



When the Golden Rule Doesn't Work: Inclusion Requires More

SOMETIMES "DO UNTO OTHERS" IS NOT THE BEST WAY TO MANAGE A MULTICULTURAL STAFF

by Lee Gardenswartz, Ph.D. and Anita Rowe, Ph.D.

"I just treat people as I want to be treated." is often the motto of managers dealing with their multicultural staffs. "What's wrong with that?" they ask. It is a good question and one that deserves an answer. The golden rule is generally considered a universal principle underlying the foundations of most religious and moral codes. While "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" is in spirit a wonderful rule, in practice it may create problems in multicultural environments. As Sondra Thiederman, intercultural communication expert says, "We all have the same basic needs for dignity, survival and social contact. What is different between groups is the way in which these needs are satisfied."

THE DINNER PARTY

A friend of ours found this out the hard way when she spent a number of years working in Vietnam while her husband, a newsman, was assigned to cover stories there. She recounted an incident that demonstrates how differently we want to be treated. Patti had worked at her new office job in Saigon for about a month. Being new to the country and not having family or friends around, she felt the need to get to know her Vietnamese colleagues better, so she invited the whole office staff over for dinner the following Sunday.

She spent all weekend cleaning, shopping and preparing an elaborate dinner for her co-workers. Then she waited... she was devastated when she realized no one was going to show up.

WHY DIDN'T YOU TELL ME?!

The next morning when she asked why no one came, she was given the polite runaround at first. No one wanted to discuss it. Finally, they began to explain that after only a month, they did not know her well enough to go to her home for dinner. In exasperation she asked, "Why didn't you tell me?" They told her they could not hurt or embarrass her by saying no and refusing the invitation. In Patti's culture, not showing up was the biggest sin. In theirs it was saying no to an invitation. So much for the golden rule.

Stop for a moment to consider how you like to be treated. Check off any of these statements that are true for you. Feel free to add more of your own as well.

HOW I LIKE TO BE TREATED

- "I want to be told when I make a mistake so I don't make it again."
- "I want you to tell me if you disagree with me."
- "I like being told when I'm doing well so I know I'm on the right track."
- "I want my boss to ask for my input and to listen to my concerns."
- "I want the freedom to do things my own way."
- "I want my boss to roll up his/her sleeves and help out when we're busy."
- "I don't want to have to ask for directions and approval every step of the way."
- "I like it when others tell me what's on their minds."
- "I like it when people call me by my first name."
- "I want my staff to see me as their partner rather than as their boss."
- "It Feels good when I am noticed and singled out for praise."
- "I like to be seen as an individual, not just considered one of the group."
- "I like being treated as an equal."
- "I like people to look me in the eye when they talk to me."

DIRECTNESS MAY MEAN LOSS OF FACE

How many of these statements did you check off? Did you realize they are typically American cultural preferences that are not shared by many other groups? In each case, if you treat individuals from other cultures like you wanted to be treated, you would **not** be treating them as they would prefer. In fact, you would be embarrassing them or treating them rudely by their cultural standards.

For example, the dominant U.S. American preference for directness ("Tell it like it is" "Don't beat around the bush" and "Put your cards on the table") is not universally shared. In many other cultures such as those in Asia and the Middle East, communication is much more indirect and subtle. The direct, no frills approach is seen as harsh, rude and may lead to loss of face.

A POSSIBLE STEP

Pay attention to the reactions of your staff, colleagues and customers. If they seem uncomfortable, incommunicative or evasive, it may be because they are confronted by behavior that breaks their cultural rules. Once you are aware of this barrier, you are less apt to react defensively and you are in a position to do something different to change the interaction.

© Copyright 2016 Gardenswartz and Rowe. All Rights Reserved.