Race Relations Need Relationships

By *Simma Lieberman, The Inclusionist*

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Other people are shocked and surprised at the outpouring of emotion, support and calls for change in the relationship between law enforcement agencies and civilians. They think that if it hasn't happened to them, it doesn't happen to anyone else.

People who have never had any negative experiences with police, or been targeted because of the color of their skin express disbelief and denial that there are issues of racial bias, and race relations with police and other law enforcement agencies.

Law Enforcement Agencies Are Listening

However according to a recent article in the Dallas Morning News, many law enforcement agencies do recognize problems, and are reviewing their policies and training. They have already begun to make changes in their overall culture to prevent police fatalities, and increase communication between police and the communities where they work.

I recently spoke to one white officer who works in a primarily Black community who has taken the time to get to know people who live there and develop relationships with the youth. He sees his role as bridge between young people and law enforcement.

People Are Seeking Change

People in communities where there tends to be more distrust of police based on history, are also seeking to change that dynamic, and are participating in dialogue with law enforcement. They don't want to be afraid of the people who are supposed to protect them, and they don't want police to be afraid of them.

I've also noticed an increase in recognition of more than a few police who are making a difference in communities and people's lives.

Sensitivity Training is a Waste of Time

I've seen recommendations for mandatory "sensitivity training" for law enforcement, which in my opinion is next to useless. Real change needs a vision and strategy, and must involve people from the communities they police. It's not just learning about a group or knowing what not to say. Improving "race relations" means there needs to be relationships. Several years ago, a Police Lieutenant I was coaching complained about a sensitivity training class his department had to attend, "I don't want to unconsciously discriminate, and I'm willing to learn, but when they bring in consultants who start with accusations, and tell us how insensitive we are, it turns me off. I don't want to be treated as a stereotype either."

The Broader Problem

While the focus and catalyst of outrage has been about police and the deaths of unarmed Black people, issues of race, exclusion, and discrimination, are much broader. Lack of diversity in hiring and promotion in the technology sector is currently being addressed. There is a tendency to hire people who look like you, went to the same schools, and have the same interests and with whom you are most comfortable. Whether it's the police force, an organization like Google, or a department in an organization, this sets up an "us vs. them mentality" which stops us from seeing people as individuals and their potential contribution to the organization.

In the community or workplace, when people have meaningful interaction with people who are different, they let go of stereotypes and treat each other as individuals. It's easier to stereotype, dislike and fear people we don't know. In the community this creates conflict, suspicion, and enmity. In the workplace, this disrupts productivity, creates silos, and can result in a lack of innovation, new ideas, and poor customer service.

There Are Solutions

I've been bringing people from diverse backgrounds together for over 25 years. I grew up in New York where I joined a multicultural organization and was trained to facilitate dialogues across racial and ethnic differences. I've facilitated or participated in dialogues between groups that include people from different racial, cultural and ethnic backgrounds, Men and Women, Palestinians and Jews, older and younger generations, work functions and departments, managers and unions, police and community members, etc.

I've worked in corporations, associations, non-profits and government agencies. When people are willing and want solutions, the possibilities are limitless.

I've seen some incredible mindset changes, reduction in biases, and new relationships built between people who thought they could never find common ground.

Ten Points to Ponder If You Want Positive Change

1 - Accept the fact that we are not "post-racial" and that the conversation about race needs to include all of us.

2 - Be honest about our own biases, and stop denying they exist. Everyone is capable of stereotyping.

3 - Be open to the fact that someone who looks like us, is the same religion, ethnicity or occupation may be capable and guilty of committing despicable acts, and that they have to be held accountable.

4 - Discrimination, biases and assumptions based on people's differences exist in the workplace, and outside of work. When a Black executive leaves work, he is no longer the executive. He is the Black man who is subject to profiling, being mistaken for the parking valet, and being the object of other people's fears as they cross the street.

5 - Bias, stereotypes and assumptions that lead to exclusion from hiring, lack of advancement and other forms of discrimination based on race and skin color, have not

been eliminated from the workplace.

6 - Diversity training, quarterly lunch and learns, and sensitivity training for police, or any other industry do not change a culture or the way people work together.

7 - In order to stop racial profiling and claims of bias against police, body cameras need to be provided. This protects everyone.

8 - Set up low-key dialogues with police, and members and representatives of communities where they work, to eliminate fear, group stereotypes, and to share concerns and seek solutions together.

9 - Increase community policing, which has shown to lower crime, police fatalities and reduce conflict.

10 - We need to have a national honest conversation/dialogue about race starting at local levels in the workplace, in our communities and in our schools where people get to share their stories, hear each other and look for solutions. We don't need town hall meetings where the same people keep repeating themselves, interrupt each other, and lock into political stances and have screaming matches.

Simma Lieberman works with organizations and individuals who want to dramatically increase their profit and productivity by creating more inclusive cultures. She is an internationally known consultant, coach, speaker and author. You can reach her at simma@simmalieberman.com