

The Opposite of Bad Is Not Oblivious

Oftentimes the approach that many attempt to take in dealing with diversity is to act like differences don't exist—after all, if you don't notice differences, you can never be accused of treating people differently or harboring prejudice, can you? But treating people as if they are all the same is actually the single-handedly rudest thing you can do. Okay, maybe “rude” is a little harsh, but it is definitely insensitive. People mistakenly think that noticing a difference is the same as judging a difference. It isn't, and people don't like to feel as if their uniqueness—a different way of perceiving diversity—is being ignored.

It reminds me of a conversation I heard while listening to Bill O'Reilly's radio show and some issue of race came up. O'Reilly made the statement that he didn't notice the race of people when they walked into a room. The person on the air challenged him on that point, and in classic Bill O'Reilly fashion, he held stubbornly to his position. The person, who apparently was reading my mind, then asked O'Reilly if he noticed when a woman entered a room, which prompted O'Reilly to avoid answering the question by joking that it depended on whether the woman was attractive or not. The point was a great one because it almost always sounds disingenuous to people when you say you don't know how someone differs from everyone else in a situation. Again, the issue isn't judging the difference, having an emotional reaction to the difference, or even finding the difference worth commenting on. It is just merely being aware of the difference.

People are individuals, and individuals are not various-sized flesh bags carrying bones and blood. One of the hang-ups of truly grasping and appreciating diversity without being mired in resentment is viewing diversity as the highest form of honoring individualism. That might sound contrary, but only because diversity has become synonymous with political correctness, which constantly pits one group against another in deciding the ways and means of how to treat others.

But think about how an advertising executive who was raised on a farm and grew up with literally no modern or electronic conveniences might look at how to advertise a new product, compared to his coworker who was

raised by high-income suburban parents who bought every technological innovation before the first-generation prototype could be perfected. Those two executives, while similarly educated, of roughly the same age, and with practically the identical professional pedigree of experiences, most likely view the same project with remarkably different perspectives.

LIFELONG TECHIE: Let's have a commercial where we have this little boy milking a cow one night ...

BORN FARMER (interrupting): You don't milk cows at night.

LIFELONG TECHIE: Whatever. Anyway, for the commercial it will look better to have a full moon in the background.

BORN FARMER: That's great that you want the full moon backdrop but you don't milk cows at night.

Lifelong Techie rolls his eyes.

These two ad execs are having a culture clash that has a distinct impact on their work. The clash doesn't stem from color, race, gender, sexual orientation, or any of the issues that people typically leap to when thinking about diversity. But that's exactly what this is.

In the context of diversity, one of my favorite definitions of culture comes from the 1990 book *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. He writes, "Cultures are defensive constructions against chaos, designed to reduce the impact of randomness on experience."¹ In other words, culture is the shorthand way I choose to view the world around me by basing it on what I already know and feel comfortable with.

Cultural clash can be as simple as one person who grows up with a different way of life from another person and is protective about the representation of facts and his upbringing. In this sentence, the word "culture" or "background" could be substituted for "upbringing," but they all boil down to the same thing.

The clash between a farm boy and a tekkie may not be governed by law or even company policy, but it is an illustration of how we can't look at two people and rub out their differences because it's more convenient to focus on their similarities.

Even when there isn't a radical difference in backgrounds—such as with the person raised on a farm without exposure to modern conveniences versus someone raised in electronic overload—there can be a radical difference in perspective that defies concrete reason.

During the national election season of 2008, for example, a narrow-minded person may have assumed that any black supporting Barack Obama merely voted for him because he would be the first black president of the United States. But there are blacks who didn't vote for Obama at all, blacks who voted for him only because he beat the person they voted for in the Democratic primary, blacks who voted for him because they always vote for Democrats, blacks who voted for him because they despised the opposition, blacks who voted for him because of his stance on specific issues, and yes, blacks whose sole reason for voting for Obama was because he too was black.

The flip of that point, however, would be saying that every white person who did not vote for Obama voted for John McCain because McCain is white—even if the voter always voted Republican or specifically supported certain political positions that Obama didn't support. See why you have to be careful about reductionist analysis based on race or any other category of membership? Because it's one that can always be flipped completely around to take you down a different illogical and insulting road.

Our Society and Differences

Often, people who proclaim their desire to not see difference hold that viewpoint about the differences that deep down aren't that important to them. However, they see difference all the time in situations where they do

hold a strong opinion. For example, a person who grew up as the oldest child can see very well how that makes him different from his youngest sibling. A person who holds several degrees from academia can see how she may have a different view on higher taxes to build a new library in her community than an individual coming from a background where education wasn't respected and thus, no one in the family chose to go further than partway through high school. People always see differences; we can just be selective about the ones we choose to acknowledge.

Siblings, Parents, and Friends

Most people have had multiple associations in their lives—parents, grandparents, siblings, friends—long before they enter the workforce. And most people would never treat their loved ones without making distinctions.

You may love your mother and father equally, but there aren't too many people who would buy their parents the exact same gift for their respective birthdays, major gift-giving holidays, or Mother's and Father's Days (outside of buying a joint gift for both of them). It's the same thing regarding siblings. Except for the rare year when you give all your siblings the exact same thing for whatever reason, you make a distinction, whether it's taking into account their tastes, their interests, their current life situations, their experiences, or even your relationship with them at the time you're giving the gift.

Therefore, when people talk about treating everyone the same, that's never really the case because we make distinctions in our personal lives starting before we're old enough to crawl across a room.

At a diversity workshop for firefighters, I facilitated this very issue in the context of saving lives. The workshop was made up of all white men except for one Hispanic man and one black man. One firefighter asked why people shouldn't just be treated exactly the same. After all, wouldn't that be the simplest, most fair way to treat everyone?

I pointed out that when they go to the scene of a fire and have to make decisions on how to get people out safely, there is probably a difference in how they rescue a healthy, physically strong sixteen-year-old boy who is not incapacitated by smoke, fire, or injury, as opposed to how they rescue a frail, eighty-one-year-old woman with obvious physical ailments. The firefighters got my point that sometimes the most fair and just thing you can do in your treatment of others takes into account their different circumstances or conditions so that you can treat them with the same and equal degree of respect, dignity, and compassion.

The firefighters could get the point easily when it came to the split-second decisions of life and death that their job required. But, like most of us, the seemingly noncritical and more leisurely decisions regarding difference seem much harder to understand and navigate.

Keys to Breaking This Chapter's Code

- Being oblivious to the differences of others doesn't make you more respectful—rather, less so in many cases.
- Noticing a difference is not the same as judging a difference, let alone having a negative judgment.
- We make distinctions in our personal lives all the time and don't have any problem with doing so. Workplace diversity just requires you to use the same dispassionate compassion.