

Conversation With a Purpose



By *Sondra Thiederman, Ph.D.*

Have you ever found yourself abruptly thrust into the middle of a conversation about diversity with no particular idea about how to proceed? Perhaps there has been some sort of misunderstanding, maybe an accusation of bias has been made, or perhaps something has been said that left a team member feeling disrespected in some way. Because these incidents are capable of bringing about productive dialogue and thereby serving as gateways to greater understanding and reduced bias, I call them “Gateway Events™”.

Regardless of the nature of the Gateway Event, talking about sticky diversity issues is not always comfortable and not every conversation ends with the participants collapsing into each other’s arms in a mutual paroxysm of newfound understanding. The purpose of this article is to provide a basic tool to minimize the discomfort and maximize the chance that we will, if not collapse into each other’s arms, at least be able to walk through those Gateways and meet on the other side.

How a Gateway Event resolves itself is predicated only in part on the details of the initial action. The ultimate outcome is also influenced by the sequence of decisions that follow. Each swing of the gate following an event provides another opportunity to make good or bad choices, to set good or bad goals, and, therefore, to influence the outcome.

Diversity consultant Roosevelt Thomas says it succinctly, but powerfully: “*Dialogue is conversation with a purpose.*” Aimless conversation, particularly if the catalyst for that conversation is emotionally charged, will lead nowhere or, worse, will lead somewhere we would rather not go. We need functional dialogue about diversity, not just noise, and certainly not just conflict for conflict’s sake.

Your specific goal or function will, of course, be shaped by the nature of the Gateway Event itself. The following is a sampling of the kinds of events you are most apt to encounter, along with suggested goals. Keep this discussion in mind so that, when each situation presents itself, you will be prepared and able to enter into the dialogue with a firm purpose in mind.

You Feel Offended—What Is Your Goal?

When someone has done something we find offensive, it is our task and responsibility to communicate how we feel in a way that will accomplish our goals. I doubt it, but your goal might be to upset the person, make him feel guilty, and hurt him (like so many like him might have hurt you before). Let’s admit it, there is a certain pleasure in making people feel guilty. The problem is that “guilt-tripping” is a notoriously poor motivator of change. A little guilt served up gently might work, but too much can backfire and that backfire inevitably ignites a circle of destruction that spins out of control:

- The circle starts when a statement or act is perceived by someone as offensive.
- The person who feels hurt accuses the offender of bias and then says something with the goal of making him feel guilty.
- The guilt-tripped offender dislikes the accuser for making her feel guilty and, therefore, withdraws and becomes belligerent.
- The accuser perceives this belligerence as still more reason to be offended and redoubles her efforts to make the offender feel guilty.
- The offender (who, by the way, is rapidly taking on the role of victim) again withdraws.
- The accuser perceives this withdrawal as . . .

I told you the circle would spin. Even my head is spinning from trying to figure out how all this jousting works. Setting the goals of guilt and revenge doesn't seem like a very good idea to me.

Here's a particularly extreme example of an incident in which someone was offended by the actions of another. Based in part on a true incident, it involves a woman named Barbara who was, she admits, once tempted to go down the rocky road to revenge. This urge occurred when she encountered a man on the street who found it entertaining—or felt it was his moral obligation or some other such foolishness—to call her a lesbian. Barbara, you see, is blind and was walking with a female friend who was guiding her by the arm. As the man walked past the pair, Barbara heard him mutter, “Look at those lesbians flaunting their homosexuality. It's disgusting.”

When Barbara heard this barely audible attack, she had a choice to make and a goal to set. Barbara's chosen goal would depend on the answer to two questions.

1. What did she want to accomplish?
2. Was there a reasonable chance of her achieving that goal without paying too high a price? In other words, was it worth it?

One goal Barbara might have had is a sometimes sweet one: revenge. Imagine his humiliation at being accosted in public by a blind woman and berated for calling her disgusting. If Barbara wanted to feel better by causing pain, this certainly was achievable. But it also would compromise a more important long-term goal: to educate others about how people with disabilities should be regarded and treated.

It is impossible to know if Barbara could have succeeded at educating this particular person—that would have been determined by the nature of the man and the virulence of his fear. Her odds for success, however, would have soared if she approached him with compassion and with the intent of preserving both her dignity and his. Knowing what I do of Barbara, that is just how she would have gone about it. Barbara knows that people are far more apt to listen if they are not distracted by efforts to build an emotional firewall with which to protect themselves against attack.

Reader Activity: Think back to a time when you were offended by someone's comment or action. What goal did you set for the conversation that followed? Having read this section, what goals might you set for the future?

You Have Done Something Offensive and Now Regret It—What Is Your Goal?

If most of us were to answer this question honestly, we might say, “My goal is to turn back time and make the whole thing go away.” Of course, that’s not going to work. For one thing, it’s impossible. For another, all our efforts to ignore it, make a joke out of it, or just walk away from it are disrespectful and—let’s face it—cowardly. I remember a moment some years ago when I said something offensive, knew it, felt awful about it, and set for myself the un-recommended goal of trying to make everyone, including myself, believe it never happened.

The unfortunate event took place when my children were teenagers, some 25 years ago. I was standing at my kitchen counter next to one of my daughter’s best friends—a young man who, by heritage, was part Japanese. As odd as it may sound to those who know of my lack of culinary skills, I have the vague impression that he and I were cooking together. Well, maybe the “cooking” was more along the lines of unwrapping some take-out food or maybe as sophisticated as slicing a pizza. Anyway, for a reason I can’t recall, I had occasion to refer to Asian food and, somewhere in there, I uttered the phrase, “Ching Chong food.”

As soon as the phrase left my mouth, I regretted it. He didn’t say anything, but there was this nanosecond of silence that screamed embarrassment and hurt feelings and discomfort. You might have expected that I would take advantage of that gap in the banter to apologize, but I didn’t—no excuse for that, just too buried in my own regret to do the right thing. My goal that afternoon, standing in my kitchen, was obvious: Make it go away. A better goal, of course, would have been for me to do anything it took to make him feel less diminished by what I had said. That means, acknowledge what happened, take responsibility for it, and apologize.

By the way, with respect to this young man, I very recently remembered this event and, with the clarity of thought and courage that intervening years can supply, was able to shift my goal from “hide it” to “fix it.” After all these years, I tracked him down and apologized.

You Have Been Wrongly Accused of Bias—What Is Your Goal?

Let’s say you have been accused of a bias. You really listened to what the other person had to say, really thought it out, and are convinced that the accusation is wrong. What on earth is your goal then? I can best answer this question by telling you what happened to my colleague Gayle who is, as you can see from this incident, very skilled at handling awkward Gateway Events.

Gayle, an experienced diversity trainer, was about halfway through conducting a workshop when he had occasion to refer to the “flip” chart that stood in the corner of the room. No sooner was the word out of his mouth that a hand shot up. “How can you, a diversity trainer, be so biased? ‘Flip,’ the irate woman said, “is a pejorative term for Filipinos.”

Yes, “flip” is a pejorative term for Filipinos. But it is also the name of a large pad of paper mounted on an easel. Gayle would agree with me that this woman’s reasoning—that an offensive word is a reflection of bias even if it is used for an entirely different purpose—was a bit off base. If we carry her thinking to its logical conclusion, a woman would be right to protest every reference to baby “chicks,” people of Asian ancestry could become angry when the “slope” of an incline is mentioned and a person with a disability might express outrage when hearing a golfer refer to her “handicap.”

Faced with such distorted reasoning, Gayle had a couple of options. He could set a goal of making the accuser feel justified (and end up looking like a good guy in the deal). To accomplish this, he would have to pretend that the accusation was correct and fake an apology (that means, lie). A corollary result of this misguided goal would be that the accuser would remain ignorant of her mistake and continue to chronically see bias where none exists.

On the other hand, he could set this goal: Demonstrate to the woman that he respects her enough to hold her to a high standard of judgment.

This is exactly what Gayle did. First, he thanked the woman for her comment and said he was sorry if what he said made her uncomfortable. This was an important step because it made it clear that he honored her right to feel the way she did. Notice a distinction here: Gayle did not actually apologize for using the word “flip”; he apologized, instead, for the fact that his use of the word made her uncomfortable. This nuanced apology was one step toward his goal of showing her respect. In short, he resisted the temptation to patronize her.

The second step toward his goal grows from Gayle’s assumption that the woman would be able to understand the distinction he was making between the pejorative use of the word and the way he was using it. He respectfully pointed out that the term “flip,” in the context in which he used the term, meant only a large pad of paper and nothing else. He then went a step further and asked the woman if she’d like to talk about the issue more during the break—another sign of respect.

Reader Activity: Think back to a time when you were falsely accused of a biased attitude. Upon learning of that accusation, what, if any, goal did you set for the conversation? Having read this section, what goal might you set if a similar incident happened in the future?

Conclusion:

No matter what type of conversation you are in, the setting of a clear goal is your first step toward increasing the chances that the conversation will be productive. This is because, once that goal is set, it gives us something to shoot for, keeps us on track, and assures that the conversation will consist of exchanges that are honest, calm, and, above all else, respectful.

Sondra Thiederman is a speaker and author on bias-reduction, diversity, and cross-cultural issues. Her latest book is Making Diversity Work: Seven Steps for Defeating Bias in the Workplace that provides practical tools for defeating bias and bias-related conflicts in the workplace. Most recently, she has completed work on the training video Is It Bias? Making Diversity Work. This video-based training is available through Learning Communications (www.learncom.com).

She can be contacted for Webinars and in-person presentations at: www.Thiederman.com, STPhD@Thiederman.com.