The 'Magic If': Achieving Empathy in Your Diverse Workplace

By Sondra Thiederman, Ph.D.

Theatrical coach Konstantin Stanislavsky may not have realized it when he developed an acting technique called the "Magic If," but he was providing us with a strategy for identifying what otherwise disparate groups share – a key strategy for reducing bias and creating harmony in our diverse workplaces.

Actors who use Stanislavsky's technique ask themselves how they would act if they had their character's life experience. The odds that an actor, even one as dedicated as Marlon Brando, would have actually lived the life of Vito Corleone of *Godfather* fame, for example, are so remote that the only way for him to answer that question is to identify experiences of his own that approximate those of the character. The Magic If thus allows one human being to engage emotionally with the experience of another. The Magic If is empathy. There are many definitions of the word "empathy," but this is the one that serves our purposes here best.

The capacity for participating in or relating to another person's feelings.

For purposes of our goal of identifying what we share, the empathy we are seeking is summarized in this question: What emotions or experiences—positive or negative—have you had that are, to some substantial degree, like those experienced by

someone who otherwise seems different from yourself? Those shared experiences and emotions, that empathy, becomes, in essence, a shared kinship group.

For those of you who question the possibility of achieving empathy between groups who possess substantially different amounts of power and who have been subjected to substantially different intensities of bias, I sympathize with your skepticism. Full understanding of another's life experience is elusive if, as my father used to say, you haven't been there. Even if you *have* been there, it is you that was there, not the other person. Everyone's psychological terrain is different. Because of this, the fallout from a given experience will settle on each of us in a unique pattern—deeper here, just a dusting over there. For one person, the fallout may not stick at all; for someone else, it may pile so deep that it suffocates any chance of happiness.

In light of these differences, it is lucky that the following statement is true:

Full understanding is not a prerequisite to empathy.

What we are after—and what we can realistically expect—is a reasonably well-considered grasp of the essence of what the other person has felt or is feeling.

Take labor pains, for example. "You'd have to experience it to understand" is what my mother used to say about giving birth. It was as if one needed to be a member of an exclusive club to comprehend that particularly eloquent "discomfort" (as they called it in natural childbirth classes—ha!). I agree with my mother on this one: if you've never had a baby, you'll never know the full depth of the "discomfort." At the same time, it is still possible to "get it" enough to meet the needs of a woman in labor and to have an intelligent conversation about what she is experiencing.

To notch the pain down a peg or two (and broaden the metaphor to both genders), let's talk about headaches. Everybody's head hurts at one time or another. Some endure the steady drone of a tension headache, while others feel a burning sensation in their sinuses; for the most severely afflicted, their curse is the blinding

constriction of a migraine. Having been blessed by the gods, I have never had a migraine headache; I have, however, had my share of tension. Because I haven't "been there" with the pain of dilating capillaries, I am incapable of fully grasping my assistant's agony when a demon migraine comes to call. I have, however, tasted her discomfort through my tension headaches. So, with a little imagination, I can transport myself into a "virtual being there" and achieve what philosopher George Harris calls a state of sympathetic emotional engagement.

Likewise, the able-bodied woman who is temporarily disabled by a broken leg will never feel the same amount of frustration experienced by a man permanently confined to a wheelchair. She can, however, approximate his emotion and thus feel enough empathy to form, with this man and with others like him, a new kinship group. This particular group would be composed of people who understand, to varying degrees, what it feels like to be limited by a disability.

Like headaches, other pains and pleasures of life fall on a continuum, from slight to intense. It doesn't matter where on that continuum the emotion we have felt falls. What matters is that we have experienced that same feeling to some recognizable degree.

Instructions for practicing the Magic If are simple: As you interact with people who seem different from yourself, look for opportunities to identify positive or negative emotions and experiences that you share. Again, the emotions do not have to be of equal intensity to qualify as a match. In the appendix of this book, you will find several vignettes that you can use to practice the Magic If strategy. As you read them over, and as you encounter people in the workplace, I encourage you to watch for a spark of recognition, a moment of familiarity, or a pang of memory from a time when you felt a similar emotion or found yourself in a similar position.

Here are examples of people who have practiced the Magic If. This practice allowed them to empathize and build a common kinship group with someone whom they previously thought was completely different from themselves.

1. Carol is angry and frustrated when someone falsely accuses her of homophobia. Because of those emotions, she is able to approximate the pain of, and empathize with the frustration of, a male colleague falsely accused of sexism.

2. A Christian is hurt when he overhears a colleague make a negative remark about his religion. Because of that emotion, he is able to empathize with a Muslim colleague who is constantly faced with negative media reports about her spiritual beliefs. Next time he sees the woman, he stops to engage her in conversation.

3. Camilla decides to change jobs because her boss won't give her assignments that are challenging enough to utilize all her skills. When confronted, the boss defends himself by saying he was concerned that the extra stress would aggravate Camilla's multiple sclerosis (Guerilla Bias). Because of this experience, Camilla is able to empathize with an Asian colleague who couldn't get honest feedback from her manager.

4. A white male engineer goes to work for a Chinese-owned company and finds he has difficulty fitting in with the culture. Because of this, he begins to empathize with the parents of the immigrant children at his daughter's school. At the next school open house, he approaches the family and tries to make them feel welcome.

5. Lourdes always finds it easier to speak her native Spanish when around other Latinas in the workplace. She never understood why her English-speaking colleagues were so uncomfortable with her doing this and assumed they were

just biased against immigrants. Then, one day, she found herself in the cafeteria

surrounded by people speaking only Tagalog. This made her feel excluded and ill

at ease. Ever since then she has understood how other people feel when she

talks Spanish in their presence.

There's a lot to be learned from these five people. Most important, they show us – each

and every one of them – that human beings, no matter how different they are, can

always find a way to empathize and a way to connect. That is the real magic in the

Magic If.

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