



Seven Ways to Turn Bias-Related Tension into Gateways for Understanding

By Sondra Thiederman, PhD



Case 1: You are a top level manager who has just hired a new assistant. In most ways she is a wonderful member of the team, but she does have a heavy accent that you sometimes have difficulty understanding. You are concerned because your communication with her must be flawless, but are afraid to say anything for fear of creating a conflict. What do you do?

Case 2: You are an American whose parents immigrated to the U.S. from China. While standing in the computer room at work, you overhear someone tell a joke about a “Chinaman,” a priest, and a rabbi. What do you do?

Case 3: You are a Diversity Manager who is conducting a pilot training program. Part of the course content deals with cultural differences in attitudes toward punctuality. In an attempt to contrast Latino notions of time with those found in mainstream American culture, you refer to the latter as “normal” with the implication that Latino views are “abnormal.” No one catches your faux pas. What do you do?

Many of you are probably tempted to respond to the question “What do you do?” with a resounding, “Keep my mouth shut and run the other way.” In today’s climate of excessive political correctness and the accompanying fear of saying the wrong thing, I can’t say I blame you. The sad thing, however, about giving into the temptation to run for cover is that, while you might be avoiding an awkward encounter, you are simultaneously throwing away an opportunity to increase mutual understanding in your workplace.

Fortunately, or unfortunately depending on how you look at it, we rarely have to seek out opportunities to engage in conversations such as these; life has a way of presenting them to us. They come in the form of misunderstandings, accusations, and any other happening that involves discord between or about people who are different from each other. Because these incidents are capable of bringing about productive dialogue and serve as gateways to greater understanding and reduced bias, I call them “Gateway Events.” Gateway Events come in many guises. These are just a few:

- Perhaps you witness an act of bias against a friend, team member, or colleague or hear an inappropriate joke or comment.
- Maybe someone falsely accuses you of bias.
- Perhaps someone treats you in a way that appears to reflect a biased attitude.
- Perhaps you say or do something that inadvertently offends a team member.
- Maybe you witness someone else being falsely accused of bias.
- Perhaps you are confused and uncomfortable because of the differences between yourself and someone else.
- Perhaps you say or do something involving diversity that you immediately regret.

Regardless of the nature of the gateway event, talking about sticky diversity issues is not always comfortable and not every conversation ends up with participants collapsing into each others arms in a mutual paroxysm of new-found understanding. The purpose of this article is to provide the tools and skills to

minimize the discomfort and maximize the chance that we will, if not collapse into each other's arms, at least be able to walk through those gateways and meet on the other side. Here are seven fundamental skills that will go far toward achieving that goal.

1. Take a beat before responding: Almost by definition, any moment of diversity-related tension will give rise to some kind of emotion. It might be fear or anger or embarrassment or even shame, but it will be intense enough to distort the judgment of even the most experienced manager. Because of the danger of such distortion, it is important to pause for a moment before responding. Take a breath and, if at all possible, walk away and gather your thoughts; if you take the time to do this, the chances of your responding in a productive way are greatly increased.

2. Avoid jumping to conclusions: If the incident triggering the conversation involves someone saying or doing something offensive, resist the temptation to find them guilty of bias or other ill intent without solid and consistent evidence. Consider, for example, that perhaps you are assuming bias – and feeling offended – not because of what the person in front of you has done, but because of an earlier painful event. Bear this possibility in mind, too, when mediating examples of alleged bias between team members.

3. Decide what you want to accomplish before proceeding: Knowing one's goal is one of the most important components of any successful dialogue. Aimless conversation, particularly if the catalyst for that conversation is emotionally charged, will lead nowhere or, worse, will lead somewhere you would rather not go. We need functional dialogue about bias, not just noise, and certainly not just conflict for conflict's sake. Your specific goal will, of course, be shaped by the nature of the gateway event itself. We will deal with the types of goals that are appropriate in various situations in a later issue of this newsletter.

4. Use a communication style that works. This may sound obvious, but how often do we allow emotion to distort our communication style, and, therefore, our message. Here are some specific communication guidelines:

- Avoid using accusatory terms like "racist" or "sexist." Even if your accusation is true, hurling it in someone's face will only make him or her defensive and might just cause your "gateway to understanding" to swing abruptly closed.
- Avoid shouting. In fact, lowering your voice so people have to crane forward in order to hear tends to make people more interested in what you have to say.
- Avoid exaggeration. Admittedly, Americans love large language. We like to indulge in a kind of over-speak in which the finest eggs are always the biggest, buildings the tallest, and books the "best selling." This is all very nice when pitching a product or coming up with a book title that sells, but exaggeration is a sure-fire way to draw psychological blood and, thereby, inflame the dialogue to the point of conflagration or, worse, shut the conversation down entirely.

5. Listen, Listen, Listen. Unfortunately, when we talk about something that involves a difference of opinion, as is the case with many Gateway Events, we tend not to listen. This is because we believe that really listening gives the impression that we agree with the other person. In fact, eloquent listening sends only one message: that we care about resolving the situation.

6. Never negate someone's feelings. Each of us has at one time or another inadvertently offended someone. Our temptation, especially if we had no ill intent, is to negate the feelings of the other person and spout platitudes like "You know what I meant," or "You're being too sensitive." No matter how much you think the person is overreacting, they are feeling what they are feeling and it is your job to recognize that reality.

7. (Sometimes) walk away. Yes, let's face it, there are times when we find ourselves standing before a fence that is just too high to be climbed or a gate too firmly stuck to be opened. In those cases, we need to preserve our energy, hold our tongue, and walk away determined to converse another day. When you really think about it, the strategies outlined in this article boil down to one value: Respect. For example, when we make an effort to interpret intent accurately rather than jump to conclusions, we communicate respect for all parties involved. Also, when we set an appropriate goal for the conversation, we communicate respect for ourselves and our colleagues by increasing the chances that our desired outcomes will be achieved and that the gateway event will indeed result in improved, not diminished, communication and understanding.

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