

Human Capital and Diversity: Building Relationships that Affect our Competitive Edge

by Amy S. Tolbert, Ph.D.

Relax! This article is NOT about “shoulds, needs, and I told you so-s.” Twenty-first century diversity education is NOT about group hugs and emotional, “executive retreats” that force attendees to form a circle, hold hands and sway back and forth in unison. It’s not about filling workforce quotas or learning to “tolerate” each other.

This article IS about practical, how-to, everyday workplace habits that will help you learn how to make yourself and others more productive by recognizing and appreciating the value of the contributions of other people. This article IS about a specific and significant business-building tactic—diversity education that affects your influence on the workplace. And, the best news is, dealing with diversity challenges doesn’t have to take weeks out of your already over-stuffed schedule.

So how can you approach diversity positively and, thereby, enhance your competitive advantage?

Let’s explore three simple concepts that when applied can reap bottom-line business results:

1. *Stop Walking On Eggshells: Define and use positive confrontation.*

Relationships are built. You can influence how they are developed and shaped. However, to do this, you have to overcome the energy draining, stutter-stepping that hinders relationship development. This is especially true in developing positive working relationships with those of different cultures or abilities.

Here are some tips on how to stop walking on eggshells:

- Adopt the goal of developing mutual respect.
- Demonstrate mutual respect by refraining from statements that others might find upsetting.
- Confront inappropriate workplace behavior —appropriately:
 - ◆ A. Get the Facts
Consider both nonverbal behavior and verbal behavior
 - ◆ B. Assess the Damage
What is the affect of the behavior on you, the team, the company and the client?

- ◆ C. Resolve the Issue
Confront the behavior by talking it out with the other person. Be positive; propose alternatives and then let it go! Holding a grudge will only prevent future relationship building.
- Take risks—lean into discomfort instead of moving away from it.
- Confront difficult situations appropriately—use the 3-step model listed above.
- Manage conflict—make conflict work for you instead of letting it spin out of control.
- Check your emotions—be aware of your own frustrations and anger. Once you are aware of the negative emotion, you can choose to redirect it to a positive action.

2. *I'm Okay, but "They" Need Help: Why should I change?*

Although there are rewards for implementing personal change, change is unlikely without identifying those rewards and making a conscious choice to implement the changes needed to receive them. You can actually look forward to personal change when you:

- Commit to developing your self-awareness. Change yourself before looking at what others may need to change. It is both the right and smart thing to do.
- Acknowledge your values and beliefs. List three core values that that help guide your life.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Now ask yourself how these values and beliefs influence your daily behavior. Do you choose the behavior? Is there something you want to change about it? How do your values affect how you judge others in the workplace?

- Use the head, heart, and hand (think, feel and do) model to help increase awareness of the things you say and do. This model emphasizes that, in every situation, you *choose* your response. By recognizing your ability to change outcomes by making different response choices, you can begin to experience the benefits of those changes.

- Know your affect on others. How? Be bold enough to ask...and then listen! People may not always tell you what you want to hear. Be willing to have a conversation without judging the honest input you just received. This is valuable feedback...if you use it.

3. *Help Others Matter: Unleash the power of diversity.*

You are either included or excluded by others, which causes you to feel and behave in certain ways. You also include or exclude others. Individuals who feel they are being excluded often respond with less motivation and productivity. You have the power to change that response by:

- choosing words that include others. For example, instead of he and she, use plurals when possible. Language and words have a lot of power; be sure you say what you mean.
- reaching out to support targeted individuals. Do you openly give your support when someone has been marginalized or excluded in the workplace? You can talk with the person privately and you can also support contributions during meetings. Give voice to your support – it has great meaning to others around you.
- being aware of behaviors that may unintentionally marginalize others. Monitor your own behavior. You can't change behavior if you aren't even aware of it! Ask others to bring it to your attention and thank them for it!
- identifying key times in your life when you were included and excluded. How did the inclusion make you feel and behave? How did being excluded make you feel and behave? Remember how different the outcomes were? Share your stories with others. When you personalize a difficult topic you open the door to developing empathy with others.
- making it a goal to overcome unconscious acts of exclusion and build more effective relationships.

Did you notice the common theme in each of these concepts?

Relationships...how you choose to live, play, and work with others. You can develop and build upon your relationships in a diverse environment by applying the three simple concepts outlined above. While the three concepts are simple, the application of them will take some effort. The objective is to simply begin navigating through the world with more awareness and a broader perspective.



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