

Addressing and Resolving Differences - A National Conversation

By Steve Hanamura

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Expert Forum



I am struck by the progress we are making in the field of Diversity and Inclusion, both externally and internally, knowing full well there are differences in approach and philosophy. This article is devoted to examining how we might need to expand our sphere of influence to include some of the outside forces that do not directly apply to our specific places of work, but rather the items which undergird our overall make up as a nation and possibly the world at large.

Growing up I was told never to discuss religion, politics or finances in public or in mixed company. However given the events of the past months I want to ignore that teaching and invite us to examine carefully why our politicians can't seem to address and resolve differences. I believe there's a connection to our work as D&I practitioners and that is the need to revisit what it means to come from different cultural constructs.

I've been thinking about a few questions lately and want to share them with you so we can see how and where to begin to create an atmosphere which conveys respect trust and collaboration.

- Why are we unable to address and resolve differences?
- What has led to our inability as a two party system to reach compromise without being contentious with each other?
- Some 50 or 60 years ago it was possible for a candidate to lose an election but still be supportive of the victor. Why can't we do that anymore?

Perhaps some of the biggest detractors for not being able to work collaboratively are due in part to fear, anger and pain. Will Schultz, Ph.D. founder of the encounter group movement said that anger is very rarely the first emotion that people experience; it is preceded by loss of control, fear and the feeling of incompetence. Anger mounts if we believe that something that we value is being taken away from us.

I think that some of us in this nation have either become numb to pain or we are confronted with having to address things that are totally not on our screen. Minorities and people with disabilities, for example, know what it is liked to be victimized and it has gone on for a long, long time. Today this type of victimization has seeped over to affect others. Incidences like shootings, looting and bullying are no longer rare. The more frequent mass shootings are bringing a more magnified attention to the fact that something isn't right. Then you add in little children (Newtown, CT) and this understandably puts many people into an uproar about gun control and mental health.

Though much of the hard work in becoming culturally aware doesn't happen with the same level of intensity as it did in the late 80s and 90s, we still have a platform in which cultural differences can be examined. I think it would be good if this same kind of platform could be applied on a national and international level for community members.

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There are two tracks we must consider when trying to come up with solutions or remedies to address the challenges we have been discussing. Personally it's a matter of finding people from different walks of life with whom we can talk as well as learn from how they feel. That is, get to know some of the cultural constructs that drive how and why they believe what they believe.

On an institutional level, we must first have a breakthrough about how to have the difficult conversations. We need to collectively figure out what we have in common with others while still allowing for different points of view to be in the room. We must work from a common definition of culture, knowing full well that these different cultures may influence our world view of how to approach addressing problems.

If I could change the system, here are some of the things I would want to see implemented ;

- Term limits for all politicians. Some of my colleagues would argue that there needs to be time to implement change. I agree, so make the terms something like eight to ten years. Once politicians complete their service, they no longer receive special benefits from the government but return to whatever health care/Medicare and Social Security options that are available to the "regular" citizen.
- Come up with a common definition of culture that the government could work from. In our sessions we define culture as "a system or domain from which we gather our roots and form values."
- We must be willing to let go of the past and be open to changes without compromising some key values to work from. Once these values are solidified, we must develop a common framework from which to have conversation. The goal here is to begin and possibly restore the value of talking with others whose views are different.

The D&I work can serve as a catalyst to help begin a new conversation about what it will take to re-instill respect for others and a process through which to address and resolve our differences.

The complexity of the problems we are surfacing for discussion is so wide that it is virtually impossible to cover the magnitude of the challenges in front of us.

I would encourage us to begin working with our constituent base by starting the conversation as well as reaching out to others who are different. The main criteria are to find people who are amenable to being involved in such a conversation. There will be people who are not reachable but we need to find a group who might be willing to call out and challenge current practices in behavior that are not useful to the majority of human kind.