FOUR WAYS

That Good Intentions & Well-Meaning Behaviors

DERAIL

INCLUSION

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Many different types of organizations now have Chief Diversity Officers and Diversity and Inclusion experts on staff. These individuals work across sectors and institutional types including higher education, school districts, high-tech companies like Google and Facebook, as well as in health care organizations. They are responsible for recruiting and retaining a diverse workforce, as well as facilitating the role of diversity as a value added in order to support organizational effectiveness. Research in organizational behavior and human resource management has demonstrated that diversity can enhance the quality of group decision making as well as creativity and innovation, in addition to even improving a firm's financial performance (Jackson & Joshi, 2011; Phillips, Northcraft, & Neale, 2006; Richard, 2000).

However, these benefits can only accrue within organizations that maintain a strong climate for inclusion. Inclusion reflects how individuals experience their environment; the extent to which they feel a sense of belonging and value, as well as the belief that they may have an opportunity to grow, develop, and perhaps even lead. Diversity professionals, therefore, are concerned with the extent to which all employees are having (hopefully) a positive work experience regardless of their many differences. Ferdman (2014) differentiates diversity from inclusion by suggesting that diversity is a state; it's about "counting heads." In contrast, he defines inclusion as "making heads count (Ferdman, 2014)." You could also think about diversity as reflecting quantity; the quantity of different types or categories of people in your organization. In contrast, inclusion refers to the quality of the experience those individuals are having.

Certainly hostile diversity climates that allow persistent discrimination and harassment are barriers to inclusion. However, sometimes even our well-intentioned behaviors and communication can derail opportunities for inclusion. This article targets those well-meaning behaviors, beliefs, and sayings that we might even see as positive on the surface but that still send negative anti-inclusion messages. Specifically, the article will outline the four ways in which inclusion can be hindered by our avoidance of diversity as well as our support of it.

1 Breaking the Race Taboo

For many of us, race is a taboo topic. Taboos operate on two levels: They silence the topic, and subsequently this silence interferes with resolving or intervening in the issue (Thomas, 1989). Tatum (2007) argues that there are a number of reasons for why we do not discuss race. One of the reasons that we avoid the discussion of race is because we simply do not know how to discuss it. That is, we lack a vocabulary and we use words like *prejudice, discrimination, bias*, and *stereotyping* interchangeably and ineffectively. We limit conversations as well because we feel as though we don't have permission to do so. To bring up race challenges the myth that we are blind to it and subsequently that it does not inform our actions and decisions. We are especially hesitant to discuss race in diverse groups out of fear that we may inadvertently offend someone or perhaps even reveal racial biases even to ourselves. Lacking role models who comfortably discuss race in a respectful and nonoffensive way has limited our own ability and comfort with even trying to engage the topic. By silencing discussions of race, we send a message that it is negative. For individuals who are racial minorities specifically, it may also send the message of exclusion and a societal expectation of assimilation rather than true integration (Cox, 1994).

2 Privilege

If discussions of race are collectively avoided, then discussions about privilege are shunned. The construct of privilege often brings up feelings of guilt and shame that not only make people avoid discussing it, but may also make them angry enough to challenge its existence. McIntosh (1988) in fact suggests that the power of privilege is in its invisibility and that we are meant to remain oblivious to it. The power of privilege also lies in the presumption that it is actually merit. When everyone who holds power and influence within your organization shares common social identity group memberships, and those leaders have done so throughout history, many might assume that these people have been elevated to positions of power solely due to merit. Another explanation might be that their path was eased somewhat due to their resemblance to the model of leadership that reflects history, and that others who might have been equally hard working and intelligent did not ascend to positions of authority because of their differences and the subsequent challenge to the status quo that might present. Therefore to talk about, look for, and to confront privilege is uncomfortable and actively avoided.

Whereas maintaining the taboo nature of race and avoiding the examination of systems of privilege prevents inclusion, actions that may on the surface seem diversity-friendly can also derail inclusion. These actions include some forms of micro-aggressions and maintaining a colorblind diversity ideology.

3 Microinsults and Microinvalidations

Sue and colleagues (2007) define microaggressions as daily chronic slights, snubs, and indignities that many tokens and marginalized people address over their lifetime and across contexts. Often, it is difficult to discern if these microaggressions are intentional or not, but it is usually clear that, to the recipient, they cause pain, hurt, and a heightened sense of vulnerability and exclusion. Sue and colleagues (2007) expand our understanding of microaggressions by specifying its subtypes which include microinsults, micro assaults, and microinvalidations. Several well-meaning questions and even compliments may fall into the micro-insult and microinvalidation categories. For example, to hear someone exclaim, "*You're so articulate!*" can subtly convey that the actor did not assume that you were educated or capable of speaking well. Asking someone, "*Where are you from?. . . no, where are you really from?*" may send the message that you are the Other and not presumed to be "one of us." Therefore, microinvalidation sends a message to the recipients and to others like them that they do not belong. Another form of microinvalidation that many have been socialized to espouse despite its obvious falsehood is color blindness.

4 Color Blindness

Research in social psychology and even industrial/organizational psychology is grappling with the issue of models of diversity, sometimes referred to diversity ideologies. The two ideologies most studied are colorblindness and multiculturalism. On the surface, both reflect a desire to be (or at least appear) egalitarian and racially fair. Most of the literature has demonstrated that people of color prefer the more contemporary multiculturalism whereas Whites are more likely to espouse colorblindness. Multiculturalism reflects an interest and value for differences. Colorblindness instead promotes silencing differences and embracing sameness.

Colorblindness is a common American diversity ideology (Thomas, Mack, & Montagliani, 2004), in part because to articulate that we notice race may make one accountable for the ways in which race might be used unfairly in major decisions like admissions, workplace promotions, or even the quality of healthcare offered. Yet it is fairly obvious that most people (even those with compromised vision) see skin color even if they do not acknowledge it.

Common sentiments reflective of colorblindness include, "*I don't see color*," and "*We are one race, the human race.*" In each of these cases, the speaker seeks to diminish the importance of skin color in order to demonstrate egalitarianism. Unfortunately colorblindness seems to have many negative consequences, especially for cross-racial interactions.

For example, Plaut, Thomas, & Goren's (2009) field study demonstrated that White colorblindness reduced minority coworker engagement at work. Holoien & Shelton's (2012) lab study found that, when primed with a colorblind message, Whites exhibited more prejudiced behavior, and subsequently minorities who interacted with them exhibited decreases in their performance on a cognitive task relative to performance prior to the interaction. Other research has demonstrated that Whites who espoused colorblindness are less sensitive to perceiving acts of racism and may therefore be less likely to correct them (Offermann et al., 2014). Indeed one qualitative study in education found that White colorblind teachers where less willing to adjust their teaching to meet the needs of diverse students (Hachfeld, Hahn, Schroeder, Anders, & Kunter, 2015).

Conclusion

There are times in which good intentions derail inclusion such as when we avoid conversations around race and systems of privilege, or when we deliver compliments that may also be microinsults or when we espouse colorblindness. Those who engage in these practices may be well-meaning, but their actions send messages to people of color that they are actually uncomfortable with diversity, expect racial minorities to assimilate rather than integrate, and that overall they are racially insensitive and that minorities may be at risk for discrimination when around them. What can be done instead?

An often-heard strategy is to remain truly open to differences and not to impose your own culture, ethnicity, or ideologies upon others, which often implicitly sends the message of presumed superiority. An alternative is to take a value-added perspective on differences and seek to learn from them and view them as an asset rather than downplay or silence them. When we do encounter colorblindness or microinsults and microinvalidations, we should challenge them. Often this simply means breaking the silence that sustains those perspectives that reinforce exclusion rather than inclusion.

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