

Guidance for Improving Staff Engagement

INTEGRATING DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION IN SOAR WORK

As we all do our best to address the barriers associated with racism and inequity, we must accept the discomfort that comes with the effort to learn about ourselves, learn about each other, and grow to create a psychologically safe environment where staff can work and thrive. Conversations regarding race in the workplace can be challenging. While BIPOC staff may be reluctant to share the injustices they have experienced firsthand, other staff may feel hesitant to speak up for fear of offending anyone. This results in a comfortable workplace for the fearful and tremendously unsafe for the reluctant. This guidance invites you to reflect on the actions that can take place before, during, and after conversations with BIPOC staff.

Purpose of the Guidance

- Begin conversations with staff that serve Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC).
- Use as a resource to strengthen engagement practices that minimize bias with individuals we serve and improve staff relationships and workplace wellness.
- Address inequity to strengthen workplace support and safety for all team members.
- Establish a foundation of safe places within the workplace that can be extended to the people we serve (both physically and emotionally).

Pre-Engagement

1. Be more than aware. Address your own biases.

- Take time for self-reflection.
- Awareness isn't enough. Take action steps to address biases and overcome them.
 - Learn more: [SAMHSA DEI Terms](#)
- Be mindful that transformation starts from a "heart place" before it can be evident in the workplace.

2. Recognize that the trauma WILL happen – AGAIN. How will you respond to your staff?

- Traumatic events will not always reach national media. Most trauma experienced by BIPOC staff is subtle and persistent. Just because BIPOC staff don't *look* like they are struggling to manage the stress of enduring the trauma, it does not mean that they aren't.
- Understand that real people show up at work. They carry their own life experiences into the workplace each day.
- Recognize that the impact of day-to-day occurrences of racial-related trauma can negatively impact the mental health of BIPOC staff. It is important to approach the impact of trauma on staff members as a behavioral health concern that requires practical agency policy to allow for staff to be empowered to engage in the healing and recovery process.

3. Consider how your agency/company will respond to support BIPOC staff.

- It is important to recognize that it is the culture of the work environment that will encourage inclusive and effective staff engagement with BIPOC populations. Non-BIPOC staff need to witness that their BIPOC colleagues are engaging in supportive conversations within their own agency while encouraging effective engagement with the BIPOC people they serve.
- The actions and commitment of leadership to create a psychologically safe workspace for staff will likely encourage staff/teammates to treat the people they serve with the same considerations with which their agency treats them.
- Questions to consider in creating a safe space for BIPOC staff and how to set core values for the agency.
 - Is DEI part of the culture of your work environment?
 - How does your company respond to trauma exposed by the media?
 - How does leadership respond to BIPOC staff during those times?
 - Is there consideration for extending deadlines or rescheduling meetings on behalf of that team member?
 - Do you encourage time off, or do you talk (negatively) about the time off they take?

What does this have to do with SOAR work?

SOAR case workers need to be able to respectfully engage with a potential applicant and gather personal information to complete a process as comprehensive as SOAR. How can a SOAR case worker engage a BIPOC applicant with dignity and respect for their experience without regard for their own experience within their workplace?

SOAR case workers are the cornerstone of service to others. SOAR case workers are responsible for gathering personal information from some of the most vulnerable people in our communities. This requires engagement skills that allow the applicant to feel safe enough to trust the case worker with the information that they provide and expect that they will try their best to effectively represent their story for SSA to review.

SOAR applicants may be people of color who are experiencing homelessness along with substance use, poor health, limited education, post incarcerations and hospitalizations, low-level job skills, and limited work experience. Addressing bias in any of those areas before engaging an applicant will help ensure equitable access to effective SOAR services.

4. Do your research and educate yourself.

- Remember: it is not the traumatized person’s job to teach you about their trauma. Be proactive in your own learning. Come to the conversation prepared with a basic understanding of the inequities that BIPOC face.
- Learn more: [National Network to Eliminate Disparities in Behavioral Health \(NNED\)](#)

During Engagement

5. Be authentically you.

- People respond positively to authenticity.

6. Listen with your ears and eyes.

- Listening is not a debate.
- Let them tell you what “the real issue” is. They are the expert.
- Do not offer solutions to their experience or a “different perspective.”
- Sometimes, they may need to tell the same stories repeatedly. Sometimes they may be totally frustrated about having to tell the same story repeatedly. Respect their stance and their pace.
- Actively listen to them. Just. Listen.

7. Recognize that alliance comes with empathy – not pity.

- Think about how you would want someone to support you; what would you *not* want them to say or do?
- You may not know the perfect thing to say, but you know what NOT to say. So, start there.
- Learn more: [SAMHSA Behavioral Health Equity](#)

After Engagement

- *Repeat steps 1 -7.*
- “The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy. The true neighbor will risk his position, his prestige, and even his life for the welfare of others.” – *Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Letter from Birmingham Jail, April 16, 1963*
- “You can’t be where you are not.” – *Dr. Joy DeGruy*
- “There is no way to stand in our full humanity if our willingness to serve is restricted to work hours.” – *Dazara Ware, SAMHSA SOAR TA Center*

Resources

For resources to further your learning and understanding, please visit the [HHS Office of Minority Health Knowledge Center](#).