

“” Last Word on HR

Defusing Hidden Bias

By Sarah McAdams

Considering that the U.S. Department of Labor predicts a shortage of more than 10 million workers by 2010, no employer can afford to piss off a good employee.

Doing so without cause opens a company to unpleasant consequences when the employee 1) quits and goes elsewhere, 2) quits and goes to a direct competitor, for whom he works tirelessly, or 3) files a lawsuit or otherwise hollers about the company's (perceived) failings.

Two of the most common causes of the third option are alleged harassment and discrimination. We know what you're thinking: *Got it covered — I'm completely enlightened when it comes to issues of race, sex, disability, age and physical appearance, and so is my company.*

Well think again, says Harvard researchers. Most of us, their new study found, are more biased than we realize (particularly against those who are African-Americans, elderly, disabled, or overweight). The problem, of course, is that hidden prejudices reveal themselves in not so hidden ways, prompting major anxiety in affected employees whose productivity and morale often suffer. (Plus, those biases also cause managers to make unsound decisions.)

Bystanders Must Be More Than “Whistleblowers”

Hoping to help organizations defuse bias, a group of Boston-based diversity researchers have begun training employees to become “active bystanders” when they witness displays of bias — everything from stereotyping to off-color jokes. But will such training actually prompt organizational change? There seems to be a handful of potential pitfalls. How do you avoid a culture of finger-pointing? Isn't it risky to allocate intervention responsibility to employees who aren't conflict professionals? What if the offender is at a senior level and retaliates?

But it's a start, said David Campt, Ph.D., a diversity consultant with The DWC Group and former White House advisor. “On the basis of my experience in analyzing the practices of hundreds of diversity efforts, I would say that these bystander-focused

efforts should be considered leading edge efforts on diversity,” he said.

But for such training to be effective, bystanders need to do more than “challenge” acts of discrimination, Campt added. “They must have the additional skill to be able to engage the people who they think are discriminating in real dialog about what is happening,” he said. “Pointing fingers at people does not work; engaging them in an examination of what is happening can create the teaching moment that can lead to real change.”

Even Spectators Play a Role

When it works, such training benefits all involved: the person discriminated against (who feels supported and not alone), the active bystander (who when passive often reports feeling worse than the victim), and the offender (who may not realize he was being offensive, and certainly not that it could negatively affect his career).

The problem is that there are no bystanders in the workplace — everyone plays a role, whether or not it's a speaking part. “If we counsel people to think that they are bystanders when they are not, we might be placing them at risk,” said Rick Brenner, a conflict management consultant who's worked with companies like Microsoft and Wachovia Bank. “In some cases, people who think they are bystanders might choose to intervene and find themselves bystanders no longer. Or maybe even terminated.”

It comes down to the culture of the organization. “If the leaders have a zero tolerance for discrimination or harassment, it will stop quickly,” says management consultant Nan Andrews Amish, a professor at The University of San Francisco. “If the leaders choose to exhibit their own biases widely, then the culture will condone it.”

Therefore, in a culture in which there's an appreciation of diversity, active bystander training might strengthen support of difference in the workplace. In cultures that are all about avoiding lawsuits, such an approach likely would fail.



Sarah McAdams has reported on human resources for a variety of publications, including the *Journal of Employee Communication Management*, *Corporate Legal Times* and *The Ragan Report*.

Quiz Answers

Here are the answers from the Pop Quiz on page 6:

- (1) **True.** Physical or cultural characteristics associated with a certain race include skin color, hair texture or styles, or certain facial features.
- (2) **False.** An African American employer violates Title VII if he refuses to hire other African Americans whose skin is either darker or lighter than his own.
- (3) **True.** Employment decisions that are based on the discriminatory preferences of customers or coworkers are just as unlawful as decisions based on an employer's own discriminatory preferences.
- (4) **False.** Using arrest or conviction records as an absolute bar to employment disproportionately excludes certain racial groups. Therefore, such records should not be used in this manner unless there is a business need for their use. Whether there is a business need to exclude persons with conviction records from particular jobs depends on the nature of the job, the nature and seriousness of the offense, and the length of time since the conviction and/or incarceration.

For more from the EEOC's *Questions and Answers About Race and Color Discrimination in Employment*, go to www.eeoc.gov/policy/docs/qanda_race_color.html.

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