



A few of my favorite hilarious things that get said about diversity and inclusion:

Diversity is a scam.

This one is my favorite. I love the idea that diversity is something that we have just invented as a money-making scheme. Diversity (or difference) is a naturally occurring phenomena. Unlike things that we have actually invented like management and work and architecture and economics and politics and human resources and recruiting, diversity is one of the most basic and most fundamental aspects of human interaction that there is. Anytime two or more people are gathered (regardless of who those people are), diversity is present. There is difference in every single interaction or transaction between human beings. There would be no life without difference. But you think it's a made-up thing? M'kay.

Diversity is a real thing and it invites real challenges and real opportunities. You disagreeing with that or disliking that does not make it any less true. I recently listened to an HR person prove how diversity is a sham by describing the dysfunctional diversity program in place at a previous employer. I will be the first to admit that there is plenty of nonsense done in the name of diversity and inclusion. But that is not about diversity and inclusion, that is about bad business, bad management and faulty logic being applied to diversity and inclusion efforts. There are weak leadership-development programs out there—that does not mean leadership is not something that matters. There are poorly delivered safety programs out there—that does not mean that safety is not a legitimate issue. There are schools that suck—that does not mean that education sucks.

There are diversity and inclusion programs that are poorly designed and implemented. You will find the full range of human potential and talent in diversity and inclusion work, just like you will in other fields and disciplines.

I am all for “diversity,” but I am not real clear on the business case.

I also love this one, especially when someone uses their fingers to make air quotes around the word “diversity” because after all it is a made up thing, right? (See above.)At this point, I don't even know what to say on this one. For starters, if you tell me that the business case seems unclear, I am going to expect that you have made some effort to understand it. I am going to assume that you and I can discuss the state and the nature of diversity work today, not just some crappy workshop that you attended 11 years ago that you still have a chapped ass about.

Hilarity.

By Joe Gerstandt



Expert Forum

If you have not made the effort to understand, then how would you understand the full business case in the current context?

So, who have you talked to about the business case? What have you read, what research have you looked at, what research have you conducted, what conferences have you attended? Things have changed since 1990. Work and research from a variety of disciplines have brought new clarity to the value of diversity. New insights about diversity and inclusion have emerged from the study of evolution, behavioral economics, mathematics, social psychology, cognition, complexity, neuroscience and other fields.

Funny thing about those folks so dubious about the business case: I never see them at diversity conferences. If you are just hanging out in your HR cubical talking smack about diversity with the person in the next HR cubical over, you are not likely to stumble upon any new insights. And questioning the business case for diversity in general is kind of like questioning the business case for language or breathing or trust. Diversity is simply a part of the human experience. If you want to get to an actual ROI business case, we have to get a lot more specific than diversity (what is the intervention, what kind of diversity are we talking about, are we talking about workforce stuff, customers stuff, etc.), and we can do that. There are valid questions and conversations to be had there. But if you are confused about the value or validity of this issue on a general level, then I think you should probably go focus on something else. The universe will eventually provide you with the guidance that you need.

Why are we still talking about diversity?

Hilarious. What else should we stop talking about? Trust? Communication? Ethics? Leadership? Because, you know, we talked about them that one time. WE ARE NEVER GOING TO BE DONE TALKING ABOUT DIVERSITY. Not only are people like me getting filthy rich shopping our made-up stuff around, but diversity is never going to stop being part of the human experience.

Specific issues certainly change and evolve over time. I can see quite a bit of movement in my lifetime around issues related to race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and gender. Regardless of where we are at around those and other issues, the underlying dynamics of diversity are always going to represent both an opportunity and a challenge—not just for Americans and not just for straight white dudes, but to everyone. We are unique parts of a whole and we sort and group in myriad ways.

Hilarity.

By Joe Gerstandt



Expert Forum

There is some tension involved in moving in and out of these groups and some natural friction between these groups, because difference is between them—whether the groups are white and black, or rich and poor, or Hutus and Tutsis, Catholics and Protestants, or conservatives and liberals.

Why do we have to focus on diversity, why can't we just hire the right person for the job?

I know, right?! There are two big juicy assumptions wrapped up inside of this one, and I love them both.

First is the assumption that a focus on diversity runs counter to a focus on talent, as in we are automatically lowering our standards by prioritizing diversity. The second is the assumption that we are actually good at “hiring the right person for the job” to begin with. Both give me a good chuckle. Actually, a commitment to diversity cannot be divorced from a true commitment to talent. And vice versa. They are part of each other.

On the individual level, we are not nearly as unbiased and scientific in our judgment of and evaluations of each other. We hold onto this problematic binary approach to diversity where “bad people” are judgmental and “good people” are not, and the truth is that we are all judgmental. It does not require any hatred or fear to make assumptions and jump to conclusions about other people (especially people you do not know well)—that happens naturally. It also does not require any hatred or fear for those assumptions and conclusions to be informed by stereotypical ideas and images. We have to proactively work to check these blind spots if we are truly going to be committed to finding the most talented folks, otherwise our decisions will always be skewed.

On the group level (which may now be where the idea of talent really matters) we can actually say that diversity is a component of talent: If you want smart teams that can create and innovate and solve problems, then you need to be able to bring teams together that think differently and are willing and able to work through the associated tension. We are, today, in need of a new framework for thinking about talent with diversity at its center.