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Colored?

By T. T. "Mitch" Mitchell



Colored? Colored. I keep running this word through my mind. The occasion of the word came weeks ago at a reunion I went to of former employees of mine at a luncheon on a Saturday afternoon. It had been a good day, seeing all these friendly faces from my past, and catching up with what was going on with everyone. Then, while my wife had gone out of the room for a minute, one of my former employees was telling a story about something that happened with this "colored" kid, and that was the last thing I heard. It's 2003, and there's someone still calling people like me colored? And she worked for me and I never heard that in all the time she worked for me. Suddenly I felt like something less, like everything I had done with these people and had accomplished with these people didn't mean anything because she thought of me, or people like me, as "colored."

This event reminded me once again of just how powerful one little word or phrase can be in fostering the worst of feelings in people. As I write this now, I'm remembering that it was almost 30 days ago, and the word still hurts my feelings somewhat. If this is the case with me, and it's a race issue, what inference can be made as to how inadvertent words uttered by a clueless person can stick with the known or unknown victim of those words?

It reminds me of an incident that happened to a friend of mine at his place of work. He was walking through one of the offices when another employee received email. Many people have sounds associated with receiving email, and this woman did also. However, the song that played, for which humming won't work right now, was the tune to a song that begins "Mammy's little baby loves short'nin, short'nin,..." Enough said. Anyway, he stopped in his tracks and exclaimed something that can't be repeated. However, it was loud enough and emphatic enough for another supervisor to come running, since he'd never heard my friend utter such a phrase in such a way before, to find out what might be wrong. Then he heard it and gasped himself. The woman's excuse? She thought it was just a cute little tune, and didn't realize it was offensive in any way. My friend was angry for at least a week over this little faux pas, even though it wasn't intended.

Every day in the business world people interact with someone else. People are different; there's no getting around that. Even people who may seem similar at a first glance are different; heck, twins are different. Where trouble often starts is when someone brings their petty prejudices or biases into the workplace. It can be something as innocuous as a perception of a person's status (trailer park trash) as well as something overtly blatant, such as race or sex.

Before a manager can have a chance to deal with these issues they need to try to determine how many differences there may be to worry about. In this time of imminent war, when we see battle lines being formed even in our own country between those who feel war is justified and those who believe it isn't, once again it's highlighted that differences can come from anywhere, at any time. I have a list of things I've discovered on my own, and I never even thought about philosophical differences in my original list.

Here's a listing of the kinds of things I've come up with:

- A. Race**
- B. Religion**
- C. Sexual preference**
- D. Sex**
 - 1. Same Sex**
 - 2. Frequency**
 - 3. Type**
- E. Ethnicity (what country you're from)**
- F. Cultural (rich, poor, small town, large city, military)**
- G. Demeanor (nerd, jock, cheerleader type, moody and depressed)**
- H. Physical (heavy, skinny, bald, hairy, sweaty, tall, short)**
- I. Disabled (seen and not seen)**
- J. Employment status (administrator, director, supervisor, worker, surgeon, nurse, maintenance, housekeeping)**
- K. Age**
- L. "Look" (tattoos, studs, clothing, hair style, hair color)**
- M. "Self" (discrimination against people who are like you or remind you of you)**
- N. Politics**
- O. Reverse discrimination; myth or reality?**

The last issue is a full topic on its own, but it's valid enough to think about when you're looking at protecting those who fall into other categories. The truth is that within each category at the top you've covered every single person in the world. The nuances of dealing with each person as it relates to the category, however, are not in your favor most of the time. These are issues every single employee needs to deal with. But if you're at a management level you're at a major disadvantage in dealing with the same issues because now you're responsible for the actions and statements of someone else making comments outside the realm of what's supposed to be work appropriate.

There's a phrase which has developed a negative connotation amongst many people, but I consider it a positive phrase: political correctness. Some feel they should have the right to express their feelings and say what they want to say. Outside the office I may tend to agree with you, whether I like it or not. Inside the office,... that's another matter. I believe managers who share ideas with their staff and gain input from them is the best way to run things. However, the business office is not a democracy; there is no concept of free speech in the office regarding this issue. People get sued for this kind of thing; people get into fights; people kill. Do I have to say anything more?

What you have to deal with are three issues. One, where do you fit in on the list above? You fit in more than one category for sure. Which end of the spectrum are you considered as, and is that negative or positive based on the thoughts of the general public? At this point we're not talking about your feelings as much as what the general populace feels. And you have to be honest with yourself when evaluating this one. I've had people tell me they see me as they see anyone else; that's not being realistic, and doesn't help you as the manager or worker at all.

Two, now we talk about your personal feelings. How do you perceive those on the list above who fit into what's considered the negative end of things? For that matter, how do you feel about those who fit into the area where you are? That's an interesting question, one I bet most people have never considered. Can you separate your feelings and thoughts from the work place? Do you treat everyone fairly regardless of your personal feelings, if you have any kind of negative feelings whatsoever? Can you always identify your negative feelings?

Three, have you helped to foster the kind of work environment that is free of the stress of differences, or have you fostered a hostile work environment because either you participate in the "harassment" of other employees or ignore the harassment as if it's not happening? If you say you hadn't noticed I consider that as ignoring what's going on in your office and feel you're as responsible in that case as if you were ignoring the issues on purpose.

As a manager or as a worker, you help to establish how the office performs its duties. You as the worker and the manager also help to foster how people are going to be treated within the work place. Just as ignorance of the law is no excuse, ignorance of what may be offensive to the people you work with in the office is no excuse for insensitivity, no matter where it's coming from or who it's directed at. Every person needs to be held accountable to a professional demeanor when they're in the work place. In diversity education I've performed, I stress that I don't try to change any person's ideas when it comes to their personal feelings about whomever based on a listed criteria from above. I do, however, try to change how they may treat people in the work place based on those feelings, because that's where the problems occur. And if you're able to change your demeanor in the work place, you just may change your demeanor outside the work place, and you may never make the mistake of calling someone something like "**colored.**"

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