

Diversity in Practice *cutting through political correctness*

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If you have ever watched "The Office," a satirical comedy on modern workplace dynamics that airs on NBC, you probably already know that one of the show's most popular episodes is "Diversity Day."

During Diversity Day, a day of diversity training and conversations on differences, the regional manager of the fictional Dunder Mifflin company, Michael Scott, says things like:

[To a Hispanic co-worker] *Let me ask you, is there a term besides Mexican that you prefer? Something less offensive?*

[In reference to a race role-playing exercise] *You'll notice, I didn't have anybody being Arab. I thought that would be too explosive, uh, no pun intended.*

[In reference to diverse food] — *some burritos or some colored greens or some pad thai*— [In response to being corrected that it is "collard greens" and not "colored greens"] *That doesn't make sense. You don't call them collard people ... that's offensive.*

I have shown clips of this episode in training sessions, and the sincerely politically incorrect Michael Scott never fails to evoke laughter from audiences of any demographic mix.

When the laughter eventually fades, and I ask people to think about why they find this episode funny, the answers fall somewhere between the release induced by raw political incorrectness to the candidly humorous navigation of topics that are now considered workplace taboos. The dialogue on diversity following a viewing of "Diversity Day" usually leads to this question: *Have our good intentions to usher in diverse and inclusive workplaces stifled the very conversations we should be having to make our workplaces diverse and inclusive?*

Political correctness in the workplace perhaps initially served the necessary purpose of containing the offenses perpetrated by those who could not differentiate between sexual harassment and compliments, or cultural curiosity and stereotypes. But has political correctness now become an obstacle on the road to diversity and inclusion? In order for us to recognize, respect, and even value our differences, is it not necessary for us to be able to talk candidly about these differences?

Each of us enters a workplace with a set of beliefs, perspectives, and opinions that reflects our individual experiences, and imbedded in our beliefs, perspectives, and opinions are biases and preferences.

A relatively new tool developed by Harvard University (the Implicit Association Test) to measure hidden biases in people reveals some startling results: 88 percent of white people had a pro-white or anti-black implicit bias; nearly 83 percent of heterosexuals showed implicit biases for straight people over gays and lesbians; and more than two-thirds of non-Arab, non-Muslim volunteers displayed implicit biases against Arab Muslims. The IAT has also found that large majorities of the U.S. population showed biases for Christians over Jews, the rich over the poor, and men's careers over women's careers.

Not only do the results contradict the perceptions of many of the test takers that they did not have biases for or against any of the groups mentioned above but the IAT results also demonstrated that the biases are often societal biases that affect the minority groups as much as they affect the majority groups. For example, 48 percent of blacks showed a pro-white or anti-black bias; 36 percent of Arab Muslims showed an anti-Muslim bias; and 38 percent of gays and lesbians showed a bias for straight people over homosexuals. (www.implicit.harvard.edu, or at www.projectimplicit.net)

Given the consistency of the IAT's results across those people who have taken the tests thus far, we may need to start defining biases differently. Instead of viewing biases as inner flaws, we can recognize biases as the collective snapshots we have of our social history.

If left hidden, our biases keep us mired in a place where our differences divide us. If kept hidden, our biases will prevent us from growing and competing in a profession, a city, a nation, and a world that is increasingly diverse.

The IAT research team has soundly and effectively defended the scientific methodology and results of this groundbreaking test, but the researchers have just as effectively argued that implicit biases are more likely to affect our actions when they stay implicit. Once we become our aware of our biases, we gain the conscious choice to act in a way that is inconsistent with our bias. In other words, it doesn't matter what our biases are if we are not making biased decisions in the workplace.

If biases are an intractable part of who we are, then, political correctness only serves to keep our hidden biases hidden. Perhaps diversity and inclusion require us to not focus on eliminating our biases but recognizing them through candid conversations that cut through political correctness with sincerity, empathy and courage.

In a world where the fear of being labeled a racist or sexist is quite real, the strongest advancers of diversity may be those who are willing to risk political incorrectness and have real conversations about differences, commonalities, prejudice, diversity, and inclusion.

I'm not necessarily advocating for the Michael Scott style of conversation, but a little more Michael Scott and a little less political correctness may indeed serve us well.