

2019
June



WDN Regional Council
Meeting Summary

Host: National Coalition Building Institute
Topic Discussion: Is Tokenism a bad thing?
Group Discussion: Tokenism in the Workplace Part 2

Difficult Topic Discussion:

Our difficult conversation was based on the following exercise that examines a woman's unique and surprising response to being tokenized in her organization. The small and large group discussions that followed provided a segue to our featured topic.

Is Tokenism a bad thing?

Not long after the first anniversary of gender pay gap reporting, I was out for dinner with a group of friends. Inevitably, the subject came up, and the supposed lack of female talent able to step into a senior role was mentioned. One of my female dinner guests complained how hard it was for her to get the opportunity to show how capable she was. Another replied she used the fact she was a woman to her advantage. As we all looked at her aghast, she explained.

She works in a male dominated office in a male dominated industry. As the issue of diversity became more and more important to clients, she noticed she was being invited to more client meetings. One of her male co-workers joked she was the 'token' woman.

'I knew he was right, but I saw this as the perfect opportunity to show how good I am at my job', she went on. 'I started as the token diverse gender rep, but as soon as clients, and more importantly my team, saw I knew what I was doing and talking about, I was being invited for my expertise and knowledge.'

This token gesture, she argued, has allowed her to develop and get promoted on her skills and ability, rather than her gender. She is now in a position to help other less experienced females who may not have access to the opportunities my other dinner guest was referring to.

While I instinctively loathe tokenism, I could see her point. While we wish for a world where all people are treated equally in terms of opportunities, this is not the case. Research continues to demonstrate that women are less likely to ask for a pay raise than men (confidence? worth? social conditioning?); less likely to get a pay raise when they do ask (confidence? worth? social conditioning?); less likely to ask for a promotion (ditto).

Working in the world of Executive Search, I meet senior women all the time. I have heard the phrases 'lucky to have the opportunity'; 'right place right time'; 'willing to take a risk on me' (this last one a particular favorite). As diversity becomes an

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open discussion and initiatives such as gender pay gap reporting become mandatory, I'm starting to hear phrases such as 'I worked really hard for it; I deserved it'; 'I actually don't see gender as an issue in my place of work'. How do you feel about the idea that tokenism isn't such a bad thing? Why? What roles do confidence, worth and social conditioning play in opportunities for women?

Have you observed tokenism in your workplace or had personal experience with it? Describe the circumstances and the outcomes.

What can organizations do to address tokenism? Be as specific as possible.

Featured Group Discussion:
Tokenism in the Workplace – Part 2

The response to our May meeting topic, Tokenism in the Workplace, was overwhelmingly positive with the main concern being that we did not have enough time for thorough, in depth discussions. Many members asked that we continue the dialogue in our next meeting, and so we did.

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

We continued the discussion 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.

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.