



Skills for Diversity Dialogue:

How to Turn Moments of Tension into Opportunities for Understanding

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Compliments of Sondra Thiederman, Ph.D.
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- Do any of these situations seem familiar?
 - You are a manager who just gave an important presentation regarding goals for the next quarter. As you walk out of the meeting room, one of your direct reports says she is offended by your comment that the company's new product would give the customer a real "bang for the buck." What do you do?
 - You are a team member whose parents are from China. While in the computer room at work, you overhear someone tell a joke about a "Chinaman," a priest, and a rabbi. What do you do?
 - You are a manager who, during the weekly staff meeting you facilitate, hears one of your female team members accuse a colleague of sexism because of something he said. You heard his comment and think the woman is overreacting. What do you do?
 - You are a top-level manager who has just hired a new assistant. In most ways she is great, but she does have a heavy non-American accent that you sometimes can barely understand. You are worried because you need your communication with her to be flawless, but are afraid to bring up the issue of her accent. What do you do?

These scenarios have a couple of things in common. First, they all involve some level of discomfort – that's the bad part. The good thing, however, is that they each serve as an opportunity to have honest conversation about diversity and bias. For this reason, I call incidents like these "Gateway Events." "Gateways" because healthy conversation can open the way to productive dialogue and, in turn, greater mutual understanding.

Gateway Events can come in many guises. Here are just a few that may seem painfully familiar:

- You witness an inappropriate act or hear a joke or comment that is disrespectful.
- Someone falsely accuses you of bias/prejudice.

- Someone treats you in a way that appears to reflect a biased attitude.
- You say or do something that inadvertently offends someone.
- You witness someone else being falsely accused of bias.
- You are confused and uncomfortable because of the differences between yourself and someone else.
- You say or do something involving diversity that you immediately regret.

Regardless of the nature of the incident, talking about sticky diversity issues is not always comfortable and not every conversation ends with the participants collapsing into each other's arms in a mutual paroxysm of newfound understanding. The purpose of this article is to provide five strategies to minimize the discomfort and maximize the chance that we will, if not collapse into each other's arms, at least be able to walk through those gateways and meet on the other side. Believe me, it is worth the effort.

Strategy I: Get “Diversity Fit”

Most Gateway Events swing open without warning. We rarely have time to prepare a response or sort out how we feel about what is happening. When this occurs, we are at risk of walking away or, worse, going into auto-responder mode spouting glib denials and politically correct nonsense. To prevent this dangerous meltdown, we must get in shape so we will be ready when the challenge arises. We need—you guessed it—to develop a “diversity hard body.”

One way to get this “hard body” – to be “diversity fit” – is to become aware and, therefore, in better control of the fears that hamper our ability to enter into and function effectively in a conversation about diversity or bias. It isn't necessary to exorcise our fears altogether, just the act of giving them a name has a magical way of bringing the emotion under our control. Some of the things we might be afraid of include:

- Fear of the commitment that comes with honest conversation
- Fear of our own biases showing
- Fear of the other person's (or our own) anger
- Fear of being accused of being too serious, “up-tight,” or sensitive
- Fear of appearing un-politically-correct and opening ourselves up to charges of insensitivity or worse

It was during a dinner with a female acquaintance some years ago that I learned the importance of identifying my own fears. Because my emotions were at that point still anonymous, they were utterly unchecked; cavorting around my mind in such a frenzy that they doomed what might have otherwise been a productive conversation. Here's the grizzly scene:

My dinner companion was a black woman named Candace, who had just moved to town and whom I was anxious to welcome into the community. We met at a local restaurant and proceeded to have a great time indulging in "girl talk," being silly, comparing notes on the best shopping malls in town, and, most fun, trying to figure out how to get her involved in the San Diego dating scene.

After about an hour of light conversation, we began to talk about my work and that led to what promised to be an interesting discussion about various types of diversity. Unfortunately, that promise was an empty one. Once the subject turned to race, there was a subtle shift in atmosphere. We were transformed into different people. Gone were the play and shared interests; we became, instead, a pair of women who were too self-conscious to carry on any kind of honest conversation. And the worst of it was that neither of us had the courage to so much as comment on what was happening between us.

Looking back, I realize that two stumbling blocks contributed to the broken promise of that evening—stumbling blocks that neither of us was able and/or willing to overcome. The first block was that we were clearly uncomfortable discussing the subject of race. Talking about race, even in today's relatively enlightened age, is, I think we would all agree, a heck of a lot scarier than chatting about shopping malls and clothes.

The second problem was actually the bigger one: the fact that neither of us had the courage to mention that the subject of race was making us uncomfortable. In short, neither of us was willing to acknowledge that we were jointly facing a Gateway Event. Because of our reluctance to state the obvious, we missed out on a prime opportunity to learn more about the complexities of human difference and how to make them work.

Why didn't at least one of us speak up? Why did we both refuse to enter into this Gateway Event? I wager it was fear or at least discomfort. But, what were we afraid of? If I had known that answer, at least from my end, I would have been able to explore the emotion and reduce its power.

Here are some of the feelings and fears that might have been responsible for that ruined dinner conversation:

- One emotion might have been fear of the intimacy (read honesty) and commitment that goes along with healthy conversation about diversity related issues.
- There might also have been a concern that our own biases would be revealed if we carried the conversation forward. Perhaps Candace was concerned that, if we got into a really honest conversation, her bias toward white people would show through and damage a potential friendship. Perhaps I was worried that biases of which I was barely aware might make an inopportune appearance in the form of a misspoken word or poorly chosen phrase.
- Maybe one or both of us was afraid that the other person might become angry. Sadly, where there is diversity, there is always the possibility that old angers are festering just beneath the surface. Alternatively, we might have been worried that our own anger would leak through our reserve and spill out, ruining both the evening and the budding friendship.
- We might have been concerned about appearing uptight, judgmental, or overly serious. Often when a Gateway Event swings open before us, we reach out to slam it shut for fear that if we bring up the weighty subject of diversity tension or bias, someone will hurl back at us that most patronizing of all phrases, “Lighten up!”
- Perhaps we were apprehensive that, if we said anything, we would give the impression of not being “nice people.” Maybe neither of us wanted to be negative or confrontational in any way. Perhaps we feared that we would no longer be liked if we mentioned the harsh reality that our new friendship was not developing as smoothly as we had first expected and hoped.

One of the purposes of this article is to encourage you to walk through gateway after gateway and thus learn more and more about diversity, bias, and yourself. As you turn the handle on each gate, you will no doubt come up against fears and discomforts and other excuses to hesitate that are not on this list. The more experience you have in encountering, naming, and diffusing your fears, the easier the process will become and the more prepared you will be to take on any Gateway Event that comes your way.

Reader Task: Watch for opportunities to talk about diversity-related issues and, if you feel uncomfortable, take a moment to notice and diagnose that

discomfort. Once you understand the nature of the emotion, think about what you might do to minimize its negative impact on future conversations.

Strategy II: Avoid Jumping to Conclusions About Intent or Attitude

Despite all the regulations that clearly state “one piece per passenger,” the people boarding after me were laden with packages and bags and so-called carry-ons that seemed too large to take on the *Titanic* much less aboard a tiny regional jet. I was absorbed in my reading so I didn’t see it coming. Bam! This huge dark green duffel bag swung around and hit me, hard, in the head. I looked up and, with a scowl more appropriate to a deliberate attack than an act of clumsiness, struck back with an impatient, “Can’t you be more careful?!” The woman who had lost control of the bag obviously had no intention of hitting me; nonetheless, my head hurt just as much as if it had been a carefully aimed assault—and my response was just as churlish.

My defensive reaction to this surprise attack is exactly what happens at the outset of many Gateway Events. This is especially true if what has collided with one’s psyche is a comment or action that has offended us in some way. We initially recoil in surprise and then lash out. What we don’t do is take a moment to regroup and assess what is really going on. We may feel hurt or offended or angry, but no matter what the genre of discomfort, an ill-considered response will do more harm than good.

In order to figure out the most productive response, we must first assess the intent or attitude of the offender. Right about now, you might be asking this pointed, and slightly testy, question. “Who cares about intentions? If I’m hurt, that’s all that matters.” Of course the impact of an act matters and that impact, if negative, must be remedied. The actor’s intent, however, must be known, because knowledge of intent will influence the success of that remedy.

Intent becomes particularly important to assess when we are confronted with a behavior, comment, or joke that makes us feel diminished in some way. Our response will, for example, be very different if the person’s intent was to diminish us than if it was a mistake or misguided effort to be funny. Here are some questions we can ask to help figure out just what is going on in the other person’s head and heart:

1. Is the offending word or action unusual for the person you are indicting?
Of course, there is always a first time that a bias manifests itself in a behavior—just because it did not happen before does not rule out the

possibility of bias. On the other hand, if the offending act is unusual, consider the possibility that the attitude behind the behavior was benign.

2. Has this person done other things that support your reaction or, on the contrary, has she demonstrated that she respects and cares about people who are different from herself?
3. If you have heard that she has done other things that might reflect a bias, are they merely rumors or are they events that you have witnessed and evaluated for yourself?

When we feel offended, the benefit of asking questions like these is enormous. That benefit is the acquisition of power. If we calmly examine what has happened, we gain the power that comes with objectivity. That power, in turn, grants us the option to either proceed confidently with our accusation or, alternatively, to shift our focus from the pain caused by the offense to the possibility of an unfortunate misunderstanding or an innocent act of clumsiness.

***Reader Task:** The next time you have an opportunity to dialogue about diversity or bias, take a beat before responding and ask yourself this question: What do I **really** know about the attitude or intent of this person?*

Strategy III: Set Productive Goals for the Conversation

Once we understand the other's person's point of view, we are in a much better position to set productive goals for the conversation and setting goals is an important component of any successful dialogue. Aimless conversation, particularly if the catalyst for that conversation is emotionally charged, will lead nowhere or, worse, will lead somewhere we would rather not go. We need functional dialogue about bias, not just noise, and certainly not just conflict for conflict's sake.

How a Gateway Event resolves itself is predicated only in part on the details of the initial action. The ultimate outcome is also influenced by the sequence of goals that follow the incident. Arguably, the atrocity of September 11 was the largest Gateway Event in U.S. history. The flash points on that event, however, lay, not only in the attack itself, but in each subsequent reaction to it. In short, each swing of the gate following an event provides another opportunity to make good or bad choices, to set good or bad goals, and, therefore, to influence the outcome.

One such choice following September 11 was the sending of an angry e-mail to an Islamic Web site. That e-mail read, “Go back to your beautiful land of sand and pig dirt, and take your HATE with you.” Not so good so far: a brutal attack (Gateway Event) followed by a response that had the potential to make matters worse. Fortunately, the recipient of that e-mail, Mohammed Abdul Aleem, possessed the courage and goodness to react with compassion and kind words.

That kindness, that spin-off Gateway Event, had the desired effect of soliciting an equally compassionate response from the angry and, as it turns out, frightened American who had sent the initial e-mail. The man replied with this apology: “I was upset by all the things that happened. My brother lost several of his friends at the Pentagon. I appreciate your calm and informative response . . . and as a result have since then come to my senses.” (Solomon Moore, “Expressions of Support Surprising to Muslims,” *Los Angeles Times*, 26 September 2001.)

The difference between these two correspondents is that one reacted rashly to the initial incident (September 11) while the other took the time to decide what he wanted to accomplish with his response. The first man’s goals were vague at best. Did he just want to vent his emotion? Did he actually want to create more animosity with his angry words? Did he have the conscious intention to motivate Mr. Aleem and his friends to go back to the Middle East? We don’t know. But odds are pretty good that that frightened American, if asked, would say that he had no idea what he was trying to accomplish by what he did; he just did it. Mr. Aleem’s goals, on the other hand, were clear: to restore communication and create goodwill. This initially heated electronic exchange illustrates the profound importance of setting goals before entering into dialogue.

Your specific goal will, of course, be shaped by the nature of the Gateway Event itself. Here is a sampling of the kinds of events you are most apt to encounter along with suggested goals. Keep this discussion in mind so that, when each situation presents itself, you will be prepared and able to enter into the dialogue with a firm function in mind.

1. You have said or done something that has offended someone else and you realize what you have done.

Productive Goal: To diminish their negative feeling and help restore the relationship to one of trust and mutual respect. (Action: Admit what happened and apologize.)

Counter-Productive Goal: Attempt to diminish the situation by denying what you have done or negating the accuser’s right to his or her feelings.

2. You have been offended by something someone has said or done.
Productive Goal: To educate the offender about the nature of what he or she has done and its impact on you and others like you.
Counter-Productive Goal: To make the offender feel guilty.

3. You have been accused of an inappropriate word or act, but it is a misunderstanding:
Productive Goal: To demonstrate respect for the accuser by holding him or her to a high standard of judgment. (Action: Apologize for the fact they feel uncomfortable, but not for your action per se. Explain the misunderstanding.)
Counter-productive Goal: To make yourself look like a good person by pretending you have done something wrong. This goal only serves to make your accuser feel patronized and leaves them ignorant of what really happened.

***Reader Task:** Think back to a time when you were offended by someone's comment or action. What goal did you set for the conversation that followed? Having read this section, what goals might you set for the future? Do the same with other examples of Gateway Events.*

Strategy IV: Lower the Volume of the Conversation

In radio, modulation means to adjust the transmission settings so the program will broadcast more efficiently. In human communication, modulation involves lowering our voices to assure that our message is heard. Whereas loud and harsh utterances cause most of us to retreat behind a soundproof wall of denial, a softer tone has a remarkable way of creating safety for and, therefore, receptivity in the listener.

Unfortunately, when we are in the middle of a Gateway Event, we are often tempted to raise our voices out of anger or outrage. By softening our voice, we allow, and even tempt, the listener to crane forward to hear, and more readily understand, what this mysterious and barely audible message is all about. Next time you find yourself tempted to raise your voice, consider the possibility that a softened tone just might be the best way to get your message across.

This lowering of volume applies, not just to how loud we speak, but also to the intensity of the words we use. Admittedly, verbal modulation is tough because American culture loves large language. We like to indulge in a kind of over-speak in which the finest eggs are always the biggest, buildings the tallest, and books the

“best selling.” This is all very nice when pitching a product, but exaggeration is a sure-fire way to draw psychological blood and, thereby, inflame the dialogue or, worse, shut the conversation down entirely.

Assume for the moment that someone has offended you and your goal is to help reduce any bias he may have—or, at the very least, motivate him to stop and think next time around. You will have a far better chance of accomplishing this goal if you avoid using exaggerated terms or what is referred to as hyperbole.

In a situation like this, the understandable anger and stress tempt us to use potent verbiage like *racist*, *sexist*, and *homophobic*. *Homophobic*, for example, is a clinical term meaning “a pathological obsession with homosexuality caused by the heavily suppressed fear that one may be homosexual oneself.” Wouldn’t you agree that a “pathological obsession” is absurd hyperbole when applied to Lilly’s office mate whose “obsession” went no further than to express surprise that Lilly was gay? We accomplish only one thing when we spread such potent words around so liberally: we weaken the impact of our message.

Another problem with the use of hyperbole is that it gives the accused justification to play the innocent. Most people associate words such as *racist* with blatant discrimination, *homophobic* with hate crimes, and *sexist* with the desire to keep women barefoot and pregnant. “That’s not me,” the defendant is apt to think with relief. And most of the time, if measured by what those words traditionally mean, he’ll be right. If, on the other hand, the terms used were more reasoned, if the crime of which we accuse someone were pled down to a misdemeanor, then maybe we could maintain an atmosphere in which a productive conversation could take place.

Cranking up the emotional volume, which is what hyperbole is all about, provides no assurance that your message will be heard. It instead guarantees that the accused, whether guilty or innocent, will be sorely tempted to cover her ears, learn nothing, and turn and walk away.

A much better way to express complaints is to couch them in terms of behaviors and feelings rather than extreme labels. Here are two approaches to the same Gateway Event. Read them over and see which one you think is more apt to achieve the positive goals of education and behavior change:

Approach A: Sophie, having worked for months with a boss who treated her poorly, walked into his office, sat down, and said, “I’m really tired of your sexist treatment. You ignore my ideas, never give me feedback, and regularly exclude me from key meetings. Your bias against women will

have to change or I'll have no choice but to go to human resources with a complaint.”

Approach B: Sophie, having worked for months with a boss who treated her poorly, walked into his office, sat down, and said, “I need to let you know what I have been experiencing. Very often I find myself feeling ignored and I really do need more feedback on how I am doing. Also, it would be helpful to my career if I could attend more of the management meetings. To be honest, I am very concerned about this.”

I'm going to assume that you agree with me that Approach B is far more likely than A to change the behavior of Sophie's boss and maybe even his attitude. The biggest problem with Approach A is that, in that scenario, Sophie labels her boss's behavior and makes assumptions about his attitude and intentions—he is, she has decided, sexist and biased. Of course it is possible that he does have these attitudes, but Sophie can't know that for sure. Because she doesn't know for sure, there is no point in her using the labels. All her use of labels is apt to accomplish is to make her boss defensive and angry. Sophie's goal of changing his behavior would be better served by sticking to the facts that have been proven. She is uncomfortable and dissatisfied. Period.

The Sophie we meet in the second approach does just that; she talks not about what the boss is doing or what his attitude may or may not be, but about how it is affecting her. The fundamental reason Approach B is so effective is that it avoids giving the boss a reason to become defensive. No labeling, no insults, and no threats. This approach is far more apt to allow him to stay receptive to what she has to say. Who knows, he might just hear her and decide to make some changes.

***Reader Task:** The next time you find yourself in an awkward conversation about diversity or bias, monitor yourself carefully to make sure both your voice and your choice of words are designed to communicate, not to alienate.*

Strategy IV: Avoid Dismissive Language

Another language choice that can interfere with an effective conversation about diversity is the use of language that dismisses or negates what the other person has felt or said. Have you ever, for example, been in a discussion in which one person rebuts an argument with, “That's the way everybody does it,” or “That's what I was taught,” or, “Well, that's just the way it is”? Statements like these serve little

purpose other than to shut down the conversation and any learning that might have taken place.

Of course, we have every right to believe as we do. What we don't have is the right to use these beliefs as devices to stop dialogue. Slamming the ideological lid on a topic might make us feel righteous and safe, but it is also an excellent way to defeat our goals of sustaining productive conversation, getting to know each other better, and pounding another nail into the coffin of bias.

It is when someone has falsely accused us of a biased attitude that we are most tempted to make dismissive statements. Particularly if we haven't gotten ourselves diversity fit, we are apt to buckle at the knees and at the heart, and lash back with an inflexible, "You're too sensitive," or that pair of old standbys, "You know what I meant" and "I was only kidding." Each of these dismissive phrases does little more than make the object of the allegedly offending statement feel still more diminished and the person who has been accused of bias look foolish and unkind.

Just for a moment, put yourself in the position of a person who has been accused of saying something offensive, but, in fact, has been misunderstood. Here are some ideas of what to say that communicate respect for the accuser's feelings while keeping dialogue and mutual-learning open:

- "You have a different perspective. I'd like to hear more."
- "Thanks for speaking up about how you feel. We need more open discussions like this."
- "I can't honestly say I agree with you, but I'd sure like to talk about it some more."

Responses such as these just might produce a rich conversation in which honest emotions and ideas are exchanged; kind of scary, but very much worth the effort.

***Reader Task:** Think back on your own experience and list any dismissive phrases that have been directed at you and your feelings. Recall how they made you feel and commit to never using them during a dialogue about diversity.*

Strategy V: Really Listen

It may seem simplistic to include a strategy on listening, but the reality is that when we talk about something that involves a difference of opinion, as is the case

with most Gateway Events, we tend not to listen. This is because we believe that really listening gives the impression that we agree with our opponent. In fact, eloquent listening sends only one message: that we care about resolving the situation. George, Charmaine's boss, delivered this message of caring at a time when she desperately needed to hear it:

When Charmaine – an openly gay woman – was passed over for a promotion, she went to George and accused him of homophobia. At the start of the conversation, she was very emotional, not just because of the loss of this one promotion, but also because she had recently been the victim of two layoffs. She felt vulnerable, abused, and a little frightened. As Charmaine talked, George knew her charges were false; nonetheless, he fell silent and listened. When she was finished, he understood how frustrated she was and why she might have mistaken workplace realities for discrimination.

If George had refused to listen, if he had succumbed to anger or defensiveness and had begun to jabber on about how wrong Charmaine was, he never would have gained that understanding. As it was, he was able to empathize with her frustrations, explain the situation, avoid costly litigation, and retain a valuable employee to boot.

Only by listening can the full breadth of the speaker's thoughts and emotions be laid on the table. Only when these thoughts and emotions are fully heard can gateway conversations result in what we so desperately need – better understanding, reduced bias, and better working relationships.

***Reader Task:** The next time you are in a conversation in which there is a difference of opinion – no matter what the subject – pay attention to how much you are talking and how much you are listening. If you find yourself talking over or interrupting the other person, remind yourself of the importance of listening. You just might be surprised at what you learn.*

Sondra Thiederman is a speaker and author on bias-reduction, diversity, and cross-cultural issues. Her latest book, *Making Diversity Work: Seven Steps for Defeating Bias in the Workplace*, provides practical tools for defeating bias and bias-related conflicts in the workplace. Most recently, she has completed work on the training video *Is It Bias? Making Diversity Work*. This video-based training is available through Learning Communications (www.learncom.com). She can be contacted for Webinars and in-person presentations at: www.Thiederman.com, STPhD@Thiederman.com.

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