

THE DAILY RECORD

LAW, REAL ESTATE, FINANCE AND GENERAL INTELLIGENCE SINCE 1908

Diversity Conference:

Cultural Ignorance: Identifying Personal Bias And Shoving It Aside

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Humans have approximately 30,000 genes. On average, how many genes separate all members of one race from all members of another race? (a) none; (b) 1; (c) 23; (d) scientific answer unknown.

Part Four Of Five

At the Diversity Conference 2004, Dr. Melanie Bush listed this question along with others

to open her session on "Good Intentions Of Everyday Whiteness."

"Race is a social concept," she explained. "There is no biological basis for it. Society gives meaning to race. Otherwise, it is irrelevant." (Thus, the answer to the question above is "a.")

Defining Bias

Dr. Sondra Thiederman, president of Cross-Cultural Communications, provided an informative presentation about bias and how it impacts leadership abilities.

"You can divide the world into two kinds of people: there are dog people and cat people. There are Democrats and Republicans. There are men and women. There are Bills fans and non-Bills fans," began Dr. Thiederman. "And on each side of the fence there may be unconscious, learned assumptions about the people in the opposite group."



PHOTO BY NORA A. JONES

LEADING BY EXAMPLE — Focused on honesty and practicality, Dr. Sondra Thiederman explained how bias impacts our leadership abilities and explained how to reprogram our brains to be more connected to people from all backgrounds.

Explaining that bias is simply an "inflexible belief about a particular category of people — positive or negative," Dr. Thiederman explained bias is an attitude and not a behavior.

In the 1800s and early 1900s, throughout the United States employers and even government officials expressed negative bias about Italians and Irish immigrants. Now that many of those ethnicities have blended into America's melting pot, most white Americans have let go of any conscious racism concerning white immigrants.

"We've come a long way," Dr. Thiederman said. "But the white population still has more power, making bias against non-whites more hurtful."

"But the human brain is a powerful tool for reducing bias," she continued. "We are not hard-wired. We can use our brains and our intellect to eliminate most bias that we learn from family, friends, media and other sources."

Identifying Bias

One workshop included a group discussion exercise where participants read a detailed description about a company president's office. With the name Pat Jordan, it wasn't clear whether the president was a man or woman.

Specific details in the description could imply that Pat was black or white, male or female, young or old. Each participant was asked to share their reactions to the descriptions and determine what they could about Pat.

With details about color of office furniture, what magazines were on the table, what pictures were on the desk, the style of coffee mug, desk lamp, letter opener — it did not take long for individuals to start making assumptions about whether Pat was a man or woman, or black or white.

Different participants made different assumptions, helping the small groups discover that their own way of thinking often includes generalizations and "biases" based on past experiences.

There was no right or wrong answer

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to Pat Jordan's identity. It was just an exercise to clearly illustrate how easy it is to jump to inaccurate conclusions that reflect our own subconscious patterns.

Five Steps To Bias Free Leadership

1. Become mindful of your biases. Watch the first thought that comes into your mind when encountering a member of another group (e.g., deaf, Asian). Ask yourself, would I feel the same way about this encounter if the person was just like me?

2. Identify the alleged benefits of your biases. Generally, a stereotype gives an illusion of control and predictability. Are you really threatened and in need of such control?

3. Which biases cause the most damage? Prejudgment in the hiring process screens out many competent applicants.

4. Dissect biases to weaken their foundation. Determine where you might have learned that particular bias. Was it something that happened to a friend? Something you read? How many people do you know that actually conform to the bias?

5. Identify shared kinship. What characteristics do you have in common with the person? Are they a parent? Do they share your love of animals? Find a common denominator that will allow you to be an equal at some level and build from there. Shove aside your biases to focus on true connection.

Executive Excellence

Liz Hobba, senior consultant with Simmons Associates, reviewed survey results that indicated what executive behaviors correlated to leading a successful diversity and inclusion initiative.

She reported that between April and August 2004, 123 companies participated in an online survey that included 59 questions. Certain questions were critical to connecting specific executive behaviors to "success." For example, question 20 asked: "How would you rate the success of your organization's diversity/ inclusion initiative?" By correlating individual responses against the reported success or lack of success of their initiatives, shared behaviors were evaluated in the following manner:

- ♦ 80 percent or higher indicated a high shared best practice by the successful;

- ♦ 70-80 percent indicated a shared practice by the successful;

- ♦ 50-70 percent indicated a potential shared best practice, but required gap analysis; and

- ♦ below 50 percent indicated a questionable connection to success.

Best Practices

Interpreting the survey data, Hobba concluded that successful diversity or inclusion initiatives shared several characteristics:

- ♦ Involvement of the full executive team in the initiative;

- ♦ Strategic objectives were clearly defined to tie diversity/inclusion initiative to business results and were measurable;

- ♦ People and departments were held accountable through appropriate compensation, performance reviews, etc.;

- ♦ The entire organization was engaged in the initiative in business relevant ways;

- ♦ Hiring and promoting non-traditional candidates was encouraged, including those with non-traditional career paths;

- ♦ Appropriate resources were made available, including budget and

staffing for the initiative;

- ♦ A shared definition and vision of diversity was communicated to all levels of the organization; and

- ♦ Continuous improvement, year after year, was expected and achieved.

Holding People Accountable

"An inclusion initiative by definition is not accurately named if portions of the organization do not see themselves as part of it," Hobba noted. "So all levels of staff must be actively engaged in ways that make sense for their roles and responsibilities within the organization."

To back that up, survey results showed that respondents who reported success with their initiative had specific diversity-related deliverables in 76-100 percent of their departments.

"This demonstrates that accountability is a key to success, specifically when applied to both individuals and departments," Hobba explained.

Competitive Advantage

The survey revealed that "best practice" executives strategically position diversity and the initiative as a potential competitive advantage with financial benefits for the business.

Executives who insist on educating employees on diversity concepts and related skills "significantly enhance the likelihood of a successful initiative," Hobba said.

Not all successful organizations had a diversity department or diversity officer in place. However, Hobba pointed out that successfully diverse environments have individuals throughout the organization that lead inclusion efforts.

Hobba suggested companies treat diversity/ inclusion competency as a performance criteria.

"This is the fastest way to make people accountable for their attitudes and behaviors," she said.