

Skills for Diversity Dialogue: How to Turn Moments of Tension into Opportunities for Understanding



By *Sondra Thiederman, Ph.D.*

Do any of these situations seem familiar?

- You are a manager who just gave an important presentation regarding goals for the next quarter. As you walk out of the meeting room, one of your direct reports says she is offended by your comment that the company’s new product would give the customer a real “bang for the buck.” What do you do?
- - You are a team member whose parents are from China. While in the computer room at work, you overhear someone tell a joke about a “Chinaman,” a priest, and a rabbi. What do you do?
- - You are a manager who, during the weekly staff meeting you facilitate, hears one of your female team members accuse a colleague of sexism because of something he said. You heard his comment and think the woman is overreacting. What do you do?
- - You are a top-level manager who has just hired a new assistant. In most ways she is great, but she does have a heavy non-American accent that you sometimes can barely understand. You are worried because you need your communication with her to be flawless, but are afraid to bring up the issue of her accent. What do you do?
- These scenarios have a couple of things in common. First, they all involve some level of discomfort – that’s the bad part. The good thing, however, is that they each serve as an opportunity to have honest conversation about diversity and bias. For this reason, I call incidents like these “Gateway Events.” “Gateways” because healthy conversation can open the way to productive dialogue and, in turn, greater mutual understanding.

Gateway Events can come in many guises. Here are just a few that may seem painfully familiar:

- You witness an inappropriate act or hear a joke or comment that is disrespectful.
- Someone falsely accuses you of bias/prejudice.
 - Someone treats you in a way that appears to reflect a biased attitude.

- You say or do something that inadvertently offends someone.
- You witness someone else being falsely accused of bias.
 - You are confused and uncomfortable because of the differences between yourself and someone else.
 - You say or do something involving diversity that you immediately regret.

Regardless of the nature of the incident, talking about sticky diversity issues is not always comfortable and not every conversation ends with the participants collapsing into each other's arms in a mutual paroxysm of newfound understanding. The purpose of this article is to provide five strategies to minimize the discomfort and maximize the chance that we will, if not collapse into each other's arms, at least be able to walk through those gateways and meet on the other side. Believe me, it is worth the effort.

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Sondra Thiederman is a speaker and author on bias-reduction, diversity, and cross-cultural issues. Her latest book is *Making Diversity Work: Seven Steps for Defeating Bias in the Workplace* which provides practical tools for defeating bias and bias-related conflicts in the workplace. Most recently, she has completed work on the training video *Is It Bias? Making Diversity Work* which is available through Learning Communications (www.learncom.com).

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