



Can we talk?

By Steve Hanamura

In the mid 1990s I was asked to assist a government agency to address some challenges they were having with their diversity council and affinity groups. The proponents of diversity had fought hard to establish a diversity network within the organization, but due to a conflict between two of the affinity groups - the gay/lesbians and the Christians - the administrator threatened to shut down the entire initiative if the two groups in question didn't "get their act together." The negative energy from the conflict between these two groups was spreading throughout the entire agency. He gave us two days to address their challenges and stop their bickering.

My first goal was to create a room in which everyone would have an opportunity to talk about why their group was important to them individually and why they thought their particular affinity group should be a part of agency life.

Second, they were encouraged to think beyond their own group to determine what was best for the agency.

Third, as we examined the stereotypes of each group they began to see how damaging these could be. They could see the common denominator of pain even though their beliefs and approach to work/life might be very different.

The group was able to establish some working agreements for how they would treat each other. Knowing full well, that they would not reach total agreement on some aspects of work/life, they were able to agree to disagree. They were also able to promote the other group's meeting times to individuals who wanted to learn what each had to offer.

The final outcome of the two days was that all affinity groups developed a business rationale for how they could enhance agency objectives.

Some fifteen or sixteen years later I find myself reflecting on the progress we are making in the diversity profession as well as some of the things that we still need to work on. For example I am struck by how the language we use is changing to reflect a more respectful workplace. We refer to the group representing gays and lesbians now as LGBT or GLBT and even more recently LGBTQ. The term Blacks morphed to African American to people of color. And handicapped changed to differently-abled, to inconvenienced, to physically challenged and finally people with disabilities.

In like manner there are words or comments which are not permissible to use and if done so, can result in serious reprimands or job loss for their offense. In August 2010 Dr. Laura used the n-word repeatedly during a call on her radio



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program. She received so much negative feedback that she did not renew her radio contract. Juan Williams, NPR news analyst, was fired because of comments he made on the Fox News Channel in October 2010 about Muslims.

However, in spite of our efforts to be more respectful of those who are different from us, there are still groups who are being dissed, even among diversity professionals. One group that comes to mind is Christians. We don't tolerate the idea that all Muslims are terrorists so why do we tolerate the idea that all Christians want to burn the Qur'an or bomb federal buildings or murder doctors who perform abortions? We wouldn't think of using offensive language around someone with a disability, but why is it okay to use the f-word in the presence of Christians?

To be a true diversity champion respect needs to be given to all groups and all people in both words and actions. This does not mean we shouldn't discuss the impact different groups have on others or on institutional policies and procedures. But it does mean we should be examining our personal prejudices. Only when we are able to model respect can we effectively teach respect.