



Walking on egg shells: Fear of talking about differences in the workplace

Part two of a two-part series

by Barbara Deane and Donna Stringer

Organizational Implications of Fear of Talking Across Differences

Organizations often hire women and people of color hoping to benefit from their unique experiences and contributions. If they do not teach employees the skills to talk about differences, they run the risk of losing the very value they hope to capitalize on. This can also reduce effectiveness in three key elements of organizational performance:

- 1) employee engagement,
- 2) high performing teams and
- 3) employee satisfaction.

Examining each of these components through the lens of people's fears and concerns about interacting with each other can expose some of the assumptions about diverse workers and relationship issues not being addressed.

Employee engagement

Engaged employees demonstrate emotional and intellectual commitment to

their organization or group. Specifically, engaged employees may be described as:

- Being enthused about being a member of the organization
- Seeing themselves as doing meaningful work
- Eagerly referring the organization to others (potential employees and customers)
- Exerting extra effort and acting in ways that contribute to business success

Inclusion refers to creating a work environment where individuals feel a sense of belonging, respect, acknowledgement and challenge that allows them to contribute their best at all times—in other words to be engaged.

Across the board, studies show that organizations with highly engaged employees perform better and have stronger bottom line results. Engaged employees deliver a much higher level of discretionary effort and are much more likely to stay with an organization.

However, the recent Gallup Management Journal's semi-annual assessment of the number of engaged employees in companies identified 29 percent of those surveyed as "truly engaged", while a whopping 54 percent were "not engaged" and 17 percent were "actively disengaged" (Phelps, 2004).

A specific contributor to employee engagement was found to be the degree to which people felt they could make friends in their work environment and the degree to which they felt their relationship with their manager was both trusting and supportive.

The Journal also reported that "negative workplace relationships" may be a big factor as to why many American employees are not engaged at work. In a survey of 1,003 employees nationwide, the Journal found that engaged employees "are much more likely" to report that their organization "encourages close friendships at work."



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Of engaged employees, 82 percent either agreed or strongly agreed that friendships were encouraged at their workplaces, while only 53 percent of the “not engaged” agreed and only 17 percent of the “actively disengaged” agreed with this statement.

Gallup’s global practice leader, Tom Rath, states, “Our favorite moments, jobs, groups and teams revolve around friendships with other people.” But, he says, the American worker spends very little time or attention on building workplace friendships (Crabtree, 2004). Further, The Conference Board (2005) reports that the satisfaction of U.S. workers continues to decline, suggesting that this is an issue industry must pay attention to if a competitive edge is to be maintained.

In the race to attract and retain talent, employee retention goes hand in hand with employee engagement. Research studies show that organizational success depends on the effectiveness of employees; if they are not engaged there is far greater

likelihood of losing them to the competition.

The cost of turnover (estimated to be \$5 trillion annually in the U.S.) directly impacts customer loyalty and company profits. The challenge to companies is to find ways to retain talent so that they reduce costs and improve performance.

One study reported increased engagement may result in as much as a 57 percent increase in discretionary effort and as much as an 87 percent reduction in the desire to leave a company (Corporate Leadership Council, 2004).

The message to organizations seems clear: engagement is not a practice to ignore. Lack of engaged employees leads to higher costs and lost opportunities; engaged employees produce improved performance.

What seems to be missing from the engagement literature is a consideration of diversity. Our assumption about inclusion of diverse groups and employee engagement is that neither

will happen if employees are uncomfortable with or around each other. Nor will they happen if the organizational culture is not supportive of managers and employees taking time to develop trust and engage in courageous conversations.

If employees fear talking with co-workers who differ from themselves, particularly in terms of race and gender, then their ability to develop friendships at work will be thwarted. If employees and managers fear interacting with each other, then employees' goals of developing a trusting and supportive relationship with their managers will be unlikely to occur, as will the engagement of the employee.

High-performing teams

Earlier in this article, we identified “partnering,” or relationship building, as one of the most common activities in teamwork. We defined partnering as the ability of team members to get to know, trust and respect each other for who they are so that their team can carry out quality processes .



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These “human connections form the basis for support, cooperation and team spirit that not only make for high morale, but the kind of effective communication and creativity that lead to greater productivity” (Gardenswartz & Rowe, 2003).

In the process, employees create a safe working environment in which they are more likely to take risks and explore innovative approaches.

Organizations often assume that team members can automatically engage in the partnering or relationship-building activity. Most teamwork models and most communication models are based on similarity among the participants.

When white men were the dominant members of organizational teams, most organizations assumed that men could accomplish their performance goals and gave little, if any, attention to any differences they might encounter among themselves. In other words, their similarity — white skin and male gender — would drown out any differences that might affect their performance.

Enter diversity. Even though organizational members have become increasingly diverse, the historical assumption about teamwork has not changed very much. Most organizations still assume that team members will figure out the partnering activity, in spite of, or perhaps by ignoring, their differences.

Research on diverse teams, however, indicates that such groups are more creative and productive once they have developed solid relationships and understanding of each other.

If team members are afraid to talk with each other because of their racial or gender identities, then little progress will be made in developing the relationships and understanding required for partnering effectively and unleashing the creativity and innovation that are characteristic of high-performing teams.

Employee satisfaction

Employees who like their co-workers and are more satisfied with their work environment, contribute more to their company’s success. This contribution comes in the form

of staying with the company and serving its customers well. Research shows that improving an organization’s environment and employee satisfaction directly impacts customer satisfaction and bottom line performance, .

Needless to say, employees who fear talking with their co-workers due to their differences will have a hard time getting to know their co-workers, much less knowing if they like them or not. The inability to engage in this important relationship-building communication sets up a chain reaction of lost opportunity for the organization.

Solutions: No more Egg Shells

What, then, could help in overcoming employees’ fears so that engagement, high-performing teams and satisfaction flourish? As with many other changes involving human behavioral change, it will be important to provide a combination of awareness, information and skill development.



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Awareness

For individuals to be willing to engage in conversations about differences, it will be helpful to develop awareness of why those conversations are avoided and the value they can have to both individuals and organizations. Such awareness can be achieved in short presentations or discussions and should include awareness of personal fears as well as the time required to develop trust.

Both managers and employees will need to be aware of their own fears or concerns if they are to be prepared to engage in such discussions. It will also be critical to create an awareness of the time required to develop trust and have such conversations. If discussing differences is treated as another “quick fix task” it will surely fail. This is also an opportunity to validate the concerns white men expressed about the time required to establish authentic relationships.

Information

Perhaps the most critical information managers and

employees need if they are to engage in conversations about differences is related to communication and conflict styles.

Brief educational sessions about these differences allow people to have discussions with others whose styles are different from their own without misperceptions or negative evaluation.

A perfect example of this is the concern white women expressed that women of color would get “defensive.” Without denying that defensiveness can occur, the authors have also observed women of color using more expressive communication styles and more confrontational conflict styles as a means to engage and to understand and be understood—not as a way to avoid such discussions.

If white women misinterpret these styles as defensiveness and therefore back off, they can be achieving the exact opposite results of those intended by women of color. Conversely, if women of color interpret this

avoidance as white women not caring about them, when the behavior is often intended to be respectful, we again have a result that is opposite of that intended.

Understanding cross cultural communication styles and conflict styles can facilitate greater understanding and a willingness to engage in difficult discussions with fewer misperceptions.

Skills

Developing the skills of dialogue will allow people to explore their differences without a need to win and to see the conversation’s purpose as developing a deeper understanding of each other. Once we understand each other better we can then move into a highly productive task orientation with each person contributing their greatest skills.

The conversation is not intended to determine who is “right” but to identify the many “right” things each individual can bring to the process. Thus, it is also



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not about agreeing or disagreeing but about understanding a range of perspectives.

Dialogue is a conversation with the sole purpose of more effectively understanding another person. It is not a debate, problem solving or decision making. It is a conversation that allows each person to more fully understand the perspective of the other(s).

Use of this skill is increasing in organizational settings and is a way to more fully understand and utilize the valuable differences employees bring to organizations. Because of the organizational barriers discussed above, dialogue is often counter-cultural and consequently requires practice and reinforcement.

Offering sessions for managers and employees to develop dialogue skills can result in the opportunity for each individual to engage in conversations that can reveal fears, deepen understanding and maximize the organization's ability to utilize the richness of its entire employee base.

How to Reduce Fears for Talking About Differences

What diversity training overlooks:

1. Mistrust due to historical relationships
2. Misperceptions due to communication & conflict style differences
3. Lack of skills for effective conversations across differences

Solutions:

1. Increase awareness about historical experiences of different groups
 2. Provide information about conflict and style differences
 3. Build skills for dialogue
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Conclusion

Our findings indicate that women and men, both whites and people of color, all share fears and concerns about talking with each other in the work environment. These fears and concerns adversely impact organizational climate and performance, specifically in regard to employee engagement, high performing teams and employee satisfaction.

If organizations want to reduce “walking on eggshells” about these fears, they have to do something different! Organizations will benefit in

both improved employee engagement and bottom-line productivity results if they provide opportunities for three key activities: help employees identify the reasons they may not be talking about differences, offer skill building in how to have such conversations and allow the time to engage in such conversations.

Rather than a “waste of time” or a “distraction from productivity”, the research supports the qualitative and quantitative benefits to talking about differences with each other in the workplace.



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