



“DIFFERENT” DOESN'T NEED TO BE DIVISIVE

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The commercial for the late night news has become standard fare. "Hate crimes on the rise. News at 11:00."

We are, unfortunately, all too familiar with the symptoms of this hate... crosses burned on lawns, swastikas painted on building walls, church bombings or bullying on campuses. The news of these stories is both painfully old and depressingly.

After an initial reaction of dismay and incomprehension, we ask ourselves why people who are different from one another can't co-exist peacefully. This seems like such a little thing to cockeyed optimists like us who still harbor fantasies of Nirvana... a time when people of all stripes (plaids and polka dots welcome too!) will not only tolerate diversity but actually relish it.

However, at this point we would be happy to start with simple tolerance. What is it about "differentness" that strikes fear in the hearts of normally sane, rational people? The answer is both subtle and complex.

Our race, ethnicity, and religion may differ, but we are all united by common values and goals.

THE MIRROR IMAGE

Part of the answer can be found in the basic and universal human need to feel safe, secure, and in control of our world. These feelings of safety are more forthcoming when we get validation from those around us. How is this validation shown? By seeing people like ourselves. Our world makes more sense when those around us mirror our values and behavior.

We feel this comfort in the little things (how we dress, what we eat) and the big things (the role of education, family and the elderly). When everyone around us eats cereal for breakfast, speaks English and plans for a college education, that becomes the way of the world. That's how life should be.

THE WORLD ORDER

What happens then, when we bump up against a world where people eat tortillas for breakfast? And people for whom long-term education is not as important as day-to-day survival? Perhaps this causes us to believe the world as we know it is changing (and not for the better).

We all have a picture of what the world order should be. At one time we may have

fooled ourselves into believing the picture was monochromatic. For example, in 1963, Crayola changed a crayon color from "flesh" to "peach." Perhaps they suddenly realized that "flesh-tone" isn't always pink. Indeed, the world is composed of many colors and hues.

FOOD AS A METAPHOR

Food reflects culture and lifestyle. Sure, people still eat hotdogs and hamburgers. But there are a lot of tacos, bagels, hummus and stuffed grape leaves sold as well. Ethnicity aside, there is also gluten-free, vegan, and vegetarian food. We mention food because the participants in our diversity workshops report that the premier benefit of living in a multi-cultural environment is the variety and abundance of ethnic food and sharing food is a non-threatening way to connect.

CHECK OUR GOODWILL AT THE DOOR

Unfortunately, our love for different cuisine does not extend to an appreciation of other languages. To paraphrase Quincy Jones, we check our "goodwill" at the door when it comes to language tolerance. From our continued contact with people in organizations regarding diversity issues, it is apparent that language is one of the most threatening and divisive.

There is an explanation. It is very inconvenient to try to communicate with someone you can't understand when trying to ask directions, make a purchase, or share work-related information. This block is not only frustrating, it also touches on feelings of inadequacy regarding surviving effectively in one's own organization or work group.

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LANGUAGE AS A SYMBOL

At a more impersonal level, language is symbolic. Historically, the most influential languages reflected global power and influence. For example, in past centuries, French was the language of diplomacy-leaders spoke French when negotiating trade and territory agreements. Now, English reigns supreme as the language of science, diplomacy and commerce. But to many people, the variety of languages heard in Southern California symbolizes declining global influence and economic power. When we feel a loss of control over those big issues, it is easy to shout, "This is America! If people come here, they had better learn English!"

Most reasonable people, both natives and immigrants, believe that it is economically and socially advantageous to speak English while living in the United States. We all agree on this. What we suggest is that tolerance and sensitivity be shown toward people who work exhausting jobs all day and crowd into adult schools at night to learn English — all this while raising a family and trying to make ends meet.

We also know that the world has become smaller. Us Americans are generally insular when it comes to learning other languages; many Europeans are fluent in at least two or three. We can no longer expect to be the world's dominant economic power if we refuse to adapt. Our economic survival depends on our acceptance of the idea that the more literacy we have, linguistically and culturally, the more dominant and influential we will be. Knowledge is always power.

MANAGING BIASES

The prejudice that motivates hate crimes seems overwhelming, yet we can take a

lesson from a bumper sticker we saw recently, "Think globally, act locally." How can we open ourselves up to being more tolerant and civil so that hate crimes decline?

For starters, we should acknowledge that differences scare and threaten us because they challenge our control, order and security. Next, we must rethink two basic assumptions that most people make without ever questioning their validity.

- **ASSUMPTION # 1:**

People of the same race, religion, ethnicity or gender think and behave alike.

We know this statement is absurd, yet we OFTEN behave as though it were true. What we frequently hear from seminar participants is that all Jews are *not* liberal, all blacks are *not* good dancers, and all Asians are *not* honor students. The point of these examples, which seem so obvious, is that we tend to assume that people, by being members of a certain group, will automatically respond in the same way.

We all belong to many groups, yet none of us like to be pigeon-holed. Let's remember this when we start to judge or label others.

- **ASSUMPTION # 2:**

We are safer and more comfortable with people who are like us.

This statement is sometimes true... but not always. We remember being on vacation in Europe years ago and coming into contact with other Americans. There was an instant affinity and identification. But we also remember being uncomfortable with embarrassing "Ugly American" behavior of some of our compatriots abroad.

Indeed, sometimes people who are like us in central ways do not help us to feel safe and comfortable. Let's return to the news. How many times do you hear about the tragedies of drive-by shootings or gang killings? Usually the people who commit these crimes reflect the population of the community in which they wreak their havoc. Gang members may look, talk and sometimes act like other people in their community, but in this case, similarity does not breed safety.

Participants in our diversity workshops report that ethnic food is the #1 benefit of living in a multi-cultural environment. Language is the most troublesome issue.

COMMON GOALS

The importance of common values as a means to overcome differences cannot be overstated. Even when race, ethnicity and religion differ, an overriding goal can pull us together. Any athletic team, from little league to the pros, finds commonality very quickly, despite different ethnic and economic backgrounds. The interdependence necessary to achieve a common goal can forge good relationships.

We recently interviewed a project manager who oversees the work of world-class scientists from all corners of the globe. He listed some of the differences between scientists from Sweden and India, and showed how their cultural programming causes them to behave differently in their lab work. Yet, the ways these two people are alike... their love of science and research... overrides any stylistic or cultural difference. Science is their common language and common culture.

We think of that interview often because it reinforces a concept many of us believe, but sometimes forget. We are both similar to and different from everyone in this world... our differences can divide us, but they don't have to. Our common ground as human beings

with universal experiences can unite us, but doesn't always. If we accept that our differentness can be a source of frustration, but also a source of joy, then we have taken a step forward.

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