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Building Working Relationships/Improving Outcomes

## Thinking about Diversity-Related Conflict: Respect, Recognition and Learning

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*In the workplace, the keys to making diversity work lie in relationship and learning from difference. Diversity practitioners realize that we each interpret the world through the lens of our own diversity and experience. Diversity of thought and experience lie at the heart of the value proposition of diversity — and also pose one of the greatest challenges. The greater the diversity of the workforce, the greater the potential for misunderstanding and conflict. This working paper, written from a practitioner’s perspective, considers underlying issues in diversity-related conflict and misunderstanding to explore how dynamics of 1) respect and disrespect, 2) identity and recognition, and 3) resentment and backlash interfere with relationship and learning.*

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A colleague of mine who specializes in organizational change likes to ask the question: “*Why can’t we just announce change and make it happen?*” A similar question can be posed for workplace diversity: “*Why can’t we just promote a diverse workplace and have people get along?*”

We know that greater diversity in the workplace increases the risk of misunderstanding and conflict. Even without malicious intent, conflict can arise in situations where an action carries different meanings when interpreted through diverse experience. The stage is set for misunderstanding, mistrust, tension, and conflict. We also know that diffusing tension to move toward resolution must be a participative process that engages those in conflict. Increasingly, diversity change leadership recognizes the critical importance of promoting a workplace culture with shared expectations around collaborative conflict resolution. None-the-less, diversity-related conflict remains one of the most confusing and volatile dynamics in a diverse workplace.

We live in a world that is neither bias-free nor equitable, where power is imbalanced, stereotypes prevail – consciously and unconsciously. Too often, we identify others as being “one of us” or “one of them.” Each of us brings life perspectives with us into the workplace, perspectives rooted in both personal and group identity – our diversity lens. Experience with disrespect, insult, unfair treatment and injustice depends, in part, on our race, gender, religion, economic power, education,

immigration status — and the list goes on. While the outright discrimination of the past is generally condemned, it resurfaces in confusing and indirect sentiments about worthiness, advantage or the pace of change — too fast, too slow. The irony is that diversity of experience and thought, a major component in the value proposition for diversity, is also one of diversity's biggest challenges.

I heard an excellent illustration of these dynamics listening to NPR's *Talk of the Nation*. [1] On the August 5, 2010 program, *How Have Discussions about Race Changed?*, a caller, a white woman who delivers pizza in a diverse neighborhood, commented that her African American customers hardly ever tip her and she felt that was because of her race. Leonard Pitts, the invited guest and syndicated columnist with the *Miami Herald*, an African American, acknowledged the possibility of reverse racism and suggested the difference lies in the impact the experience of racism has on "the quality of [one's] life in the larger scale."

In this case, the white pizza delivery woman was treated with disrespect and bias directed toward her identity group. For her, the experience may be the exception, not the rule. Suppose the situation were reversed. The customer was white; the pizza delivery driver, a person of color. No tip. The same incidence would carry different meaning when viewed in the context of broader experience. Mr. Pitts suggested that for a person of color, the experience of not being tipped likely connects to being watched in a store, being pulled over by police for no apparent reason, being denied a loan, and so forth. In both situations, the pizza delivery person was treated with disrespect by not being tipped. But understanding the underlying dynamics requires more complex thinking than simply right and wrong, fair and unfair. Surface comparisons are inadequate. When this happens in a workplace setting, the stage is set for a confusing and spiraling cycle of further disrespect, tension and division.

Similar dynamics play out in the workplace every day, with negative consequences for people and for the organization. Some tension is deliberate and malicious, but much is unintended, reflecting undeveloped awareness of diverse perspectives or the exercise of unconscious bias. Given that many people are uncomfortable with conflict of any sort, I suspect this is especially true when tension is diversity related. It's easier and less risky to allow tension to go underground, unspoken but acknowledged through silence, disregard, and a breakdown in working relationships. The workplace runs the risk of small tensions adding up to bigger conflict that expresses itself in more blatant hostility, harassment, discrimination and, in the extreme, violence.

## Conflict Resolution as Conversation

Working in diversity and conflict resolution as a trainer and facilitator, I've learned resolution lies in the conversation, in learning to understand oneself and others in new ways. I've also learned not to rush to solution. Tension often runs deeper than the precipitating incident.

As with other types of conflict, but especially where conflict is diversity-related, there is almost always an underlying story, a story that touches sense of individual-

self as well as group identity. The difficulty comes because perceptions of justice and injustice, fair and unfair, insult and respect are not understood through a shared perspective. Hall and Heckscher, writing about identity issues in diversity-related conflict, put it clearly.[2] Resolution means finding an outcome where “all parties can be proud of who they are” and “see their way to an interdependent future.” Powerful observations.

In the workplace, unless one party’s behavior is illegal or provides just cause for dismissal, the objective of conflict resolution is not to drive anyone out, but to help resolve an issue in a way that mitigates the chance of further conflict and improves working relationships in the future. Genuine, authentic workplace interactions cannot be built on shame; both parties need to see value in working with each other and in themselves.

Most disputes combine relational and substantive content elements. Popular win-win approaches to conflict resolution, such as Fisher, Ury, and Patton, *Getting to Yes*, encourage disputants to separate the people from the problem.[3] Here, the people are the problem. Diversity-related conflict is driven by a complex mix of individual self-identity, group identity, and awareness — or lack of it, which adds an additional layer of vulnerability and risk.

Diversity-related conflict resolution is not an easy conversation to have. It’s often emotionally charged, asking disputants to explore unfamiliar interpretations of their actions and events viewed through diverse eyes. Success requires a strong, but not defensive, sense of self. The underlying story often challenges deeply rooted perceptions of fairness, revealing dynamics of inter-group relations and existing power relations that are suppressed in the status quo.

These conversations move into ambiguous territory where both sides may have validity but something remains very wrong. Resolution may not emerge quickly, may resist neat, easily described definition, and may involve social and institutional forces beyond individual control. Diversity-related conflict resolution calls for conversation that inspires change and learning and discovery of more inclusive and equitable ways to interact across differences.

### Three Dynamics in Diversity-Related Conflict

Current work on diversity-related conflict suggests several dynamics in play that drive misunderstanding and block progress toward resolution. They are part of the underlying story that motivates behavior. I’ve found it helpful to stay alert for these dynamics when addressing diversity-related conflict. In a trainer’s role, I’ve found each to be a valuable focus for discussion when processing case scenarios. In training, of course, the value is not in the definitive answer, but in the consideration.

The three dynamics I would like to highlight for further consideration are: 1) Respect and Disrespect; 2) Recognition and Identity; and 3) Resentment and Backlash. Working through these may open opportunity for diverse people of goodwill to learn new ways of relating.

## 1) Respect and Disrespect

Disrespect may be gross and blatant, but it is also subtle, communicated in the little ways someone is told they don't belong, are not good enough, are not expected to achieve, or that they can be overlooked and don't count.

Remarks like the ones below convey messages about respect.

*"Not a bad job, for a woman."*

*"You don't have to worry about your appointment. You're a minority."*

*"That company is very traditional. I'm surprised they even hired you."*

A reasonable person could interpret disrespect in each of these messages. The harmful message may be unintended and unrecognized by the offending party, even as it is deeply felt by the offended party. Mary T. Rowe, of MIT, labeled these types of remarks micro-inequities, "subtle discrimination, usually small in nature, but not trivial in effect."<sup>[4]</sup> Lilia Cortina referred to these types of messages as "selective incivility," which she identified as "a major force of modern discrimination in organizations."<sup>[5]</sup>

When disrespect is communicated in unintended and unconscious ways, bringing this perspective to the surface creates an opening for learning and improved relations. Regardless of how the incident in question is settled, failure to understand the dynamics of respect and disrespect from more than one perspective perpetuates the underlying conflict.

## 2) Recognition and Identity

A second dynamic often present in diversity-related conflict resolution is recognition and identity. Recognition and identity are complicated dynamics, full of opportunity for misunderstanding and tension. These may have a negative effect, but may not have been communicated with consciously malicious intent.

We hear it below:

*"I'm always asked to be in the photo or meet with visitors because I'm one of the few people of color they have. It has nothing to do with my accomplishments."*

*"I hope you're not asking me to take the minutes because I'm the only woman in the group."*

*"You're not like the others. I feel I can talk with you."*

*"Those people ..."*

The old days of the "great melting pot," where everyone was expected to conform to the dominant group, are gone. Hopefully, we've moved past assimilation to realize that inclusion is about recognizing diverse identity. It's about understanding individuals as unique persons and, at the same time, as members of groups. Either/or logic is misleading. This is a both/and phenomenon. The ambiguity can be unsettling, especially when the challenge is so deeply personal and emotional as with identity.

We recognize imbalance when there is a presumption of competence for those in the dominant group, but skepticism for diverse others. “I have to work twice as hard to prove myself.” We see issues of recognition and identity in situations where attribution is given to an individual deficiency where that individual is like us but considered a matter of group deficiency when that individual is diverse from us. “Did you really think a woman could do that job?”

Most of us become defensive when our identity is challenged, when we don’t feel good about who we are, or when we are forced to confront uncomfortable interpretations of our character or identity group. Our diversity is very personal and linked to sense of self. The dynamics are tricky. On the one hand, acknowledging a person only as an individual, fails to acknowledge their sense of group identity. But on the other, recognizing only group identity runs the risk of stereotyping and denying another his or her individuality.

Underlying forces of recognition and identity may add an extra layer of miscommunication to diversity-related conflict. Interpretation of the substance of a conflict is influenced by diverse experience and history. What one party may view as a stand alone incident to another is seen as one more occurrence in a long history. As a result, the party from the traditionally included group talks about resolving the matter at hand, while the party from the traditionally excluded group is intent on confronting injustice. One party is focused on the present; the other, on the past. Communicating through this difference in perspective requires engaged and open-minded conversation where the parties are talking with one another, not across one another.

### 3) Resentment and Backlash

The third dynamic that influences parties’ behavior in diversity-related conflict is resentment and backlash. Despite the exaggerated rhetoric that followed Pres.

#### **Helpful Skills in Diversity-Related Conflict**

*Effective diversity-related conflict resolution needs to be a collaborative process of discovery and learning that surfaces concerns for mutual solution-finding. Collaboration is not possible unless both parties arrive at an openness to try as best they can to understand something of the other’s perspective. How messages are phrased can make a big difference. Below are some suggestions that I’ve found helpful.*

#### **Focus on Learning**

- Practice Dialogue
- Suspend Judgment while Listening

#### **Be Authentic**

- Use “I” instead of “You” Statements;
- Use Objective Constructions like  
When/Then.  
When [this happens], then [I experience...]

#### **Engage the Other Party**

- Talk to them, not to yourself.
- Use Yes, and + Problem-Solving Question  
Yes, (paraphrase their concerns to check understanding and acknowledge that you’ve listened to their story) and (add your concerns) and end with a problem-solving question (So, how can we ...).
- Learn to Warn, Don’t Threaten  
[I wonder what would happen if ...]

#### **Build Relationship**

- Take every opportunity to build connection
- Admit Mistakes
- Allow Face Saving

Obama's election, few now claim that we are moving into a "post-racial" era. Progress toward greater inclusion calls into question fundamental understandings of worth, status, power and relationship. Issues of identity that were taken for granted, now require examination. Progress itself can be a source of resentment and conflict.

We hear it in remarks like:

*"I'm not a biased-person, but minorities are getting unfair advantage with all those programs and extras directed towards them."*

*"They're pushing too hard and too fast. They're expecting too much, too soon."*

*"I use to understand the world – men did this; women did that – but now everything seems out of place."*

*"This is America. People should speak English if they want to live here."*

Friedman and Davidson labeled this dynamic "second-order diversity conflict," as distinguished from outright discrimination, or "first-order diversity conflict."<sup>[6]</sup> They contend that "second-order diversity conflict" often is "morally ambiguous and more hidden from view." It is harder to understand and tends to draw people in by identity group to promote division.

Feelings of resentment and backlash tend to be deep rooted and often go unacknowledged. Diversity requires greater awareness of self and of others. This in itself can be a source of resistance. We are learning that inclusion is more complicated than making room "at the table" for a few of those who were formerly excluded. Inclusion changes the surface and structure of "the table" itself. Inclusion asks us not just to think differently about diverse others, but also to learn new ways to identify ourselves and to understand social relations. For many, previous times, while exclusionary and unfair, may seem simpler to negotiate.

How often have we seen diverse progressive groups divided by the tension that emerges when the "privileged" participants tire of having to always be aware of power advantage or become defensive when their individual hard work is devalued? And why do we sometimes experience a reluctance to take personal accountability or to relinquish resentment or bias. "I'm not a bad person. I just want to feel good about myself again." I think of this as the ease of "not having to think twice" phenomenon. Becoming aware of self and of others imposes a consciousness that is not always comfortable; it requires effort. This in itself can be a source of resistance.

## **Diversity-Related Conflict Resolution: Relationship and Learning**

The dynamics highlighted above – respect and disrespect; recognition and identity; and resentment and backlash – often inform the underlying story in diversity-related conflict. Even if never made explicit, these dynamics motivate behavior and represent deeply experienced concerns that block progress toward genuine relationship building and more inclusive understandings. Diversity-related conflict resolution is unlikely to happen all at once. It takes time to become comfortable with inclusion. Diversity-related conflict resolution is a process of change and

learning, an on-going conversation where new understandings are self-discovered, not imposed.

In the workplace, diversity-related conflict may arise between individuals or between groups. While tension may be given focus by an incident involving particular individuals, the underlying conflict may have much broader reach. Conflict resolution may not be attainable. The best that may be accomplished is to diffuse tension and create opportunity to improved relationship building.

I return to the observation of Hall and Heckscher introduced earlier: Resolution means finding an outcome where “all parties can be proud of who they are” and “see their way to an interdependent future.” Making diversity work challenges us to reconsider fair and unfair. It challenges us to strive for understanding from more than one perspective. It challenges us to rethink how we evaluate merit and our own understanding of self-worth. Diversity-related conflict resolution needs to be a process that helps us think our way through these challenges to arrive at new understandings of ourselves and of others.

## References

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