



Elise Ahenkorah (she/her)

Follow

Sep 21, 2020 · 6 min read ·  Listen



Save



“Safe and Brave Spaces Don’t Work (and What You Can Do Instead)”

Accountable Spaces

Safe & Brave Spaces



To move forward, we don't need to promise safety or expect bravery. We need to embrace accountability to foster more inclusive and equitable spaces in communities and workplaces.

When engaging individuals from racialized or equity-deserving communities, organizations will often share promises of “safe and brave” spaces to encourage inclusive discussion, and for allies to learn from experiences different from their own.

We can probably stop making those promises now.

It was a nice idea.

Idealistic. Maybe a bit naive.

Like the tooth fairy. Or when you let your parents “hold” the money your visiting uncle gave to you as a child, so you didn't lose it.

The truth is, safe spaces don't exist for equity-deserving communities — or for those learning about identity and privilege.

And brave spaces? They negate the daily bravery marginalized communities need to display everywhere,

Open in app ↗

Sign up

Sign In



To move forward, we don't need to promise safety or expect bravery. We need to embrace accountability.

Safe Spaces

A safe place is a place or environment in which a person or group of people can feel confident that they will not be exposed to discrimination, criticism, harassment, or any other emotional or physical harm.

Sounds nice. Maybe there would be snacks there.

Unfortunately, safe spaces are impossible to create because you can't predict people's behaviours and thoughts.

With the recent heightened public, corporate, and media attention on racism, I am constantly learning what my triggers are, every day. How can I expect anyone else to anticipate what may trigger me and protect me from it?

Even organizations like local law agencies and municipalities — task



122



ing our

communities and societies — cannot guarantee complete safety, due to unexpected threats, challenges, and biases.

Safe spaces do not explicitly outline what is expected from allies to create an environment that supports marginalized and underrepresented communities.

Yet, “safe space” persists as a term used in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DE&I) discussions and tactics. For spaces designed for learning, safety is not the best goal.

Safety is necessary for preventing attacks and triggering others, but the process of learning about identity and privilege is not a comfortable or safe experience. It requires a willingness to step outside one’s own comfort zone, to be challenged, and ultimately change the way we see the world.

Brave Spaces

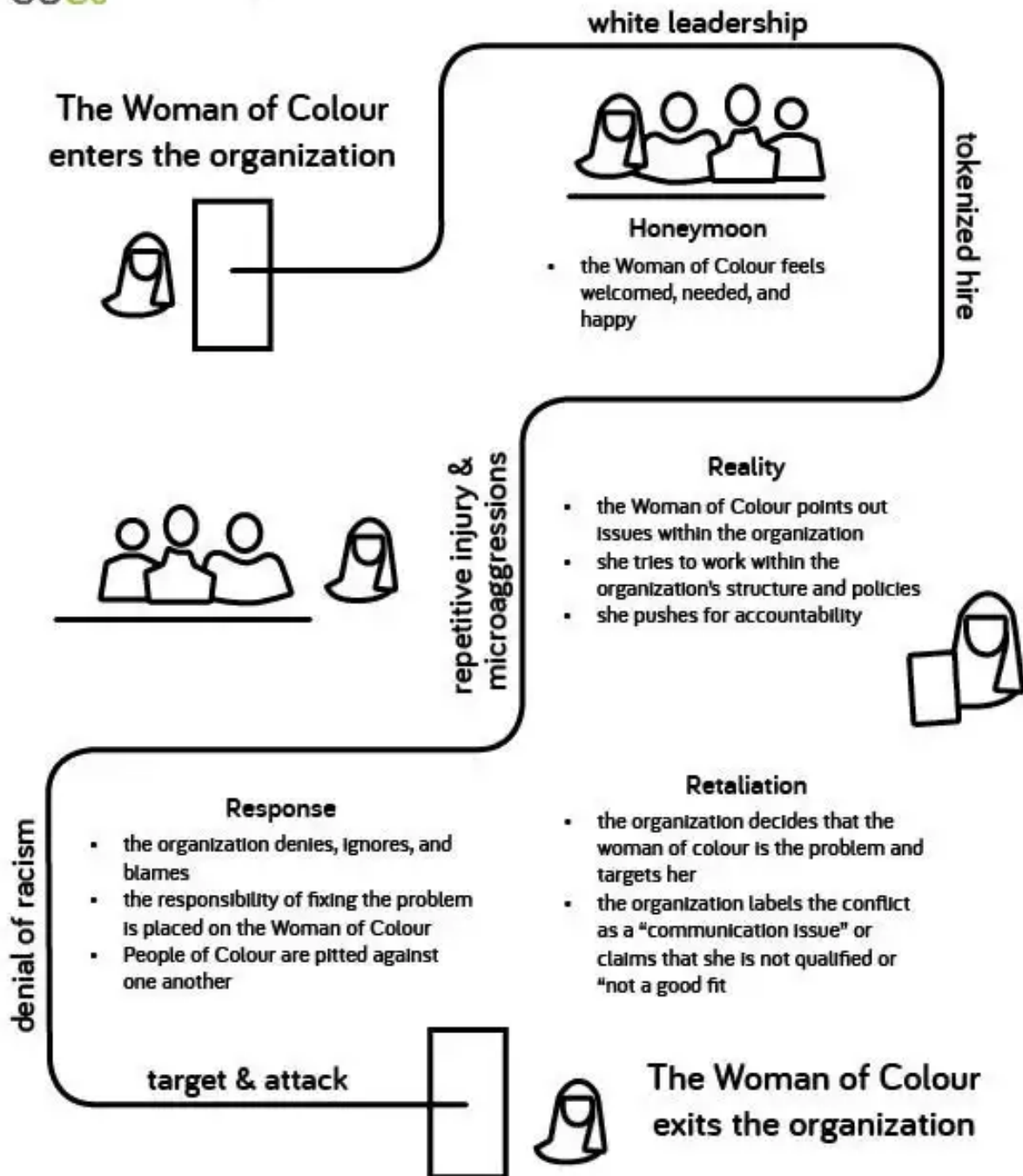
A *brave space* is a space where participants feel comfortable learning, sharing, and growing. Brave spaces are inclusive of all races, sexes, genders, abilities,

immigration status, and lived experiences. Brave spaces highlight the importance of being brave enough to enter spaces where you can be your authentic self and share personal lived experiences.

In short, brave spaces are exhausting.



The “Problem” Woman of Colour in the Workplace



Adapted from “The Chronicle of the Problem Woman of Color in a Non-Profit” by the Safehouse Progressive Alliance for Nonviolence
www.coco-net.org

Common experiences of women of colour in workplaces. Source:
www.coco-net.org

The very concept ignores the reality that underrepresented and marginalized communities must remain consistently brave to navigate business, political and community sectors across Canada. From hiring, evaluation, emotional tax, and performance, to leadership representation — people of colour and underrepresented communities face unique experiences in Canadian workplaces. Within society, there are disproportionate representation and impacts on racialized and diverse communities in healthcare, legal, entrepreneurial, social welfare, and political systems.

Diverse communities must be brave everywhere, in a world that statistically demonstrates unequal treatment and impacts by local law enforcement agencies, businesses, non-profit industries, and even during the health pandemic.

As an inclusion strategist and speaker who is a Black woman with intersectional lived experiences — the amount of microaggressions, discrimination, unfair performance expectations, and barriers I have faced to build my career is indescribable. Yet, it is not unique.

In the face of statistical data that demonstrates the underrepresentation of diverse communities in public and private sectors, people of colour are accessing education and economic growth at an unprecedented pace and entering the labour force across sectors and levels.

Merely existing, being joyful, and striving against the odds requires an overwhelming amount of daily bravery that is difficult to put into words. Dealing with microaggressions and discrimination consistently, while simultaneously remaining sane, loving, productive, and excelling is bravery at its highest heights.

My existence is bravery.

Brave spaces negate the daily bravery of equity-deserving communities and provide little value to those who must carry their bravery into a space intended to support them and their lived experiences.

If I must be brave all day to survive and thrive as a Black queer woman in corporate and community realms, why should I attend an event that requires me to behave the

same way instead of lightening my “bravery burden”? Brave spaces do not incorporate social justice principles of alleviating burdens faced by marginalized and oppressed communities — rather, it asks **more** from us. It asks us to be brave while educating others.

This is where accountable space guidelines shine.

Accountable Space Guidelines

Over the past fifteen years, while designing spaces for social justice, anti-racism, and equity, I have learned to embrace *accountable spaces*.

Accountability means being responsible for yourself, your intentions, words, and actions. It means entering a space with good intentions, but understanding that aligning your intent with action is the true test of commitment.

Accountable space guidelines allow for allies and marginalized communities to agree on a set of actionable behaviours/actions during the discussion to show allyship in real-time and after the event. It allows

participants to align their well-meaning intentions with impact through a collective set of guidelines.

Accountable space guidelines do not place an unfair burden of bravery. They do not create mythical promises of safety and unicorns. They place an equal amount of onus for all to behave equitably and inclusively, to foster a deeper understanding of diverse lived experiences in real-time.

What You Can Do

What is the secret to meaningful inclusive discourse?

To align your well-meaning intentions with actions, use these guidelines to transform your next community or workplace gathering into an accountable space that fosters an inclusive and impactful exchange.

Accountable Space Guidelines (adapted from UCLA)

1. Please do not interrupt others.
2. Listen actively, instead of just waiting to speak. Please use a pen and paper to record your thoughts, if

necessary.

3. Be mindful of your total talk time and, if you are comfortable, speak up to add to the conversation.

4. Give everyone a chance to speak, without unnecessary pressure.

5. Understand that we are all learning. If you said something offensive or problematic, apologize for your actions or words being offensive — not for the person feeling insulted.

6. Recognize and embrace friction as evidence that multiple ideas are entering the conversation — not that the group is not getting along.

7. Give credit where it is due. If you are echoing someone's previously stated idea, give the appropriate credit.

8. Ask for clarification — do not assume or project.

9. Speak for yourself. Use “I” statements and do not share others' lived experiences.

10. Words and tone matter. Be mindful of the impact of what you say, and not just your intent.

11. Self-reflect on actionable items to become an ally in your daily work or personal experiences, after leaving the space.




12. If you attend as an ally of the community, please allow space for diverse and marginalized communities to share their experiences.

13. Other — ask your audience if there are other guidelines needed to support them to ensure the conversation does not create further trauma.

Pro tip: Include accountable space guidelines in your event's registration process, so attendees know these guidelines before entering the space. This also gives diverse attendees a chance to share their needs with your group proactively. For example, an ASL interpreter that identifies as Black or an on-site counsellor to ensure marginalized and diverse attendees do not incur additional trauma or are triggered by hearing lived

experiences that highlight oppression, discrimination etc.

SPACE GUIDELINES: A COMPARISON

Safe Space Guidelines 	Brave Space Guidelines 	Accountable Space Guidelines 
Impossible for organizations to anticipate participants' evolving triggers.	An unbalanced onus of bravery of marginalized communities to maintain bravery while sharing lived experiences to ensure allies can grow and learn from it.	Places an equal amount of onus for all to behave equitably and inclusively to foster a deeper understanding of diverse lived experiences in REAL-TIME.
Impossible to guarantee complete safety since we cannot control people's behaviours or actions to embed DE&I principles in their actions during and after the conversation.	Negates the daily bravery marginalized communities need to display to navigate workplaces and society. Also, it does not lighten marginalized communities' "burden of bravery."	Creates a REAL-TIME opportunity for EVERYONE in the discussion to challenge the conditions that are oppressing marginalized communities by demonstrating accountable and equitable behaviours and actions.
It does not allow allies and non-marginalized people to show allyship in action by following a set of guidelines to support accountable conversations that foster inclusion and equity.	It does not allow allies and non-marginalized people to show allyship in action by following a set of guidelines to support accountable conversations that foster inclusion and equity.	Intent and impact are rooted within accountability to promote actions, thoughts, and behaviours that are equitable and inclusive of marginalized communities.

Diversity

Diversity And Inclusion

Strategy

Leadership

Innovation

[About](#) [Help](#) [Terms](#) [Privacy](#)

Get the Medium app

