

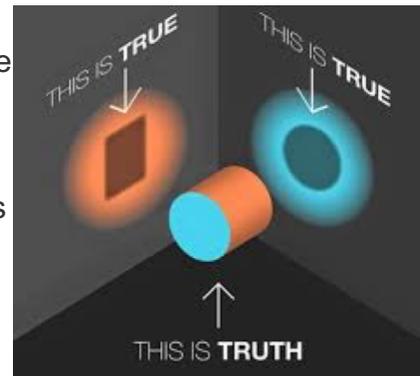
Same Words, Opposing Meanings

by [Jonamay \(Joni\) Lambert](#), *Founder and CEO of Jonamay Lambert & Associates*



When the words “Black Lives Matter” are spoken, some people hear, “Black Lives **ALSO** Matter”, while others hear, “**ONLY** Black Lives Matter.” To some, the expression is an appeal for understanding, justice, and equal treatment, but, to others, it is a threat, a rebuff, and an antagonistic assertion of racial superiority.

This extreme difference in understanding is symbolic of the magnitude of one of the most significant problems facing our society: the struggle between the communication of collaboration and the discourse of division. This is a conflict of great concern to human resources professionals who rely on effective, honest, and credible communication to promote collaborative workplaces. Diversity and inclusion professionals, in particular, need to understand how people speaking the same language can be so split over their reading of three simple words. Part of the work D&I practitioners do is to help others understand how their cultural experiences shape how they see and respond to people who may be different from themselves. Many of these “negative noise makers” have had sheltered lives and feel empowered by bullying and other forms of negative behavior.



As we know, unexamined assumptions, buried enmities, and suppressed longings bubble up persistently from our subconscious to manipulate our thoughts, actions, and perceptions. If left unchecked, these lies, half-truths, and suspicions run roughshod across our thoughts.

Unfortunately, it is hard work to keep ourselves honest and avoid making biased judgments. We all have some biases and irrational impulses, and their influence is often insidious. This challenge becomes tougher in environments characterized by elevated levels of controversy, hate, and hypocrisy.

These conditions are more prevalent now in our nation’s communities than they have been for many decades. A perfect storm of clashing values, “alternative facts,” and lurid conspiracy theories is spreading social disunity and divergence of opinion throughout society.

We see evidence of social discord in political extremism, increasing intolerance, and mounting feelings of grievance, isolation, and abandonment among large segments of the population. And we can measure this epidemic of disillusionment in the number of

Americans who say they are angrier today than ever before. A recent study found that 54 percent of white Americans, 43 percent of Latino Americans, and 33 percent of black Americans feel this way.

In addition, the opponents of diversity and inclusion are eager to exploit these conditions. “Black Lives Matter’s” detractors cynically popularized the idea that the advocacy group believed that only black lives mattered, a view inconsistent with facts or common sense. However, by aggressively articulating the idea in the public arena, the movement’s critics made it safe for people to affirm a meaning more in line with their subconscious prejudices than the author’s original intention.

As professionals charged with helping our coworkers thrive and prosper, we must confront the destructive impacts of the voices of division. We need to develop the advanced communications tools and expertise to continue working toward the vision of equity and inclusion, avoid the pitfalls of miscommunication, and proactively defend against opponents of D&I who wish to turn our words against us.

Poll: Anger in America - on race, gender, politics, police violence,” CBS News, January 3, 2016 (last accessed December 12, 2017)
<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/poll-anger-in-america-on-race-gender-politics-police-violence/>