

## Diversity. What it isn't...

By Joe Gerstandt



Expert Forum



### Diversity.

As issues of diversity and inclusion are becoming increasingly business critical, there remains a great deal of evidence that these are still largely misunderstood issues. On a very basic level, there does not seem to be a good understanding of what diversity is and what its value is for a group, organization or community. I recently posted some thoughts on what diversity is, and thanks to a lot of e-mail from readers will be adding some things to that list. I have also written in the past on what the value of diversity is.

I thought for this post I would point out some of the things that diversity is not. I see many of these things done in the name of diversity programs / efforts / initiative, etc., and I think that this is at best misinformed and at worst dishonest and almost always counter-productive. Let me know if you agree or disagree.

### Diversity is not about compliance.

It is not uncommon that people come into a workshop of mine wanting to know how to stay out of trouble. They have come to believe that diversity is largely an issue of compliance, about what you can say and what you cannot say. This is unfortunate. I am not saying that compliance is not important, but when you lump the issues of diversity and compliance together you are sending a powerful and I think a negative message about diversity. You are framing it as a burden / challenge / source of trouble. Compliance is reactive and transactional. Real diversity and inclusion work is proactive and transformational...it is appreciative, aspirational and generative. Diversity and inclusion work is about unleashing the immeasurable power in our relationships and interactions...where our differences and our similarities exist. Saying diversity is an issue of compliance is like saying that driving a car is about knowing the speed limit. **Obviously there is some overlap between diversity and compliance, but if you frame diversity in your organization as being about compliance you are not likely to have a culture that values and seeks out difference.** You will probably end up with a culture that avoids and denies difference. Compliance is important, but it is different than diversity and inclusion. Make sure that is clear.

### Diversity is not about tolerance or sensitivity.

Tolerance is too low a bar for human beings and sensitivity says that you need to approach some people as if they are fragile. A goal of diversity and inclusion work is healthy, functional and effective relationships, based on real information and experience shared by real people instead of assumptions, labels, stereotypes, etc. So this work is not really about tolerance or sensitivity, but rather personal awareness, honesty, maturity, courage, emotional and social intelligence and

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strong communication skills. **If you have tolerance or sensitivity issues in your organization or community, you do not have a “diversity problem”; you have an absence of leadership and a dysfunctional culture. Big difference.**

### **Diversity is not about special treatment for some people.**

One of the great misperceptions I run into regarding diversity and inclusion in the workplace is that it is about how to interact better with or make things better for women, People of Color or other minority groups. Diversity and inclusion is about making things better for everyone. Diversity and inclusion is about the full deployment of intangible assets for better outcomes...and that benefits everyone (and should be appealing to everyone!?). If we have outcomes that are skewed by things like race and gender we should all be less than satisfied, regardless of our race or gender...because we should want processes, practices and systems that are equitable. If I am an employee in an organization that has a retention rate of 25% for Native American males 45% for Native American females, 65% for Caucasian females, and 85% for Caucasian males, I should be gravely concerned about that as a Caucasian male. It is clearly working out well for me, but looking at the outcomes I should have great concern about the validity of our practices and policies. Being concerned about how we attract, engage and retain is not me doing a favor to Native American employees or women employees, but rather me wanting to make sure that we are actually focusing on talent and not letting lack of awareness, assumptions and bias (conscious or unconscious) skew the results. **Organizations making serious investments in diversity and inclusion, not only remove the disparity in retention rates, but raise the retention rates for all groups.** Diversity and inclusion benefits everyone.

### **Diversity is not about charity.**

This is another issue of inaccurate framing. I see a lot of business and community leaders when making their speech about embracing diversity talk about our obligation to help those less fortunate. I think that it is a good thing to help those less fortunate. I think that our organizations and communities could do a great deal more to help those less fortunate...but that work is about helping those less fortunate, it is not about diversity and inclusion. And when you frame diversity and inclusion as an issue of charity, you are again sending a powerful and very negative message. **You are telling people that diversity and inclusion work is simply about helping others and making exceptions for those that are "down on their luck" and that is hardly the case.** A \$500 scholarship on Martin Luther King Day does not a real diversity commitment make.

### **Diversity is not about ethnic food celebrations.**

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When the heart and soul of your organizational diversity and inclusion work is an ethnic food day or an ethnic holiday celebration, you have a serious problem. I can appreciate these events when they are a relatively small component of a comprehensive investment involving development programs, infrastructure and accountability, but when this is the primary or only activity you are doing, it is quite likely that you are just doing damage by perpetrating stereotypes and making diversity and inclusion into something exotic and not in any way work or business related. **Stop the insanity.** Seriously, stop it now. If you want to try new food go to a new restaurant. If you want to do diversity and inclusion in your organization then get serious, invest some time and resources and put people in circles to start talking to each other and learning from each other.

**-be good to each other**

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