

WDN Case Study: Intersectionality

April 21, 2022

Introduction and Context

You are the DEI professional for your Human Resource and Operations Centers.

This afternoon, you received a call from the HR Manager, Nancy, who works with the Engineering operations. Nancy received a call from one of the summer interns, *Haoyu*, (nicknamed 'Hey') who was assigned to work in the engineering department as an intern;

- his placement was particularly based on the company's desire to increase diverse populations and culture.

Hey has told Nancy that he is being discriminated against in his workplace by his co-workers in a recent array of summer projects that have been created as short-term special initiatives.

- *Hey* was recruited from MIT, and is an international student from China.

In your meeting with *Hey*, it becomes obvious that he is older than the average college student – twenty-eight years. Nevertheless, *Hey* is relatively young, given that the mean age in his group is about 42 years old.

- *Hey* speaks English, although you might consider it to be somewhat rudimentary;
- his pronunciation of English words and grammar is somewhat distorted;
- his meaning and content seem clear, although sometimes you must reflect or clarify his actual meaning.
 - He only makes intermittent eye contact and speaks quietly.

Hey's Story

Hey has been working at the company for about six weeks and is committed to work through the early part of the Fall.

- At a team meeting the week before, there were a number of summer projects that were introduced by the department manager as special short-term initiatives.
- *Hey* indicated that this particular Engineering department prides itself on being team-oriented.
 - The manager indicated that the projects were a part of a new experiment in self-guided groups.
 - Participation was voluntary;
 - participation would be reflected positively at performance appraisal time;
 - *employees were asked to form their own teams*, according to their interests in certain projects, one team per project.
- *Hey* had waited a few days, expecting a more formal announcement, but then decided to approach some of the co-workers about how to join a team. To his surprise, everyone he talked to indicated that they were already on a team; specifically, when *Hey* asked if he could join one of the teams, he was told that the group had already started meeting; it was too late.
 - *Hey* approached the manager and asked how he could become involved, but the manager indicated that it was his personal philosophy that these teams should be based on self-selection.

Hey indicates that he is feeling discriminated against. *Hey* feels a bit indignant, being recruited from MIT, and thinks that people are afraid to allow him into the groups because of the perception that he will slow the groups' progress.

- *Hey* feels that he needs a good job evaluation at the end of his experience in order to impress his family and his government, but secretly confides that he is hoping to apply for a permanent visa to stay in the US after graduation, and become a naturalized citizen.

- He feels that his work experience at your company will be a helpful factor in compiling his portfolio at the time that he applies for his visa.

Hey also confides that he has been identifying with a few other employees that he enjoys hanging out with. They are known generally as gay men.

- *Hey* indicates that he is pretty sure he himself is not gay, but *Hey* indicates that he really enjoys their company.
- *Hey* wonders if this has been a factor in the way he is being treated by his department.

When *Hey* begins talking about his gay friends, you reposition your chair to be a little closer and lean in, hoping to demonstrate some level of empathy;

- however, *Hey* stops abruptly and asks you to move away, specifically indicating that he is uncomfortable being too close.

Hey leaves the meeting, asking what can possibly be done.

Break-out Sessions:

Identify possible strategies and action steps for:

- a. reporting back to Nancy;
- b. working with *Hey's* manager for advice and/or intervention;
- c. addressing the culture within the manager's division;
- d. providing support for *Hey* in his identity issues;
- e. preventative measures to help the division and company grow from this situation.

