

DISCRIMINATING MORE THAN EVER

A brief conversation between a couple of Talaria Intercultural associates overheard in the Talaria Intercultural cafeteria – the Athenian, a cheap downtown diner:

Reinart: You know Tregge; I think that in some ways multicultural organizations are discriminating based upon skin color, gender, national cultural differences and all of the other so-called elements of diversity more than ever.

Tregge (while chewing on a club sandwich): Don't be ridiculous Reinart. Organizations have made many strides over the past few decades in cutting down on discriminatory hiring practices, overt racism and diversity awareness. Once again, you are being too cynical.

Reinart: Well, of course that is right to some extent. When I use the word discriminate, I am not using it so much in the pejorative sense, but more in a literal sense – like how you differentiate people's values and actions. You know, we both work in a lot of different global organizations around the world. When I witness discussions about diversity and inclusion and attend events sponsored by Employee Resource Groups, I see that most of the discussion is superficial. It usually doesn't get down into deep-level cultural differences. In discussions, a popular phrase is "we have to question our stereotypes." Then there is some kind of magical thinking that this will have some kind of positive result like "leveraging our differences and getting different perspectives." The problem is that I rarely see this happening and people can seldom describe what they mean by this or instances of it happening. If they can explain it, it usually is a surface culture difference, like they had lunch with a colleague and learned that there were 12 kinds of lentils in Kashmir.

If members can't openly and proactively recognize and explain cultural differences, the only way they can discriminate is to use surface characteristics like skin color and ethnicity. It is ironic – in the quest for diversity and inclusion, the over-emphasis on similarity recognition prevents people from recognizing cultural differences (diversity).

I worked with a large team last week who were responsible for their company's global publications. They thought they were very diverse because the team was comprised of about half mainstream whites, four African-Americans and five other members from three different countries. But you know the story- the team's actions were mostly driven by white mainstream cultural values... (Reinart is interrupted by a loud waitress asking if they are ready for the bill).

Tregge to the waitress: No, we are going to have dessert.

Reinart continues: You know Tregge, after I spent two days with them doing the Intercultural Interaction Skills (IIS) workshop, they were more aware of deep-level cultural differences and made significant progress applying the skills model. By proactively and openly communicating directly with each other through the skills model, they realized that diversity doesn't exist merely from sitting at the same table if everyone is doing things the dominant-culture way. In fact, at the end of the workshop the entire group could recognize and explain that the African-American members were generally stifling their typical cultural behavior of openly, somewhat emotionally and very directly expressing disagreements. On the other hand, the Asians in the group felt that in general they were being pressured to take too many risks by expressing personal opinions and positions in the group. With the increased ability to recognize and explain their cultural differences the group was in a much better position to communicate with each other about adaptation – determining which members could and should adapt their cultural behavior in order to achieve the group's objectives.

You know Tregge, the main problem with the existing state of affairs is that people don't think about diversity and inclusion in an actionable way. They sort of think of it as a mindset within each individual, magically resulting in some kind of mental acceptance.

Tregge: OK Reinart, let's get some pie and talk about something that will help our digestion....

Reinart: Hey, my GI track is doing just fine. What's up with you?

Trege: It's just all of your talk about open recognition of cultural differences makes me squirm a little bit.

Reinart: OK, let's have some of that chocolate silk pie and talk it over.....