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Diversity: A New Level of Awareness

by Arin N. Reeves, J.D., Ph.D

In today's workplaces, the instances of overt discrimination, harassment and/or bias based on race, ethnicity and gender or sexual orientation are far less frequent than they were 20 years ago. Even so, the rate at which we are fully integrating racial and ethnic minorities, women or members of the gay, lesbian, bisexual & transgender community is still dismally low.

A diversity survey conducted in the Denver legal community in May 2007 found that 30 percent of the nearly 1,000 respondents — including 25 percent of white male respondents — reported that racial and ethnic minorities were receiving less access to mentoring, networking and key assignments than their white counterparts.

Is this due to bias in the way senior lawyers mentor, network and allocate assignments, or is it the result of unbiased actions that just happen to have unintended consequences?

The answer to this one question varies from workplace to workplace, and from individual to individual. We must rethink the way we define bias, to start including subtle and hidden forms of bias that look and feel very different from overt and explicit discrimination.

The following article originally was printed in "Chicago Lawyer," and serves to further the important discussion of diversity here in Denver.

What hurts more — Mosquito bites or shark bites?

Most people would quickly respond that shark bites, of course, hurt more than mosquito bites. Most people also, in keeping with human nature, would instinctively compare a single mosquito bite to a single shark bite, thereby selecting the single shark bite as the greater pain inducer of the two.



What if the question was reframed to compare 10,000 mosquito bites to one small shark bite? Most people's perspectives would now shift because the totality of the individual mosquito bites is now greater than the single shark bite.

In 1973, Mary P. Rowe, a professor studying race and gender exclusion at Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Sloan School of Management, coined the term "micro-inequities." Her studies led her to articulate these "small events which are often ephemeral and hard to prove...often unintentional, frequently unrecognized by the perpetrator...[they] occur wherever people are perceived to be 'different.'"

These seemingly harmless interactions in the workplace don't rise to a standard of overt discrimination. But cumulatively, they have a debilitating effect on the recipients of the micro-inequities.

Initially, Rowe's research did not gain much traction because workplaces in the 1970s were still so infused with the overtly offensive that it was difficult for many to conceptualize the micro when the macro still loomed so large. But in recent years, as workplaces have intensified their focus on diversity and political correctness has become a language of its own, Rowe's theory of micro-inequities has gained considerable interest.

Workplaces are beginning to realize that the focus on the shark bites — overt racial discrimination, explicit sexual harassment, etc. — has overshadowed the greater collective pain caused by the multitude of mosquito bites.

Micro-inequities are those annoying realities that remind those who are different that they are, in fact, different from the people who have historically been accepted, included and successful in that workplace. The female attorney who is mistaken for a secretary. The African American male attorney who is mistaken for a mailroom clerk. The female Hispanic attorney who is mistaken for a food service worker.

The cases of mistaken identity are explained by the offenders as just that — mistakes. But the inequity lies in the underlying assumption that a lawyer does not look female, African American or Hispanic. The offenses are excused away, but the exclusion registers. There is no dramatic shark bite, but, the mosquito bites grow in volume as micro-inequities are repeated day after day.

Shark bites get news coverage. Mosquito bites get tolerated. The perception that a woman is less committed to her career when she becomes a mother is a micro-inequity that is tolerated by women. The comment "you speak English so well" is tolerated by Asian Americans who are born, raised and educated in this country.

Workplaces are vigilant about looking out for the shark bites, but the heavy toll of daily mosquito bites goes unnoticed. The subtle message conveyed to people who are different is that shark bites are worth reporting, but only angry thin-skinned people complain about mosquito bites. The mosquito bites accumulate, one by one, until the feeling of being the "other" in the workplace is so tangible and often painful, that it becomes easier to just exit the workplace.

So, how do you tell the difference between a shark bite and a mosquito bite?

The biggest difference between the two is intent. Overt or explicit discrimination and harassment are usually based in the intent to make someone feel different and excluded. Micro-inequities usually are not rooted in an intent to discriminate. It is important to recognize this distinction; however, it is equally important to recognize that the lack of intent does not translate into a lack of hurt. Sometimes the lack of intent further exacerbates the hurt because the micro-ness makes it difficult for the person experiencing the hurt to articulate the offense and prevent its continued occurrence.

The perception that a woman is less committed to her career when she becomes a mother is a micro-inequity that is tolerated by women.

More importantly, how do you prevent the mosquito bites? Organizations can begin the process of preventing micro-inequities by recognizing that micro-inequities exist and that their consequences are real. Starting the dialogue on micro-inequities creates opportunities for people to discuss them productively. Dialogue leads to awareness, and awareness leads to prevention.

Each of us can also easily become more aware of the ways in which we perpetuate micro-inequities. We all perpetuate micro-inequities on a daily basis. We must consciously stop making assumptions based on what we think we see. If an assumption gets past our internal censors, and we are corrected by someone, we can apologize instead of explaining why our mistaken assumption was completely reasonable.

It is also a useful exercise to be conscious of moments when we are surprised by something about someone. When we don't know something about someone, a moment of surprise indicates that we had some assumptions in place that were challenged by reality.

We can all individually advance our work on inclusion by actively considering micro-inequities. While we may not be able to prevent all mosquito bites in the workplace, we can stop using shark bites as the sole reference point for exclusion. We can acknowledge the full potential of the hurt that micro-inequities can inflict.

Arin N. Reeves is a national legal diversity expert who works closely with the Minority Corporate Counsel Association and the American Bar Association on diversity and inclusiveness issues. A former practicing attorney, she has a doctorate in sociology from Northwestern University and heads a consulting group in Chicago.

Don't Miss the Diversity Summit!

Join us in a discussion with diversity expert Arin Reeves, who will speak the 2009 Rocky Mountain Legal Diversity Summit on Wednesday, March 18, all day, at the University of Denver Sturm College of Law.

Go to www.colegaldiversity.org.