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Voice Mail

How Diverse Are We?

As a diversity trainer, I've been thinking a lot about the term, "diversity." I've been toying with the unpopular, politically incorrect idea that maybe the whole concept of diversity is misguided.

Diversity training resulted from a need to draw a larger circle of inclusion around all types of people in our society: white and black, gay and straight, Christian and non-Christian, old and young, rich and poor, and people with and without disabilities. Diversity training has helped educate people about those apparent differences and helped them strategize ways to validate and appreciate everyone. On the surface, that seems sensible.

But how have we managed to convince ourselves and each other that because someone has darker skin or lives in a nicer neighborhood, he or she is different from us? It seems to me that such a belief stems from the way we define "different." I'm not suggesting that there aren't physical and cultural differences between people. But I am suggesting that we challenge ourselves to go beyond the concept of diversity to begin looking at similarities among people.

Diversity training is an important step in the growth process. It's when many of us first examine our prejudices and beliefs about other people. Understanding and appreciating our own and each other's cultural and racial distinctions is a valuable and necessary first step toward increased cooperation among different groups. But it's only a first step.

My message for diversity trainers: Don't fall short of your goal by believing that you've succeeded once trainees agree that differences exist between people and should be

appreciated and valued. Real success comes when you've assisted trainees in exploring all of the perceived differences to the point at which they see beyond diversity to recognize the sameness in each one of us.

After we examine how we differ, let's move ahead and examine with great vigor the multitude of ways in which we're all the same.

— **Ellen Abell**

*Abell Training and Consultation
Fort Collins, Colorado*

A Conference Review

It's common knowledge that when you buy a house, the three most important aspects are location, location, location. But what are the three most important ingredients for an ASTD conference?

I've heard it said that the three main ingredients are location, content, and key word. Looking back at the last three ASTD conferences prior to the one in Atlanta, I must say I enjoyed the one in Orlando, was fascinated by the one in San Francisco, and was totally absorbed by the one in the "Big Easy."

The content of all three of those conferences was immensely pleasing. There were some disappointments, but they were outweighed by the excellent sessions, seminars, and presentations.

And the key word? Well, the conferences have moved from "cultural change" through "empowerment" to "paradigm" at Atlanta's meeting, at which I heard one attendee refer to another as a "paradigm of virtue."

I'm more convinced than ever that the three key ingredients for any successful conference are the people, the people, the people. They make the conferences buzz with adrenalin

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Voice Mail

and expectation. They give each conference its true character. Because of the people who were there, Atlanta was brilliant.

All that remains to be said is, "Roll on, Anaheim."

— Roger E. Fielding
S.H.A.P.E.
Belgium

The Subtlety of Racism

The following letters are in response to "The Subtlety of Racism," by Jack Dovidio, in the April 1993 issue.

I'm impressed with both Jack Dovidio's article, "The Subtlety of Racism," and your decision to run it. The concepts spelled out in the article aren't easy to assimilate, either intellectually or emotionally.

Dovidio's article summarizes a program of social/psychological research that has important implications for trainers of all races. If we can start to acknowledge that we may behave in ways that systematically and negatively affect others, then we can start to change.

As someone who trains trainers and deals with race issues, I help trainers recognize the subtle things they do that may interfere with participants' learning, such as making eye contact only with white participants.

As Dovidio points out, such subtle behavior is often due to a lack of awareness. We're motivated to stay blind to the behavior not out of malice, but from a natural, human desire to think well of ourselves. If white trainers want their programs to be useful for all of their participants, they need to risk finding out uncomfortable information about themselves.

Please publish more articles like Dovidio's.

— Stephanie Nickerson
New School for Social Research
New York, New York

Some years ago while taking a sociology class, my wife was involved in an experiment that I found fascinating and revealing.

The instructor asked half of the students to sit in the back three rows

and the other half to sit in the front three rows. The seat selection was made without regard to race, sex, or other criteria. The instructor gave no reason for dividing the students into two groups.

During the class, the instructor (who was a black male) was very receptive to the students sitting in the first three rows. He ignored the people in the back of the room. The students sitting in the back rows began to notice the discrimination. They protested by making disruptive noises and shouting out comments without first raising their hands.

Interestingly, the people sitting in the front rows were judged by the instructor to be unaware of the discrimination, even after the people in the back rows began protesting. The lack of awareness was evident whether the favored students were black or white, or male or female.

It seems to me that there's a lesson in the experiment for everyone. People who are favored may be honestly unaware of the barriers others face, but they need to be aware of their insensitivity. To me, the results of the experiment had the feel of truth.

— Booth Muller
State Auto Insurance Companies
Columbus, Ohio

Fone Fuss

As a professional salesperson, I object to the term "hucksters" in "Fone Fun" ("Working Life," March 1993) to refer to telemarketers. Also, I object to the item's suggestion that people give unwanted callers a fax number, letting them think it's a phone number.

Lousy. Is this what diversity is all about?

— Walt Marzinke
Humetrics
Chicago, Illinois

"Voice Mail" is compiled and edited by Haidee Allerton. "Voice Mail" welcomes your views. Send your letters and comments to "Voice Mail," Training & Development, 1640 King Street, Box 1443, Alexandria, VA 22313-2043; fax them to Allerton at 703/683-9203; or call them in on the "Voice Mail" line, 703/683-9590.