

Coming Together as One: Race in America

By Steve Hanamura

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Expert Forum



I was sitting in the office of a chief diversity officer for a large corporation in Cincinnati, Ohio. We had just completed a session on leadership, diversity and inclusion. The topic of race relations surfaced and she began to tell me about a time when she packed a box lunch for her son who was leaving to drive to Atlanta. Midway through his trip he was pulled over by a state trooper in North Carolina and asked two questions – “Does this car belong to you?” and “Where did you get that lunch?” In order to validate that the car was truly his and that his mom had packed the lunch for him the officer called his mother at work.

The chief diversity officer told me she was a wreck for the rest of the day. Sadly, it probably won't surprise you to learn that both mom and son are African American.

In our twenty-nine years in the industry we have seen diversity grow from a compliance mentality to a multi-billion dollar business. So with the evolution of diversity, inclusion, equity and social justice, why is it that we still seem to have trouble addressing the issue of race in this country? Although the main focus in any business is the bottom line, many are encouraging an inclusive atmosphere and want people to bring “their whole selves” to work. But how can the African American mom bring her whole self when she's worried about the safety of her son?

Given the recent events of the past year or two many people are speaking out about racial unrest. Why are D&I practitioners not at the forefront of this effort? Many of the social justice efforts are fraught with people who are merely operating from a position of anger without having sufficient education, training or knowledge beyond the feelings that these egregious circumstance are on young Black males. This is not to say we shouldn't be angry, but in order for true change to come about, it is useful to develop some skills and knowledge to talk, listen and learn about the dynamics of prejudice and discrimination.

In the mid-1990s many corporations conducted three to five day training sessions for both managers and employees to learn about how to talk and listen to others. Diversity councils and affinity groups were formed and they had a stronger skill base than do groups that exist today. As a general rule, I fear that many people who now are in D&I work have not equipped themselves on how to handle or address prejudice and discrimination on both a cognitive and emotional level.

While I applaud efforts by many to engage in protests and freedom of speech

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regarding these matters, I believe it needs to be done with education and knowledge and skill development. Knowing full well that the average D&I practitioner needs to focus on matters of the workplace, what would be the return on investment for joining in on the social justice track for our respective communities? Educational and skill development in the area of race relations as well as other aspect of diversity would benefit many from disenfranchised groups. We need to practice corporate stewardship which means giving back to the communities we live and work in.

I would like to offer the following suggestions which may help jump start this effort from both a personal and institutional perspective:

- Assemble a representative sample of people from different groups (African American, Hispanic, Asian, White, LGBT, disability, etc.) to address the question “what would living in true community look and feel like?”
- Begin to dialogue with local police bureaus about what you are trying to do to see if they would be willing to take part in the educational sessions.
- Work from a position of *oneness*. Oneness builds collaboration, empowers individuals and groups, and is the key to unlock the power of diversity.