

What Shall We Weave With These Two Strings?

By Joe Gerstandt



Expert Forum



I came across yet another article recently questioning the value of diversity training, and I always find the responses to these articles interesting, but I also find the articles themselves to be interesting in the way in which they hold diversity training up to standards that I do not see applied to other bodies of content.

Human relations. Human beings being with other human beings. Beautiful things can take root and bloom in the social space that we share. Families, neighborhoods, teams, organizations. We can love each other and give life, we can forgive and care for and bear witness. We can build and learn and imagine together. There can also be dysfunction in the space between us leading to a great many horrible things. Fear, hatred, jealousy, and indifference. All leading to violence of one kind or another. We can look around this world, our organizations and communities and likely see many examples of these things good and bad that exist between us.

While we have and continue to make incredible progress in bringing technology to bear on our work and our lives, we still do not have, it seems, a solid understanding for the basic dynamics involved in the human relations that fill so much of our lives.

There are a lot of potential variables involved in an interaction between people and not a lot of constants. We are complex and dynamic beings crossing paths with other complex and dynamic beings in a variety of settings with constantly changing context. One constant is that there exists in every social exchange two things. Between all human beings and all groups of human beings you can find commonality and you can find difference.

Because of the nature of our work, we spend a lot of time thinking and talking about difference...what it is, why it matters, how it impacts our lives and so forth. The other side of that coin is commonality and it is every bit as important of a factor in our dealings with other human beings. Difference and commonality are potentially complimentary parts of a greater whole. It's a yin and yang kind of thing.

There is a paradoxical nature to our social identities.

We are all the same.

And.

We are all different.

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Pick any two people from anywhere on the planet, place them in a room together and there will be some difference and there will be some commonality. In every relationship that we have, every interaction, exchange or experience with another human being there can be found commonality and difference.

I have come to believe that to increase the likelihood that those relationships and exchanges will be safe, healthy, generative and authentic, both parties need to be willing and able to share both the difference and the commonality that exists between them. If we focus on only how we are different, we will not likely be able to stay together in relationship. If we focus on only how we are alike, we are not likely to have a relationship of any depth, substance or resiliency.

Consider your relationships both personal and professional. Is there an opportunity to search for some commonality with someone you have a troubled relationship with? That commonality might be an opportunity to move the relationship to a different place by providing a container for the difference that is causing tension. If you listen hard enough and ask enough questions you will find some commonality somewhere. Is there an opportunity to explore some differences with someone that you have a very simple and safe relationship with? Introducing difference into an existing relationship often causes some anxiety, but it adds texture and depth to a relationship. If you agree on everything or pretend that you agree on everything you are being less than honest in that relationship. One or both of you are downplaying who you really are and basically arguing with reality.

That is never a good fight to pick.

In every interaction between human beings, two things exist; difference and commonality...like two ends of string. We cannot tie any kind of knot with just one end of string, we need to use both and if we get in the habit of tying ourselves together with both I believe that we can change the nature of our relationships and of our organizational and community cultures.

Be good to each other.