



# We Need To Remain Vigilant.

## The Impact of the Trump Campaign and Election on Diversity and Inclusion in the USA

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The election of President Donald J. Trump on November 8, 2016, has had a profound and dramatic impact on U.S. American society in terms of how we see ourselves, how others in the world see us, and in the very clear polarization that now exists in our society. It can be seen and felt wherever one looks, as close as family structures and work units and as far as the span between coasts in the US. The impact is most felt dramatically in specific areas of society.

### IMPACT ON SOCIETY

- 1. Binary Thinking and Polarization** Our choices now seem stark and either-or. There is little middle ground or refinement and few suggestions that offer multiple options. This polarization shows itself in the starkly different direction the new administration has taken, with less support for the EU and the global climate change initiative. Issues such as health care, tax reform, immigration or the environment are extremely complex and they have no easy or right solutions, nor do they lend themselves to either-or answers. This binary thinking is the perfect road to polarization as well a weakening of the US role as a global leader.
- 2. Anti-political Correctness** There is a growing sentiment that calling out injustices regarding groups of people who have traditionally been disenfranchised is political correctness run amok. The label "political correctness" is a phrase intended to diminish the significance of current as well as historic prejudice that for many groups results in discriminatory treatment. A label of "political correctness" has the effect of dismissing the substantive issues that must be addressed around name-calling, violence, physical harm, and a lack of inclusion.
- 3. Oversimplification of Issues** Societal challenges such as immigration, health care and climate change are complex and require analysis and discussion of

nuances. The issue of immigration, for example, is complicated by our history as a nation of immigrants, by the symbolism of the Statue of Liberty and by the stories we write and tell ourselves about how we have welcomed the disenfranchised and given them a home. Those stories of us as an immigrant friendly nation take some real hits as the country battles over the issue of building a wall on our southern border to keep Mexicans out, and of limiting visas of those from selected majority Muslim countries. These actions have the potential to undermine our productivity and creativity in the tech world where we have always been a leader and limit the labor supply necessary for productivity. Over simplified responses such as building a wall do not take into account the multiple factors and impacts involved.

#### **4. Uncovering Hidden Issues**

The Trump campaign and election has uncovered the reality that a great number of people feel alienated, ignored and disenfranchised. The discourse has put a spotlight on the emotions underlying the desperation and exclusion they feel. It is real and needs to be addressed. However, the response to those issues has been to pit groups against each other and blame changes such as immigration, globalization and the previous administration's policies rather than get to root causes and effective solutions.

**5. The Reality of Isms** As a society we thought we had gotten beyond racism, sexism, anti-Semitism and many other isms and phobias, but seeing killings based on race, exclusionary behaviors toward people based on gender, sexual orientation, or the in-crease in graffiti with swastikas and desecrating Jewish cemeteries make it abundantly clear that isms are alive, well and flourishing in the USA. Homophobia, xenophobia, sexism, racism and prejudice are more prevalent than expected and require responses.

**6. Rights Can No Longer Be Taken for Granted: We Need to Fight for Them** If there is any good news in Trump's election for those whose presence in the US is clearly threatened, it is that the wakeup call has been sent and the siren has been heard. Whatever freedoms used to be taken for granted can no longer be. Regaining the liberties we thought we had but now see eroded will take considerable tenacity, fight, stamina, courage, work and drive. In truth, we should never take these freedoms for granted. We need to remain vigilant.

### **IMPACT ON DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION WORK**

#### **Inhibited communication**

Since the workplace is a microcosm of the larger society, the dynamics set in motion come to the organization with its employees and have powerful effects there. First, there is heightened emotionality from passionate political opinions that often leads to a fear of talking about anything that may trigger outburst, anger or hurt feelings. Most US Americans have grown up with the rule that religion and politics are off limits topics at work and in social gatherings. However, this new emotionality has made people even more wary of touching on politics or expressing o-pinions about news events for fear of conflict. This guardedness has

the effect of shutting down open communication.

### **Bringing diversity and inclusion issues out in the open**

The flip side of the shutting down phenomenon is that the labels, slurs and stereotypes that now appear in public discourse have also stimulated discussion of diversity issues in a real and unvarnished way. Since incidents of discrimination are in the news, the reality of prejudice is evident and does not have to be proven. In addition, when stereo-types are voiced they can be responded to, when assumptions are made, they can be challenged.

### **Dismissing diversity as political correctness**

Another negative impact has been the dismissing of diversity as nothing but political correctness that limits free and open expression. This phenomenon sometimes makes it more difficult to engage people in discussions of legitimate issues of inequity, exclusion and discrimination. It also promotes the inaccurate perception that diversity and inclusion promotes a kind of brainwashing that shuts down honest dialogue rather than opening up a genuine sharing of experiences.

### **Legitimizing discrimination and prejudice**

In the current political climate, labeling and discriminatory comments made by public figures have legitimized such language and views. When leaders call immigrants rapists and criminals, ban people of a particular religion or blame the decline of education on special needs students, they reinforce stereotypes and open the door to such discriminatory speech and actions. This scapegoating makes it more difficult to get to the root causes of workplace issues and find effective solutions. In-correctly blaming problems on particular groups diverts attention from the real issues, polarizes people and pre-vents productive investigation and problem solving.

### **Either/or thinking**

Perhaps the most damaging impact of this phenomenon is in promoting binary thinking. This polarization works against the diversity and inclusion focus on both/and rather than either/or. Diversity and Inclusion work promotes the idea that all approaches have potential advantages and disadvantages, that there are upsides and downsides to all norms and that the best solutions come from collaboration and synergy. Leveraging differences requires soliciting the contributions of all and using these different approaches to create something better. Remaining in the either/or paradigm means creating winners and losers and blocking the ability to use the creative potential offered by diversity.

## **WHAT D&I PROFESSIONALS CAN DO**

This climate makes the relevance and significance of diversity and inclusion work even more powerful. The question for those of us in this field then is, how can we find the opportunities in this environment to build inclusion.

### **1. Focus on the strategic business reasons for developing a culture of inclusion**

In an environment where diversity and inclusion may be rejected as liberal brainwashing or political correctness, it is even more critical to frame D&I as

strategically critical to success by showing how it helps the organization achieve its goals. Dealing effectively with differences and developing an environment that is accepting and uses the talents of all is important, whether talking about effectively teaching diverse students, providing excellent service to diverse customers, recruiting top talent from a diverse labor pool or retaining top performing staff. You can even have staff build the strategic case themselves by asking them how D&I helps achieve goals and how not being inclusive can create obstacles to achieving them.

## **2. Build new common ground**

It is normal and natural for us to connect with and feel more comfortable around those we perceive as similar to us. If we want to build inclusion, then creating ways for staff to build new common ground can help. Intentionally form project teams, task forces and committees that have diverse members. Mix people across lines of difference in social events, training sessions and other settings. Assign tasks that require staff to get input or help from different coworkers, departments or locations.

## **3. Get rid of labels**

When judgmental labels and descriptors such as racist, bigot, xenophobe or chauvinist are used, stop and ask for a descriptor of the behavior or situation instead. Then respond to the behavior or situation in terms of how it creates barriers to success. Rather than calling separate lunchrooms elitist, ask how they help and hinder productivity, relationship building, or service. Rather than calling an individual racist, ask what behavior is experienced as disrespectful or discriminating and find alternatives.

## **4. Focus on telling stories not sharing opinions**

One of the best ways to avoid polarization and help build connections is to structure opportunities for people to share their own stories. The genuine interactions that result build empathy and understanding and avoid the arguments and defensiveness that often occur when people give their opinions. Providing time at meetings or planning sessions to start with a story telling activity sets a tone of vulnerability and trust that opens minds to listening to others' suggestions and points of view. Open-ended statements such as the following are examples of prompts that can stimulate this kind of sharing.

A powerful diversity experience I've had...

A time when I was the outsider...

A formative influence (person or experience) that shaped my values...

Something I wish others in the workplace knew about me...

## **5. Set ground rules**

It is helpful to discuss desired norms in the group before getting into contentious discussions. Ground rules such as the following lay the foundation for honest but not polarizing discussions.

Presume good will

Speak from your own experience

Listen and share with an open mind

Avoid judgments and labels

Stick to descriptions of behaviors and situations

## Challenge assumptions

If using these ground rules, dismissing comments about inequities or micro-aggressions or labeling a suggestion as political correctness would not be acceptable.

### **6. Help people manage emotions**

It can also be helpful to give staff the tools to deal with the emotions that are apt to emerge in a volatile climate. Our work on Emotional Intelligence and Diversity gives us some critical approaches. First, acknowledge that feelings play a powerful role in discussions about value-laden topics, and then give people a chance to name their feeling responses. They may feel frustrated, dismissed, overlooked, defensive, diminished, confused, angry or ashamed.

Acknowledging emotions validates the individual and helps defuse the power of the feeling.

Next give them a chance to talk about feelings when discussing any issue.

Finally, help empower people by asking them what they can do about it. This question presupposes they can do something and that takes them out of the victim stance. The three options we always have to take action are to change the situation, change our behavior or change our attitude. Any of them we use can give us power in the situation.

Once you recognize that divisive public discourse will undoubtedly come to your organization, you can approach situations proactively with strategies and tactics that can keep communication open and honest while preventing interactions from becoming hurtful, damaging and counterproductive. As the saying goes, forewarned is forearmed.

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