

Diversity And Inclusion

Rethinking Political Correctness

by Robin J. Ely, Debra Meyerson, and Martin N. Davidson

From the Magazine (September 2006)

Summary. Reprint: R0609D Legal and cultural changes over the past 40 years ushered unprecedented numbers of women and people of color into companies' professional ranks. Laws now protect these traditionally underrepresented groups from blatant forms of... [more](#)

A white manager fears she will be perceived as racist if she gives critical feedback to her Latino subordinate. A black engineer passed over for promotion wonders whether his race has anything to do with it, but he's reluctant to raise this concern lest he be seen as "playing the race card." A woman associate who wants to make partner in an accounting firm resists seeking coaching on her leadership style; she worries that doing so would confirm the notion that women don't have what it takes to make partner.

These types of events occur daily in politically correct (PC) cultures, where unspoken canons of propriety govern behavior in cross-cultural interactions—that is, interactions among people of different races, genders, religions, and other potentially charged social identity groups. We embrace the commitment to equity that underlies political correctness, and we applaud the shifts in norms wrought by that commitment. We are troubled, however,

by the barriers that political correctness can pose to developing constructive, engaged relationships at work. In cultures regulated by political correctness, people feel judged and fear being blamed. They worry about how others view them as representatives of their social identity groups. They feel inhibited and afraid to address even the most banal issues directly. People draw private conclusions; untested, their conclusions become immutable. Resentments build, relationships fray, and performance suffers.

Legal and cultural changes over the past 40 years ushered unprecedented numbers of women and people of color into companies' professional and managerial ranks. Overt prejudice and discrimination in the workplace, historically sanctioned by society, are far less acceptable today. Laws now protect traditionally underrepresented groups from blatant discrimination in hiring and promotion, and political correctness has reset the standards for civility and respect in people's day-to-day interactions.

Despite this obvious progress, we believe that political correctness is a double-edged sword. While it has helped many traditionally underrepresented employees to experience their workplace as more inclusive, the PC rule book can hinder employees' ability to develop effective relationships across potentially divisive group differences. Companies need to equip workers with skills—not rules—for building these relationships.

Our work suggests that high-quality relationships cannot be mandated. Sensitivity training and zero-tolerance policies at best impart some useful cultural knowledge or indicate that a company is serious about eliminating bias. At worst, such practices undermine relationships by reinforcing a restrictive and fearful atmosphere. Those to whom corrective actions are directed—men and whites, for example—walk on eggshells for fear of unwittingly transgressing the rules of political correctness.

We have found that political correctness does not only pose problems for those in the “majority.” When majority members cannot speak candidly, *members of under-represented groups also suffer*: “Minorities” can’t discuss their concerns about fairness and fears about feeding into negative stereotypes, and that adds to an atmosphere in which people tiptoe around the issues and one another. These dynamics breed misunderstanding, conflict, and mistrust, corroding both managerial and team effectiveness.

Constructive engagement of differences—and, therefore, effective leadership in culturally diverse contexts—requires majority and minority individuals to develop a mind-set and skills that all parties currently lack. This article proposes how managers and employees can engage with one another to reap the benefits cultural diversity has to offer. It represents our collective insights from research, teaching, and consulting over the past 15 years in the areas of race and gender relations, diversity, and organizational change. It also incorporates findings from our research with Learning as Leadership, a San Rafael, California-based leadership development organization, in whose seminars we have observed dozens of managers and executives grappling with unproductive behavior patterns and experimenting with new ones. Applying our insights about these processes to classic diversity-related dilemmas, we have developed the following principles to guide people seeking a healthy approach to the tensions that commonly arise over difference:

- *Pause* to short-circuit the emotion and reflect.
- *Connect* with others in ways that affirm the importance of relationships.
- *Question yourself* to help identify your blind spots and discover what makes you defensive.

- *Get genuine support* that doesn't necessarily validate your point of view but, rather, helps you gain a broader perspective.
- *Shift your mind-set* from "You need to change" to "What can I change?"

These five principles require that all parties adopt a learning orientation in cross-cultural interactions. In this article, we spell out the challenges—and opportunities—of adopting such an orientation and offer some guidelines for leaders. First, though, let's explore the negative dynamics that result when open discussion is repressed and people fail to learn.

Identity Abrasions

Assaults to people's identities occur daily in most organizations: A white person confuses the names of two Asian-American coworkers; a black executive is addressed less formally than her white male counterparts; a woman's idea is misattributed to a male colleague. Repeated experiences of this kind can diminish people's sense of how much others value and respect them. Offense at a perceived slight may or may not be well-founded, but an attempt to discuss the possible insult risks, for example, the charge that one is overly sensitive.

Such assaults occur on the flip side as well, as when members of majority groups are accused of being prejudiced or of treating others unfairly. Because they often have meant no harm, they tend to respond defensively, upset by any suggestion that their moral goodness is being questioned.

These experiences produce what we call identity abrasions for people on both sides of the interaction. Identity abrasions cause people to burrow into their own camps, attend only to

information that confirms their positions, and demonize the other side. The overall result is a number of negative dynamics, with costs both to individuals and to organizations. Below, we offer several classic examples; these and others throughout the article are real cases, but with the names changed.

Divisiveness.

While participating in a large meeting, Tom, a white vice president of manufacturing in a household appliances company, describes his ordeal with the union as akin to “oriental torture.” The VP of HR passes him a note and tells him that his reference is offensive to some people in the room, so before he finishes his address, Tom apologizes for the insensitive remark. As the meeting is coming to a close, a white regional manager, who is married to a Japanese-American woman, openly voices his distress at the remark, though expresses his appreciation that the VP recognized his gaffe and apologized. The following day, everyone in the firm knows about the incident. Some people feel that the regional manager has inappropriately shamed Tom. Others feel that Tom’s boss needs to call him onto the carpet for his insensitive remark. That evening, more employees gather to recount numerous similar incidents from the past. The next day, some staff members call for the company to create a forum for educating employees; others conclude that race is too hot to touch in any company forum and vow to assiduously avoid the topic.

Self-doubt.

Sophia, an African-American, is a newly appointed member of the board of a regional bank. In the first few meetings, she is relatively silent, but when the agenda during one meeting turns to her area of expertise, she joins the conversation confidently and with a well-informed point of view. The board chair interrupts while Sophia is talking, urging members to be brief so that they can get through the agenda. Sophia notes to herself that the chair never makes such comments when any of her white

colleagues are speaking. She wonders, “Is he cutting me off because I’m a black woman?”—but she brushes off her worry. She thinks: “I can’t go there. It takes too much out of me. I just need to move on.” In subsequent meetings, she becomes increasingly reluctant to share her perspective; ultimately, she comes to dread the meetings because she feels marginal. She begins to wonder, “Do I have what it takes to be a fully contributing member of this board?”

Overprotection and underdevelopment.

Rob, a white partner at a management consultancy, has always been sensitive to the lack of diversity at his firm and would like to do his part to help women and other minorities succeed. He mentors Iris, a young Latina associate who is competent, energetic, and well liked but is not doing enough to generate business. In a promotions committee meeting, a number of partners voice concerns about Iris’s prospects for promotion to partner. Rob thinks these concerns may have some merit but is reluctant to share them with Iris. He fears that hearing the feedback would convince her that the partnership is simply not ready to promote a woman of color. Uncomfortable with his ambivalence, he unconsciously distances himself from Iris, leaving her bewildered about what she’s done to alienate him.

Self-limiting behavior.

Julie, an engineer, wants to prove to her overwhelmingly male colleagues that women are as good at engineering as men are. She consciously avoids being seen in gender-stereotypical ways: She doesn’t sit next to other women in meetings, tries to solve problems on her own, avoids asking for help or clarification, shuns opportunities to mentor junior women, and makes sure her personal life is invisible at work. As a result, she isolates herself from potential sources of support, works harder and less efficiently than she needs to, develops skills more slowly, and contributes less to her firm than she otherwise might.

Polarization.

A friendship between coworkers—Scott, an American Christian, and Mahmoud, a Muslim émigré from Pakistan—abruptly falls apart after they discuss events in the news. Seconds after Scott makes what he naively intends to be a conciliatory comment, the two become engrossed in a passionate debate in which Scott finds himself arguing for positions that he doesn't even support. The exchange ends when Scott storms out of Mahmoud's office while Mahmoud shouts after him. From then on, communication between them is minimal.

Suspicion and withdrawal.

Bill, a black associate in a consulting firm, consistently receives mediocre ratings from his white clients. He wonders whether these ratings reflect a racial bias and raises the issue with his white boss. She balks, insisting that their clients are not biased. Bill is not convinced. He searches for evidence to bolster his claim, but the evidence is ambiguous, so he does not share it. He feels increasingly angry, resentful, and hopeless about his prospects at the firm. In his next review, his boss tells him she is concerned about his “bad attitude.”

In each of these cases, people's judgments—and their fears of others' judgments—drive the negative dynamic. When we feel judged, it cuts to the core of our self-image as being good, competent, and worthy. To counter such identity abrasions, we deny our experiences, avoid difficult conversations, react angrily, and seek advice only to confirm our innocence. These behaviors have only one goal: self-protection. When self-protection becomes more important than the work, the group's mission, or relationships with others, people lose their connections to one another, making it difficult to take risks, learn, and solve problems creatively together. (While we have outlined these dynamics as they occur in the United States, we believe that the

impulse to protect oneself manifests similarly in all interactions among members of groups that are marked by a history of prejudice, discrimination, or misunderstanding.)

Principles for Constructively Engaging Differences

Short-circuiting these emotional reactions is not easy, but our research suggests that when people replace their need to defend themselves with a desire to learn, the possibilities for constructive cross-cultural interactions increase enormously. Learning requires people to acknowledge their limitations and to suspend their need to be right or to prove their competence. In so doing, they make themselves vulnerable to others' judgments so that they can perform their jobs more effectively.

Of course, those who consciously hold and defend their prejudices offer little opportunity for constructive engagement. Nevertheless, we have seen that far too often people draw conclusions about others prematurely, missing crucial opportunities for advancing mutually held goals.

The five principles that follow are not sequential steps. They occur, sometimes simultaneously, throughout the learning process; together, they contribute to one's overall ability to handle identity abrasions constructively.

Principle 1: Pause.

When we experience a threat to our identity, our first response is a negative emotion such as anger. We react by casting blame and judgment, which most often incites defensiveness in others. Taking time—even a few moments—to identify our feelings and consider our responses will help us to respond more effectively.

Consider the case of Mary, a 30-year veteran of a large and venerable law firm in which she was partner. Earlier in her career, when her male colleagues said or did something that she found

offensive, Mary's immediate impulse was to "get in their faces" about it. In learning to step back and recenter herself when irritants arose, Mary found she could be more effective by drawing people in rather than pushing them away.

Mary's actions in a recent partner meeting are illustrative. When a male colleague told an off-color joke about women and others laughed, Mary felt her anger rising. Yet instead of lecturing her colleagues on the errors of their ways, as she might have done earlier in her career, she paused and took several deep breaths. She then checked her anger and jettisoned her sense of self-righteousness.

Mary recognized her anger as a signal, not as a springboard for reaction. Her feelings told her to be careful, that she was about to interpret reality in a way that might not be fully accurate or that might lead her to react in ways that would not serve her larger goals. Rather than admonishing her colleagues when she was offended by their remarks, she stepped back, calmed herself down, and refocused on what was important to her. This response enabled her to enact the next principle.

Principle 2: Connect.

When we experience an identity abrasion, our impulse is to focus inward, to justify, explain, and defend ourselves. One way to resist this impulse is to focus outward, on goals that are larger than we are, such as advancing broad social ideals, contributing to a task, or striving to achieve an organization's mission. Goals such as these connect us with others by infusing our lives with meaning. Meaningful goals remind us of what is at stake in a given situation, giving us a reason to engage with others even if we feel threatened.

Mary, for example, learned to replace a defensive goal (demonstrating her moral superiority) with a generative one (making the law firm a place where women could more easily advance to partner). She was then able to see more clearly what was at stake in her interactions with her male colleagues. She could either alienate them or connect with them by focusing on a goal that mattered more to her than being right.

Once we've anchored on such a goal, we can clarify our intention for a given interaction. Our intentions shape how we come across to others and influence how they, in turn, respond. When we enter into an interaction from a stance of anger or defensiveness, we are likely to deepen the fissure in the relationship. In contrast, when we approach that interaction with the intention of broadening our understanding—whether of ourselves, the other person, the relationship, or the task—we are far more likely to repair the fissure and to move forward productively with our work.

Mary demonstrated her intention to learn in the partner meeting. Searching for a way to connect with her colleagues, she realized that their laughter at the expense of women didn't fit with her core belief that they were good, decent men. So, in the moments following the joke, she reflected: What experiences underlie their disparaging humor about women?

To engage them in this question, Mary responded to the joke, which alluded to a woman's lack of fit in an all-male culture, by describing her personal experience of entering the firm: what it was like to enter an environment filled with unspoken rules she didn't know, where everyone else seemed comfortable with one another, and where her energy and way of relating were foreign to the dominant culture. Her story was not a diatribe; her intention was not to teach or to blame but to engage and inquire. She then asked the men: What had it been like for them when women entered the firm? What did they feel they had lost? What might

they have gained? The conversation went to a whole different level as people opened up. In the course of it, Mary was able to explain the range of feelings and judgments that come up for her—and that she has to work hard to suppress—when a well-meaning colleague tells an off-color joke.

When we have an intention to learn, we step out of the need to be right. A learning orientation motivates us to seek to understand—rather than to judge—the other person. Such understanding can help us connect with the other’s humanity, which can provide further impetus for seeking mutually beneficial solutions.

Principle 3: Question yourself.

This principle is probably the most challenging one. It requires taking risks precisely when we feel most in need of protecting ourselves from a perceived or actual threat. It demands that we ask ourselves such questions as, “What am I missing in the way I’m seeing this situation? How might my desire to be proven right or innocent be distorting my view of reality or of the other person?”

This principle is particularly challenging for women and people of color, whose concerns others have so often dismissed or trivialized. Consider the case of Brianna, the African-American CEO of a start-up that consulted to executives of nonprofit organizations. She became CEO when Jay, the company’s white founder, stepped down from the position. Jay remained a close adviser to the leadership team, but his autocratic style rubbed Brianna the wrong way.

The tension between the two reached a peak after a leadership team meeting when Jay told Brianna that she needed to “lighten up” on her push to market more vigorously to clients of color. He

told her that she was being “too aggressive.” Brianna’s immediate impulse was dismissive; it seemed to her that Jay just couldn’t bear the authority of a strong black woman.

Instead of going head-to-head with Jay, Brianna chose to shift to a self-questioning stance. Rather than presuming she knew the truth about Jay’s intentions, she sought further clarification from him. She learned that Jay feared that her approach would narrow the firm’s marketability and realized that she needed to better articulate how her strategy connected to the firm’s mission. The discussion helped Brianna to question herself and, by doing so, to discover how her focus on pushing the team to see her point of view had caused her to miss theirs.

As the discussion became more open, Brianna told Jay what it felt like to be a black woman in her position. She was excited to be leading such a firm, she explained, but she also felt her success was a symbol of what black people can do when given sufficient resources and authority. She was anxious to set a positive example for those not used to seeing black women in such roles and thus put a good deal of pressure on herself to succeed. That Brianna felt any anxiety about anything had never occurred to Jay; she had always struck him as confidence personified.

Brianna’s openness emboldened Jay to take risks and question himself as well. He began to reflect more deeply on his negative reaction to Brianna’s marketing ideas and realized that he found them threatening: Consulting to executives of color pushed him (and probably others) too far outside his comfort zone. Brianna could well imagine his fears; she reflected on times when she was outside her comfort zone and how difficult that was for her. More important, she could see how her forcefulness had not made it any easier for her team to discuss their fears. It was slowly dawning on Brianna that her investment in being seen as a powerful black woman had gotten in the way of her actually *being* a powerful black woman.

In this conversation, Brianna and Jay were able to see that each had only a partial view of reality. This realization gave them an opportunity to create a different kind of connection with each other. Their shared commitment to the firm's mission had motivated them to take these risks, which strengthened their relationship. Their relationship, in turn, increased their capacity to work toward that mission more effectively.

The principle of self-questioning puts the learning orientation into action. Interrogating ourselves and asking others for clarification means abandoning our need to present and maintain a particular image of ourselves. It also opens the way for the other person to make a similar move. When people take risks with one another, they short-circuit defensive identity-related processes, enabling them to move forward in their work.

Interpretation is not the same as truth.

By this principle, we do not mean to suggest that people should question their experiences. On the contrary, feeling offended or threatened in an interaction provides an important signal that invites inquiry. Instead, we are suggesting that people question their interpretations of their experiences, their beliefs about what has happened, who is right, and so forth. Interpretation is not the same as truth. Questioning oneself means letting go of one's protective scripts, identifying what images of self feel threatened, being open to perspectives that may be difficult to hear, and seeing what can be learned.

Principle 4: Get genuine support.

To help us sort through our reactions, identify a fuller picture of reality, and, most difficult, question our assumptions, we need other people. Unfortunately, most of us seek help from the wrong people, seeing those who challenge our point of view as threats and those who reinforce it as allies. Receiving reinforcement may be comforting, but it often doesn't confer much learning. Before we look at what support is, let's consider what support is not.

Support is not necessarily validation that your interpretation of the situation is correct or that your behavior was appropriate or warranted. Although that kind of backing can feel good in the moment, it provides the opposite of what we really need. What's needed is the counsel of trusted colleagues who can help us identify choices we make about how to behave or what to believe, as well as what alternatives are available. When Brianna was at her wits' end with Jay, she sought support from two friends to whom she frequently vented her feelings. They agreed with Brianna's interpretation of his behavior, and Brianna felt vindicated, but she was not any closer to finding a way to work with him. Indeed, she felt angrier.

Next, Brianna sought the advice of an old and trusted mentor, a black professor from her MBA program. He helped her sort through her feelings and priorities and asked her to identify what she felt Jay, at his best, had to offer her and the firm. He suggested that she approach her next interaction with Jay as if he had her best interests at heart and, from that standpoint, see what she might be able to learn from him. Brianna's mentor was able to hear her concerns, but instead of reinforcing her anger, he pushed back and helped her develop a more useful approach.

Giving genuine support means challenging the person seeking it; receiving that support means not reacting defensively. Virtually every time we've seen someone address an identity abrasion

effectively, there has been genuine support.

Principle 5: Shift your mind-set.

We have found that people who are able to turn identity abrasions into opportunities have the capacity to radically shift their way of thinking—about themselves, their situations, and other people. Such people tend to be highly self-aware, but they were not born with self-awareness; they continuously develop it as they systematically reflect on and analyze the behavioral patterns that underlie dissatisfaction in their lives. Through self-reflection, people break out of negative patterns. The fundamental shift is away from a mind-set that says, “You need to change,” to one that asks, “What can I change?”

People who are able to turn identity abrasions into opportunities have the capacity to radically shift their way of thinking—about themselves, their situations, and other people.

Take Richard, a white codirector of a financial services firm. One morning, Richard e-mailed a board member about his disagreement with a policy that his black business partner, Michele, supported, and he inadvertently copied Michele on the message. Michele was understandably furious.

Richard felt bad and apologized, but over the next several days, he had a more complicated reaction, including strong feelings of anger toward Michele. They had genuine disagreements that needed to be hashed out, but as Richard saw it, Michele didn't seem interested in discussing them. Increasingly, it seemed to Richard, she had become controlling, domineering, cold, and

withholding. Richard saw himself as fair-minded and progressive and felt somewhat uncomfortable challenging a black woman. He decided not to say anything.

Still, Richard cared deeply about the company, and he was self-aware enough to realize that his inability to collaborate with Michele was hampering their work. Richard decided that something needed to change, and he understood that the only thing he could change was himself. To start, Richard asked himself: “Could I be wrong about Michele?” He realized he had to stop assuming the worst about her, so he looked more carefully at his feelings.

As he reflected, with the support of two trusted colleagues, Richard saw that what truly bothered him most about Michele was that she always made him feel guilty. He had apologized about the e-mail incident—he knew what he had done was wrong—but his apology seemed to fall on deaf ears. As he further contemplated his reactions, Richard realized that, as was often the case, he had been looking for Michele’s approval. When she wouldn’t offer it, he’d retaliate. (Indeed, it occurred to him that such a motive might have unconsciously prompted the e-mail incident.) Richard concluded that his reactions to Michele, which he had always believed were her fault, were in fact driven by his own needs and anxieties: He wanted Michele’s reassurance that he wasn’t a bigot. With this insight, Richard was ready to try a different approach.

Rather than seeking Michele’s approval, Richard decided to learn how he might give her support. He invited her to a series of meetings in which they could discuss their individual agendas with an eye to better understanding each other. Richard learned that worries about the firm’s increasing volume of work had driven Michele—anxious to belie the racial stereotype that she was unqualified for the job—to become highly detail oriented. With so many balls in the air, she worried that something

important was bound to fall. Richard had interpreted her detail orientation as a need for control and as implicit criticism of him. Angry, he had withdrawn, which had fueled her anxiety; her reactions, then, had fueled his anger. The vicious cycle was clear.

Recognizing this pattern went a long way toward easing tensions between them. They decided to manage their workload by continuing to meet weekly to discuss their goals, task allocation, and means of supporting one another. This arrangement helped ease Michele's concerns about the work and pushed Richard to take on more of the load. Richard put his insecurities aside and sought only appropriate, task-related feedback from Michele. This change made it easier for her to be supportive of him, which gave Richard the confidence to disagree with her without feeling that he was risking her condemnation.

A year later, Richard and Michele were coleading the firm in an energizing rather than enervating way. Richard's success in turning his relationship with Michele around rested on his ability to make a fundamental mind-set shift. In so doing, he was able to move from feeling powerless to taking effective action.

The clarity that comes from making such a shift often reveals a business problem that turns out to have little directly to do with cultural issues. (In the case of Richard and Michele, the engine of their problem was an increased volume of work, which they were ultimately able to address with relative ease.) Until the shift is made, threats to identity take up the center stage, hampering people's ability to see other problems clearly and to achieve truly effective partnerships.

Guidelines for Leaders

Leaders who follow the above principles of engagement and who demonstrate personal resilience in the face of identity abrasions inspire the same behavior in others. Company leaders can support

and encourage people to confront identity abrasions directly and constructively by doing the following.

Create safety.

People in the organization need to feel that, in questioning themselves or making themselves vulnerable, they will not be judged or punished. In other words, they need to feel safe. Leaders create safety by publicly stating their assumption that people are well-intentioned and by overtly ensuring that well-intentioned actions will not lead to punishment. They resist the judgmental tone that diversity discussions so often acquire, by making it clear that mistakes will not impugn anyone's moral character. Being candid themselves, they also encourage others to be candid. Perhaps most important, such leaders acknowledge their own fallibility in cross-cultural interactions. When they describe publicly their own learning, they legitimate discussions of identity-related experiences, giving permission to employees to provide and solicit feedback, air conflicts, and learn from their missteps.

People in the organization need to feel that, in questioning themselves or making themselves vulnerable, they will not be judged or punished. In other words, they need to feel safe.

Creating a safe environment requires care in determining what kind of misconduct is punishable. Zero-tolerance policies, for example, can cut two ways. Leaders create safety when they express zero tolerance for intentional forms of harassment—for instance, “hate e-mail” directed toward specific groups. Such incidents require swift, public repudiation, but zero tolerance does not mean zero discussion. Immediate removal of employees

responsible for these acts may well be called for, but often these sorts of firings stir as many fears as the violations themselves. Leaders who support a learning orientation offer forums for discussing such incidents and for delving more deeply into questions about how and why they occurred. These forums can include “town hall meetings,” in which large groups of employees convene with the chief executive to air different points of view. Alternatively, the forums can consist of systematic inquiry, with focus groups of employees led by experienced professionals who summarize and feed back their findings to management and to groups of employees for collective review. Very often, outright misconduct is the culminating event of a long history of identity abrasions that have been occurring under the radar. Effective leaders see these incidents as a signal that the company’s culture requires attention.

Assiduously model the third principle.

We believe leaders should model all the principles above, but the most difficult—and rewarding—is that of questioning oneself. This principle is challenging for managers because it runs counter to the image of the confident, decisive leader. As it turns out, however, leaders who question themselves and learn from others in the service of clear goals do not bespeak a lack of confidence; rather, they demonstrate humility, clarity, and strength. Indeed, the leaders we have observed who exemplify this principle generate fierce respect and loyalty from their followers. They model vulnerability, respond nondefensively to questions and challenges, are aware of their own biases and emotional triggers, demonstrate resilience in the face of identity abrasions, and openly rely on others to test the validity of their perspective. As one leader we worked with noted, being a role model involves “making myself vulnerable in the face of attack so that others see my humanity.”

Seek out others' experience.

Leaders need to understand how social identities influence the way employees experience the organization's work and culture. By developing a deeper understanding of those who differ from them in gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and so on, leaders learn to anticipate how employees are likely to read situations. That way, leaders can intervene early and respond effectively when difficult situations arise, as they inevitably will. Moreover, when conflicts occur, the leader's ability to understand all sides increases employees' trust that difficult situations will be handled fairly—that is, not biased by anyone's identity-based interests. To develop that kind of insight, leaders can build trusting personal relationships with senior-level staff who represent the organization's diversity. They can also meet with networking groups composed of employees with shared social identities.

Foster people's investment in relationships.

Leaders who support a learning orientation in cross-cultural interactions give employees a reason to put their self-images at risk and to invest more deeply in relationships with coworkers. By taking every opportunity to link the mission of the company with the five principles outlined above, leaders reinforce the message that a learning orientation to diversity issues will promote productive and fulfilling relationships. •••

The five principles we have identified are difficult to enact. They entail taking risks and opening up when we feel most vulnerable and in need of self-protection. When others accuse us of holding prejudicial attitudes, we should interrogate ourselves; when we believe others are treating us unfairly, we should reach out to understand their actions. These prescriptions do not sell easily; self-righteousness feels more satisfying. But self-righteousness can also lead to divisive conflict, alienation, and ultimately, poor performance.

When others accuse us of holding prejudicial attitudes, we should interrogate ourselves; when we believe others are treating us unfairly, we should reach out to understand their actions.

When people treat their cultural differences—and the conflicts and tensions that arise from them—as opportunities to seek a more accurate view of themselves, each other, and the situation, trust builds and relationships become stronger. To support this approach, leaders should put aside the PC rule book and instead model and encourage risk taking in service of building the organization’s capacity to foster high-quality relationships. The value of these skills will reverberate through every dimension of the company’s work.

A version of this article appeared in the September 2006 issue of *Harvard Business Review*.

RE

Robin J. Ely is the Diane Doerge Wilson Professor of Business Administration at Harvard Business School and the faculty chair of the HBS Gender Initiative.

DM

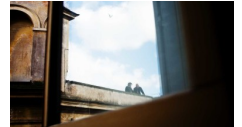
Debra Meyerson (debram@stanford.edu) is an associate professor of education and (by courtesy) organizational behavior at Stanford University in Stanford, California.

MD

Martin N. Davidson is an associate professor of Business Administration at the Darden Graduate School of Business at the University of Virginia.

Recommended For You

Building Rapport Across Cultures



How to Do Hybrid Right



Our Biases Undermine Our Colleagues' Attempts to Be Authentic



PODCAST Is Cynicism Ruining Your Organization?

