Why Sensitivity Training Is Insensitive and Patronizing

By Simma Lieberman

I've often been asked if I "do sensitivity training"

I found myself getting irritated by the very term "sensitivity training", and didn't know why I had such a visceral reaction. After spending time thinking about it, and talking to people who professed to be "sensitivity trainers' I realized that "sensitivity training" was actually insensitive and patronizing.

For an organization and its individuals to reap the benefits of diversity it must develop a culture that is inclusive at all levels. Just having representation of different groups with people trying not to say the "wrong thing" has no impact on the systems and processes that reinforce a diverse and inclusive culture where people respect each other.

When people respect each other as peers they are comfortable asking each other for feedback. Employees leverage each other's differences when they respect each others' expertise. If someone I work with is a peer, I might ask for their opinion or advice on a project or a decision, and vice versa. If either of us makes a mistake or we find a more efficient way of completing a task, we would be comfortable telling each other. If we disagree with each other or one of us is slacking off on our work we would not hesitate to say something. We would all be held to the same high standards. We are all working together towards a common goal, not afraid to discuss differences amongst us, and we would seize opportunities to leverage each other's differences as resources to increase productivity, simplify our work and become more profitable.

When I observe people from one group wanting to be "sensitive" to someone from another group I see them not really treating the other person as a "peer" but rather being "charitable". The Meta message is that in this relationship I am superior to you, you are like a child to me, and I have to understand that you are not as smart, or can't speak for yourself. Further, if you make a mistake, or don't understand, it is because being from your group you are not expected to do well so I have to be "sensitive" to you and say it's ok. I think of you as being part of a

"special" group and not as a colleague. I also hear from the people who want to be 'sensitive' that people from other groups can't think for themselves so we must "interpret" for them. There is no accountability because we are being "sensitive" to those "poor children who are incapable". It also says to me that the "sensitive" people not only are patronizing people from another group, but they think poorly of themselves and have a need to feel better than someone who is different. Now if I think that way, it means that I really don't want to see you succeed because what if you become more successful than me? I would no longer feel better about myself and I would have to look at my own accountability for my professional and personal life.

It's also insensitive because I'm not treating you as a full human being. In many cases like this, I've seen the "sensitive" person get angry and silently outraged at their sensitivity object for daring to be more successful or not living up to the stereotype of needing the "sensitive" persons help. It's an insult to the intelligence and humanity of "sensitivity targets". It becomes "you have to understand that they (whoever the they is) are not capable, can't understand and shouldn't be expected to understand.

I haven't seen "sensitivity training" impact an organization's culture. In fact, in many cases, individuals from a "target group" are asked to stand and tell their individual stories to all the other participants. At the end "the sensitive people" feel bad, apologize and cry. Everyone goes back to work and nothing changes in the organization. It continues to recruit the same old way, the same people get promoted, and there is no communication process to give everyone the same access to information. The playing field is still uneven, and talented people still get lost in the organization.

In a recent interview, a reporter told me about an elementary school that canceled their yearly Halloween parade because the administration thought that it might be offensive to the Muslim families. They hadn't even asked the Muslim parents if that were true. The administration was "just trying to be sensitive". None of the Muslim parents had even suggested that the parade be canceled. The kids were upset, and the other parents were upset by the cancellation. This was not a religious celebration that promoted any kind of religious belief. In trying to be "sensitive", they had inadvertently created resentment and blame towards a group that wasn't involved in the decision to begin with. Even if there had been a problem, the way to resolve it would have been to have a dialogue and work out an amiable solution. While Halloween is not religious, there are some religions that don't believe in its celebration. Other schools have resolved it by having something else to do that was fun at the same time as the parade, or allowing an excused absence.

There is a danger when "sensitivity" is taken to the level of deciding for everyone what is "right" rather then have a constructive dialogue where people might actually learn from each other.

At a school in Sweden, kids are not allowed to wear polka dots or stripes because it gives a teacher migraines and the school wants to be "sensitive" to the teacher. I'm sure there are other ways to resolve this without setting up the "clothing pattern police system." Two that I can think of include; transferring the teacher to a school where kids wear   uniforms if possible, or having smocks in her classroom so that kids who are wearing patterns that cause her to have migraines can put the smocks on while they are in that class.

I'm not saying that we should be callous and insensitive, quite the opposite. I'm saying that in a workplace or society that is diverse, we need to be comfortable with differences, and have dialogue rather than decide for other people what they need. Organizations need to be able to

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leverage diversity and inclusion so that our workplaces are more productive, and profitable, and individuals can be passionate about their missions and goals. Rather than insist that everyone change what they do in order to accommodate any one group or person, we need to be able to collaborate so we can have the kind of society where everyone is valued for their different experiences, and talents and allowed to contribute to making this a better world.

I have met people who are so "sensitive" to other people they walk on eggshells and whisper about the "sensitivity target", they conduct training so that people will be "nice". They don't address issues like race, class, religion, and sexual orientation, et al, when people who are different than them are in the room because they are afraid of saying the "wrong thing". The result is that people feel ignored, left out, and wonder what the heck is going on, and who decided this for me?

It's important to know about dimensions of diversity, in order to understand the world, your country, your colleagues and friends better. But if you worry so much about being "sensitive" that you are afraid to even mention the difference, or ask a question, and you excuse an individuals' wrong doing or obnoxious behavior because of your own cultural perceptions, you are guilty of not seeing the humanity of each individual, stereotyping whole groups, spreading insensitivity and impeding the progress of everyone's need to be seen and treated as a whole person.

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About Simma...

Simma helps organizations create more profitable cultures and improve individual and organizational performance. She is a consultant, speaker, and trainer. Simma is the co-author of Putting Diversity to Work (Crisp Publications, 2003), a guide for managers on leading a diverse workforce.