



DIVERSITY, EQUITY, & INCLUSION

DEI: Leading Courageous Conversations

In November 2020, the National Association of REALTORS® took bold steps to eliminate systemic racism and discrimination in real estate. Following months of deliberation and discussion by the NAR Professional Standards Committee, the NAR Board of Directors amended the Code of Ethics to prohibit the use of hate speech by REALTORS® in any situation, real estate related or not. The new rule, outlined in Standard of Practice 10-5, specifically covers hate speech directed at the protected classes of “race, color, religion, sex, handicap, familial status, national origin, sexual orientation, or gender identity.”

The purpose here is not to debate the changes or what they cover, but to dig deeper into how we got here and how REALTORS® can carry the spirit of Article 10-5 into all areas of their lives.

How We Got Here

The mission of NAR emphasizes the obligation to “...empower REALTORS® as they preserve, protect, and advance the right to real property for all.” Protecting these rights extends beyond the transactional process of home buying, extending also to the development of the local communities in which we live, work, and do business. **Dr. Kazique Prince, the Interim Executive Director for the Central Texas Collective for Racial Equity**, underscored the important role REALTORS® have in this work, noting that some REALTORS® may view their work as simply the buying and selling of property, when REALTORS® are in fact “responsible for trying to help create community.”

Matthew Difanis, 2020 Chair of the NAR Professional Standards Committee goes further, speaking to the moral responsibility of REALTORS® in advancing the goals of the Fair Housing Act. He cites the history of the industry as a trade organization that was “*responsible for perpetuating discriminatory housing*” even so far as mandating discriminatory practices, citing Article 34 of the Code of Ethics in effect from 1924-1950. Article 34 prohibited REALTORS® from “*introducing into a neighborhood ... members of any race or nationality, or any individuals whose presence will clearly be detrimental to property values in that neighborhood.*” Policies such as these that reinforced redlining were intentional discriminatory actions that have left a legacy that still impacts how our communities are viewed.

In Difanis’s view, revisions to the Code of Ethics speak to the moral imperative to redefine professional standards. The driving motivation to look at any use of hate speech by practicing REALTORS® is really a response to the human cost, the dehumanization of colleagues and community members directly impacted by language and actions that ultimately create a “meaningful barrier to the unfettered access to ‘real property for all.’”

While Difanis acknowledges that some will question the logic or need of the additions to Article 10, he believes these changes are a needed opportunity to engage in conversations about how to disrupt discriminatory housing practices and the kind of communities REALTORS® want to represent, live and work in, and leave to future generations. For the REALTORS® who truly embrace the importance of their work, the impact they have on people’s lives, and their role in fostering a meaningful living situation for people, families, and communities, these are welcome and long overdue changes to our Code of Ethics.

Where Do We Go From Here?

But words have little meaning unless they are followed up with action. This renewed emphasis on personal responsibility should have all of us asking not just what we can do to avoid discriminatory language and behavior, but how we can create equity and inclusion in all areas of our lives, from the dinner table to the board table. If you’re an agent, honestly ask yourself: “Are there any differences in my conduct professionally versus when I’m not working?” If you’re a broker or team lead, it’s time to dig deep into your organizational culture, asking yourself: “Is there any internal behavior among my leaders and agents that I wouldn’t want to see in the field?”



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To get to the bottom of these questions, you first have to have a baseline understanding of how discrimination practices have historically shaped our industry and communities. It's hard to assess yourself and your environment for any implicit biases if you are not aware of how implicit bias can show up in our everyday lives. Implicit biases are often rooted in historical perceptions unknowingly passed along and taught. We pick up messages about race that we are not aware of, but still act upon, often at our own surprise once made aware of them. Here's where you can start:

Do Your Homework

Difanis cites the need for REALTORS® to be "students of history," that there is a, "very specific, emotionally charged history [of the real estate industry] for us to know." The **Rev. Dr. Daryl Horton, long-time resident and Assistant Pastor at Mt. Zion Baptist Church in East Austin**, asks if REALTORS® "have done any of their history around Central Texas of how realty has been done...have they been truthful of the realities of redlining?" It is incumbent upon REALTORS® to do their own homework about the history of redlining, of the Fair Housing Act, the 1928 City of Austin Master Plan that for people of color, completely reshaped the face of the city with a lingering impact today.

Taking it a step further, the Rev. Horton asks: "have you ever taken a look at any biases that you may naturally operate under...any biases ...you were taught about...any assumptions you make based upon the ethnicity?" When showing a home, for example, is it assumed what part of town the individual would want to live in based upon their racial identity? Rev. Horton refers to the implicit biases that each of us carry, often unknowingly and without intending any harm.

Finally, make a point to get to know the stories of people outside of your lived experience, even if it's reading, watching, and listening to stories and content made by people who aren't like you. In today's digitally driven society where we're still largely prevented from being in in-person community with one another, it's dangerously easy to create an echo chamber of one's own biases and dehumanize groups that are unlike you online. As Brené Brown says, "It's hard to hate up close. Move in."

Lead Courageous Conversations

As we become aware of implicit biases and shed light on discriminatory practices, we have the opportunity (and responsibility) to become participants in the conversation around equity and inclusion, from sharing our own experiences and shifting awareness to calling out discriminatory behavior when we encounter it. Leadership Austin calls these "courageous conversations," based on author **Glenn Singleton's *Courageous Conversations About Race: A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in Schools***.

Courageous conversations are about mutual exchange, learning, and growth. They are not a debate with a winner or loser, except when such conversations are avoided, then everyone loses. This work is grounded in relationship, so the best place to start having these conversations is in one's own circle of relationships – friends, colleagues, and family. Keep the focus local, on one's local community, in one's brokerage office, in one's own family. Spinning off into political or national issues is a way to avoid the personal and often difficult local discussions that must happen to be productive. Well-meaning mistakes will be made, but in relationships there is also space to work through hard conversations and difficult moments and move forward.

Just as important, the burden to begin these conversations, challenge comments, and assess discriminatory practices must be taken off of underrepresented groups and our colleagues of color. And when we do encounter an experience or perspective that differs from our own, it's important to seek to understand rather than automatically dismiss someone's story. As Singleton says, "you have to stop believing that you can disbelieve me." The stories and experiences of underrepresented groups need to be heard and accepted if we are to learn from the dialogue. This may sound difficult, and yes, at times it will be uncomfortable. Find some common space, learn to trust, and then move onto the tougher questions.



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Stay Engaged

Borrowing from Singleton again, dismantling discrimination requires an ongoing commitment to remain engaged in the process. Systemic racism in the United States evolved over centuries of action and learned behavior, passed from generation to generation. Decades of historical development don't change overnight, nor can it be solved in a single conversation. Non-closure is normal and must be accepted as part of the process.

If you're from an underrepresented group, you may also feel tired from having these conversations while also continuing to experience discrimination on a daily basis, or being singled out as a "spokesperson" for your race or group in conversations. The real estate industry is at long last addressing its problematic past, and your voice and stories are critical in shaping how we move forward.

As you begin this process, know that there is no direct path or process. There is no perfect starting place, and everyone will enter into this work differently, at different points with differing perspectives. That's OK. The important thing is to step forward out of your comfort zone into the messy middle, where real change can happen.

Conclusion

The bottom line of Article 10-5 is about being a better human to other humans, and we cannot depend on others to do this work for us. In fact, it is the work of the individual in which the process of dismantling systemic racism and prejudice has the most impact. As the stewards and shapers of the communities we live in, REALTORS® are uniquely called and qualified to make a difference in this work, and the work you do in championing equity and inclusion can have a real, positive impact for generations to come.