't act on it at all, is because deep down they do not believe that this is the best way to run society.

SK: One approach comes from **Kenji Yoshino** who wrote the book *Covering...* He's a gay man, and he wrote about all the different ways that you can be out, but still experience pressure to not act 'too gay.' 'So, you're out, that's cool, but don't wear a purple tie.' Or, 'You're out, that's cool, but don't teach about gay issues.' This is called 'covering.' One of the insights he offers in the book is that, if people can connect to how they in their own lives have 'covered' in other ways — whether it's interest in a kind of music that's not cool or whether it's being Jewish, or other ways that you cover for characteristics that are out of the norm — then you can become empathetic. You can find a way to see how, in your own life, you have also not been able to be your fully authentic self. So that's one idea.

Another approach, which elementary school teachers have taken on, is simple exercises such as having all the kids wad up pieces of paper and throw them into a basket in the front of the room. Of course, the kids who are in the front of the room make the basket more often than those in the back. When the teacher declares the winner to be a person in the front, the kids in the back protest that 'it's not fair' because the winner was closer. Then, the teacher can have a conversation about privilege. I feel like we should think about an equivalent set of real experiences that we could give our students or executives so they can empathize from the inside and not just pay lip service.

JMS: I like the idea of actual experiences as opposed to conversations about 'Go re-examine your life.' We need to put people in situations, where there's something at stake but it's still safe enough for them to want to engage. Actually, I don't know if it needs to be safe enough, that's a good question.

Does that defeat the purpose? Do you need to put something at stake?

SK: If we think about ally-ship as leadership — and it is pretty clear that it is — if you are not acting like an ally, then you don't have the required leadership skills. For me, the rubber's going to hit the road if — as a result of those conversations — people are, as you said, taking risks and doing things that are different.

JMS: That's my biggest worry: Can I live up to risking something? But that's also where you come in. You're going to have to make us feel like we're part of this struggle in some way. I need to feel like I'm taking the risk as part of a group that is there to be supportive.

SK: When you say, 'You have to make us feel welcome' or 'you have to invite us,' there's a part of me that wants to say, No: You need to go the extra mile to show me that you are fighting the fight. Yes, I want to be in the conversation with you, but at the same time, I don't want it to be a situation where, just because you took a little baby step, you deserve some kind of award.

JMS: And I don't want that award. I want, if and when, hopefully, I do take those risks, and I screw up ...

SK: ...I have to appreciate that that's part of the experiment and to be along for the ride with you. **RM**

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