

The Faulty Paradigm of Tolerance and Sensitivity

Say "diversity training" and many people will immediately think about learning experiences based on a paradigm of tolerance and sensitivity. This approach made sense 25 years ago when more women and racial/ethnic minorities began to enter sectors of the U.S. workforce once dominated by white males. As they did, they encountered intolerance and insensitivity. Hence the birth of "sensitivity training." Born out of the civil rights era and the transformative feminist movement, sensitivity training taught how to be tolerant toward differences. It was appropriate for the first generation of diversity work. The guys *did* have to be made aware that the pin-up calendars had to come down, that their sexist and racist banter about women and blacks had to stop, and that a female worker getting pregnant didn't mean she was not committed to her career. It was a disruptive time for old-timers and newcomers alike, as the workplace erupted in dislocations, antagonisms, fear, and explicit prejudice.

A generation later, tolerance and sensitivity work has established mechanisms for addressing the isms.

Tolerance is a good antidote to resistance and defensiveness on the part of majorities toward those who are different. It's a place of *truce* rather than *truth*. It's manifested in statements such as: "I won't resist you anymore." "I'll tolerate that you're here." "I'm okay, you're okay." "We'll agree to disagree." "Live and let live." It's the answer to, "Why can't we all just get along?"

Sensitivity takes it further. It finds its voice in statements such as: "I will work at understanding that you have unique needs and preferences." "When you say something bothers you and it doesn't make sense to me, I accept that it is important to you." "I won't question your views, and I won't resist them." In between the lines it says, "I'll let you have that gimme."

As a result of this approach, much *explicit* prejudice in the workplace has subsided or gone underground. Unfortunately, however, this paradigm has spent itself. It has been taken as far as it can, and it will not be enough to enable the transformation of global diversity.

Why has this paradigm run out of juice? A few reasons:

- **Paralysis.** Regardless of what opinions people may harbor, employees generally know what is and is not appropriate to say. Political correctness has paralyzed us from talking in constructive ways about the very real differences between us. Even those who have welcomed diversity often don't know how to move beyond the obligatory, "I'm glad you're here."
- **Impractical.** Tolerance and sensitivity aren't very helpful when facing a colleague whose mother taught him the exact opposite of what yours taught you to do. It's an attitude, not a skill, that's condescending at worst or superficial at best, as we sponsor international and ethnic food potlucks and teach each other our culture's dance steps.
- **U.S.-Centric.** Tolerance and sensitivity do not serve us well in developing a platform for global diversity. It's a construct that flows out of the civil rights movement that gets sniffed out as too American as soon as it crosses the border. Don't get me wrong. Americans are right to be proud of the movement. In global work, however, this approach is limited due to its historical context.
- **Finger-pointing.** Tolerance and sensitivity undermine inclusion because of its implied audience. Who is it that needs to be more tolerant and sensitive? The white heterosexual male, of course! So he's in the audience, thinking, "Okay, I get this. This is all about me, but I don't feel part of it." Right there in inclusion training, an important part of the community is being excluded.

It's time for more powerful concepts that go beyond, "You've got yours and I've got mine." We need to create a voice that asks, "What is ours — *together*? Out of our differences, what new progress can we create — *together*? How can I make how you view the world a part of how I see it, too?"

What could replace this limited, spent paradigm? Today's global world requires a shift toward the paradigm of crosscultural competence.

The benefits are many:

- **Competency-based.** Crosscultural competence is not about an attitude or stance, but discrete, observable, and trainable skills and behaviors.
- **Pragmatic.** It's applicable to resolving daily diversity issues. When facing

that same colleague who learned something different on his mama's knee, it provides a means of resolving differing worldviews.

- **Globally relevant.** No matter where in the world I've presented or consulted, audiences readily acknowledge there are real differences in their midst — and they could use some skills to navigate them. Take Europe, for example. Europeans may have been quick to criticize diversity as an American thing, but crosscultural competence certainly resonates on a continent where cultural differences have led to wars, caricatures, and exasperation for a long time.
- **Versatile.** Given the expanding definition of diversity and the all-embracing nature of inclusion, it can be used in navigating all kinds of differences, not just traditional diversity issues. It's the same skill required to navigate differences in thinking styles, functional roles, organizational cultures coming together in a merger and acquisition, and so on.
- **HR system compatible.** Crosscultural competency can be embedded into an organization's performance, reward, recognition, and development system. Presented as just another set of expectations on which employees will be measured, the connection to work, expected outcomes, and pay rewards can be made clear.
- **Not accusatory.** No group, no matter how marginalized, has an inborn cross-cultural gene. The implied audience in crosscultural competence is all of us. So the white male is in the audience, thinking, "Ah, okay, I need this but so does everyone else."

With crosscultural competence, individuals and organizations can begin to see that we all need each other's differences. It's not a matter of simply tolerating, accepting, or even appreciating those differences in some esoteric way, but rather understanding on a fundamental level that we need those differences for our very survival. This puts an entirely different spin on diversity and inclusion.

Crosscultural competence requires us to look at our cultural differences, call them out, ask deep questions about their underlying assumptions, and suspend our own cultural judgments. (We all have them). We then need to tackle business or professional challenges based on what we've learned. It's an ongoing, ever-evolving practice with no finish line. It's the hard work required to succeed in the Obama Era and beyond.

The payoff can be both personally and professionally profitable in these upside-down times. The crosscultural and intercultural fields have much to offer

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us in terms of tools and models to more competently navigate the cultural differences surrounding us.