

2019
May



WDN Regional Council
Meeting Summary

Host: Coordinated Care Services, Inc.
Topic Discussion: Pittsford Central School District
Group Discussion: Tokenism in the Workplace

Difficult Topic Discussion: Pittsford Central School District

The May meeting topic was an interactive exercise framed by a September 18, 2017 article in Medium by Helen Kim Ho, “8 Ways People of Color are Tokenized in Nonprofits”. In the June meeting we continued the discussion on what tokenism feels and looks like using several specific examples from Ho’s article, of how tokenism plays out to the detriment of people of color and organizations as a whole. The August meeting topic was the History of Segregation and Racist Policy in Rochester.

The content of our difficult discussion was based on the following recent events: *In the last several days the Pittsford School District has been under fire for charges of racism since a heated school board meeting where parents and students charged district leadership with disregard for the racism that exists in schools. The issue first rose to the surface in relation to two events: a Pittsford Mendon High School student repeatedly using the N-word toward her black teammates on the track and field team, and a Black History Month display at Park Road Elementary School where several of the featured black inventors were in fact photographs of white people.*

Since then though, the District’s critics have keyed on Superintendent Michael Pero, and School Board President Amy Thomas’s unwillingness to consider racism as a separate issue from a general push for inclusivity of all kinds.

Pero, in particular, drew a harsh response from critics – “Racism exists—in every instance— at the expense of its victims, and for him to refuse to label it for the hateful ideology that it is, is a clear message to the children being affected that they do not matter. His refusal to call racism by its name and the lame attempt at “making everyone feel included,” serves only to alienate students already being alienated by their peers. What students and families need and expect from him is leadership and a commitment to discipline children who bully and harass other students. The failure to say or do such will only embolden and make comfortable the students prone to harmful behavior.”

After the meeting participants read the description of the situation in the Pittsford School District, we had a brief full group discussion and the broke into smaller groups to address the following questions:

2019
May



WDN Regional Council
Meeting Summary

Host: Coordinated Care Services, Inc.
Topic Discussion: Pittsford Central School District
Group Discussion: Tokenism in the Workplace

*What do you know about this situation?
What conversations have you had with others?
Do you think this is a circumstance unique to Pittsford Schools?
Can you identify similar issues in your own organization? In what way?
How would your management respond to a situation like this?
How hard is it to get the attention of the leaders in your organization?
Is there a cost to be paid to seek upper management involvement, in terms of being labelled or excluded or even punished?*

Featured Group Discussion:

The discussion was based on the attached September 18, 2017 article in Medium by Helen Kim Ho, “8 Ways People of Color are Tokenized in Nonprofits”, provided by Steve Jarose.

Tokenism in the Workplace

There’s a type of racism in the workplace many of us have personally witnessed, perpetrated or experienced: tokenism.

Tokenism is, simply, covert racism. Racism requires those in power to maintain their privilege by exercising social, economic and/or political muscle against people of color (POC). Tokenism achieves the same while giving those in power the appearance of being non-racist and even champions of diversity because they recruit and use POC as racialized props.

Tokenism exists in all types of organizations including non-profit, for-profit, government, education, health care and more.

At our meeting, we examined what tokenism feels and looks like, and engaged in a robust discussion, with several specific examples from Helen Kim Ho’s article, of how tokenism plays out to the detriment of people of color and organizations as a whole. Prior to the meeting, questions to guide the discussions about each of Ho’s examples of tokenism were developed by Steve and Mike Streeter.

Participants were encouraged to draw on their own experiences and share their stories about tokenism they have observed or to which they have been subjected. Based on the strong positive feedback, at a future meeting we will continue our discussions to address the other examples of tokenism in Ho’s article.