

The Trouble with “Tolerance”: Moving Beyond Passive Approaches to Diversity

By Bruce Jacobs



Expert Forum

2010



Every day, most of us accept the term “tolerance” as an ethical underpinning for healthy diversity in our organizational life. We seek diverse workforces by energetically applying the principle of “tolerance” in our hiring practices. We aim to create an organizational culture of “tolerance” to improve morale, productivity and fairness. We want to be known, within our fields and to the public at large, as organizations that carry

out the values of “tolerance” in our daily work.

The idea of “tolerance” has become a watchword for our essential commitment to diversity. But I suggest it is the wrong watchword. The concept of “tolerance” as a basis for diversity, in fact, undermines the most important tenets of diversity itself, and reinforces instead a set of passive, condescending and counter-productive attitudes and practices that work against the very goals we have pledged to pursue.

BEYOND THE PASSIVE TO THE ACTIVE

We’re not just talking semantics. “Tolerance” is, by its very nature, passive; it implies mere acquiescence to the fact of our differing ethnicities, cultures, sets of abilities, sexual orientations, genders, or religions. It demands of us only that we refrain from contesting this state of mutual coexistence; it does not ask that we embrace it in a way that shares experience and builds knowledge. Worse, the mandate of “tolerance” carries with it the negative and judgmental connotations of the word itself. Look at how we use the term “tolerance” in virtually every other context: a bodily “tolerance” for alcohol and other addictive drugs; “tolerating” a person’s shortcomings; being “tolerant” of unpleasant company or bad behavior. Why, then, would we choose this passively self-protective vehicle to get at the crucially active process of embracing human diversity? Here’s the irony: the preconceptions underlying the idea of “tolerance” actually reinforce ways of thinking and acting that run exactly counter to the intentions of many so-called “tolerance” workshops and trainings. “Tolerance,” for example, can foster:

- The mere *display* of mutual regard among diverse co-workers without an accompanying motivation to understand the positive value of these differences.
- Initiatives that are not sufficiently aggressive in pursuing tangible diversity goals. This is so because the idea of “tolerance” – again, often in spite of

The Trouble with “Tolerance”: Moving Beyond Passive Approaches to Diversity

By Bruce Jacobs



Expert Forum

2010

strongly proactive diversity program content – tends to suggest *a mere state of mind*.

- Management styles that allow underlying bias and unfair treatment to simmer beneath a veneer of “tolerance” for diversity – a sort of *détente* between the inertia of bias and the drive to address it.

We can and ought to do better.

A VERB CALLS FOR ACTION

I believe that we need to delete “tolerance” outright from our diversity vocabulary, and replace it with a concept that is conducive to deeper personal commitment and to more concrete action.

My suggestion: “Respect.” It is a term that raises the bar to the next level when it comes to diversity: from a mere passive “tolerance” for human differences to an intentional and active appreciation for them. “Respect,” even as a noun (e.g., “respect for the rights and family traditions of gay employees”) implies a level of energy and attention missing from “tolerance.” And as a verb (e.g., “respecting the range of perspectives brought by a diverse workforce”), “respect” provides an added dimension of action, for which “tolerance” has no equivalent. (Somehow the verb “tolerate” doesn’t quite seem to cut it as an expression of meaningfully pursuing diversity.) Across the board, when we transpose “respect” for “tolerance” in framing our workplace diversity efforts, we demand both a more genuine personal commitment to the work of diversity and a more tangible willingness to carry out this commitment in workplace relationships.

Still not sure? Consider this comparison of attitudes and outcomes suggested by “tolerance” versus those suggested by “respect:”

“TOLERANCE”	“RESPECT”
Act out tolerant behaviors	Seek a better appreciation of others
Withhold a show of judgment	Act out a show of respect
Manage by the “rules” of tolerance	Manage by the substance of fairness
Main focus on “tolerance” process	Focus on both process and tangible goals
More focus on keeping relationships safe	More focus on improving relationships

The Trouble with “Tolerance”: Moving Beyond Passive Approaches to Diversity

By Bruce Jacobs



Expert Forum

2010

TWO TIPS FOR MOVING FROM “TOLERANCE” TO RESPECT

- 1.) Stop using “tolerance” as a rationale for diversity, and begin to use “respect” or a similarly personally involving and active concept. Understand the need for doing so, and enable your managers and employees to understand as well. A handout will not suffice. An open but focused discussion (or a series of them) will.
- 2.) Provide ample support, whether in-house or through consultancies, for the continuing evolution of workplace relationships. Moving toward “respect”-based diversity allows for more communication and interchange in work relationships but also requires plenty of support for employees and managers who struggle with issues and conflicts.