

Does Race Really Matter?

By Steve Hanamura

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Expert Forum



When I have a room full of people come together to explore the dynamics of diversity, I first give them a brief history lesson of how diversity, inclusion, and intercultural communication became important workplace topics. We got into diversity in the first place due to compliance, legislation that states that we can no longer discriminate against people based on their race, gender, or religious background. Secondly we began to see that involving ourselves with diversity related conversations can have a positive impact on business. And finally we realized that diversity work is the right thing to do.

We have evidence of the success of diversity and inclusion initiatives in our places of work with the creation of chief diversity officers, an influx of people with disabilities who have more opportunities thanks to advancements in technology, and ERGs to serve the diverse populations, to name just a few.

So why then, do we have so much difficulty addressing issues of race? The recent LA Clippers situation is a prime example. Isn't it interesting that even when people see bad behavior we can speak out against racist language, but we are unable to go deeper into solving problems of racism. I think that one of the reasons we are having trouble dealing with issues of race and prejudice is due to our inability to admit that individually we have our own prejudices and biases. Before we can take on the "isms" we must first address our personal prejudices and biases. Allow me to remind us of some key definitions so we can restart our efforts to address the challenges we face not only in the United States but the world at large.

Bias is a highly personal and unreasoned distortion of judgment.

Prejudice is defined as an attitudinal bias and the means to pre-judge something or someone on the basis of some characteristic. Prejudice is a bias for or against something formed without sufficient basis.

I tell participants in our workshops that it's okay to be prejudice, because you can't help it. However it is notokay to discriminate against someone because those prejudices exist. I believe this is the first step toward eradicating racism. Once a bias or prejudice becomes identifiable, steps can be taken to reduce those biases.

Discrimination refers to a behavioral bias towards a person based on a person's group identity (race/skin color, gender, sexual orientation, disability, work group or function). *Taylor Cox*

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Racism is defined as an inherent belief (conscious or unconscious) in the superiority of the dominant group plus the power to impose that on others. *Bob Hoffman* further defines institutional racism as a modus operandi which is practiced by business, government and other institutions that run this country while systematically excluding people of color from participation in the decision making process. Therefore, those decisions that are made rebound to the detriment and exclusion of people of color.

Collusion is operating knowingly or unknowingly to keep things silent thereby holding current policies and procedures in place to the detriment of others.

So what does this mean to those of us who are D&I practitioners (either internal or external)? First we must continually do our personal work to monitor our own prejudices and biases so we won't discriminate against others. Secondly more time must be allotted by individuals and organizations to work on these matters and reach out to the communities at large. Third, address issues of collusion.

Once Sterling's egregious behaviors were made public owners of other NBA teams started to speak up and out about how horrible it was to treat people wrongfully. Sadly I think other owners may also be guilty of racism, but not to the degree that warranted sponsors removing their support from their teams. Or at least they weren't caught.

The problems of racism transcend all of society and not just the corporate government or educational settings. It is my hope that all of us who work in the field of leadership, diversity & inclusion and intercultural communications will continue to be persistent in doing this work. Don't give up; realize that when we see injustices occur, they may not be addressed in a timely manner. We must be relentless in our efforts to strive to make the world a better place for all of us.