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

Part one of a two-part series

by Barbara Deane and Donna Stringer

Introduction & Research

Why are white men afraid to talk to black women? Why are black women fearful of talking to white women? What concerns white women about conversations with white men? Why are black men anxious about interacting with white men?

Why is the ability to interact across these differences important in the workplace?

Racial and gender differences are still causing people to walk on eggshells in the workplace according to the data from our study. In spite of hundreds of hours of corporate diversity training and even a recent focus on difficult, cross-racial dialogues, many managers and employees still have trouble engaging in authentic conversations with people different from themselves.

Effective interaction at work is how people get to know each other and build trust — the basic infrastructure of relationships that deliver organizational performance. Employee engagement, high-performing teams, and employee satisfaction are key elements of organizational performance that have relationships among co-workers at their core.

Diversity training has seldom taken into account three key factors. First, historically, relationships between men and women, people of color and whites, were filled with inequality, distrust, mistreatment and exclusion—issues that people are eager to avoid in any context, but which are even more uncomfortable in mixed-race, mixed-gender settings.

Second, diversity training may not have taught the skills that would allow people to be comfortable discussing these historical relationships when they surface. Third, style differences related to conflict may result in misperception of behaviors and misunderstanding of communication.

One result of these omissions is that people avoid discussions

Three Factors Overlooked by Previous Diversity Training:

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

about differences for fear that they will unintentionally offend the other. This, of course, only leads to further lack of information and misperceptions.

This article examines new research about the fears and concerns reported by people in four broad identity groups. In addition, it suggests ways that organizations can help employees and managers overcome their angst and interact

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effectively across differences to build relationships that improve employee satisfaction and organizational performance.

The Study

We conducted our research over three years, gathering data from 242 participants. The participants were mixed gender, mixed race groups of employees from several Fortune 500 companies and government agencies. The data collection occurred as part of an exercise that asked individuals to identify their fears and concerns when interacting or partnering with members of each of the four groups.

The four groups were: women of color (28 percent), men of color (14 percent), white women (35 percent) and white men (23 percent).

We used the words "fears" and "concerns" because some people reacted to the word "fear" as too strong to describe what they felt. However, whatever the name, it stopped them from acting; consequently, we used the words interchangeably and it stimulated participants to think about why they were not acting.

The results were very consistent across time, groups and organizations. We continue to collect data from additional groups.

The Findings

Each group reported concerns about interacting or partnering with each of the other groups, including their own group. These concerns remained hidden until facilitated discussion gave permission for them to surface.

One of the benefits of this exercise was the realization that the fears were just that: fears, not reality. Because the fear stopped conversations from occurring, people had rarely taken the opportunity to check out the reality of their perceptions. The following graphic (Figure 1) illustrates the major concerns expressed:

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Figure 1: Fears and Concerns About Interacting

GROUP ⟹ CONCERNED ABOUT ⟱	White Women (35%)	Women of Color (28%)	White Men (23%)	Men of Color (14%)
White Women	• Competition • Communication Style Differences • Judgmentalness • Cattiness	• Being misinterpreted • Defensiveness • Physical & cultural differences	• Not being valued or heard • Competitiveness • Not open to equal partnerships	• Misunderstanding due to cultural differences • Not being valued/ heard • Being perceived as racist
Women of Color	• Perception of racism • Don't share history • Not acknowledging problems of women of color • Assumed solidarity	• Competitiveness • Class and status differences • Assumed solidarity	• Good old boys mentality • Attitude about reverse discrimination • Inequality	• Competitiveness • Sexism • Lack of support • Ambivalence
White Men	• Perception of insensitivity • Perception of patronizing • Perception of sexism	• Perceived as racist • Perceived as sexist • Offending others	• Ego issues • Vulnerability • Communicating/ giving feedback	• Perceived as racist • Time to build relationships • Opening up/being vulnerable
Men of Color	• Complimenting without offending • Misperception of motives • Past history	• Past history • Complimenting without offending • Misperception of motives • Taking care of them (mothers/ sisters)	• Fear of info being used against me • Disagreeing without damaging partnerships • Past history	• Disagreeing without damaging partnerships

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Understanding each group's fears and concerns

"The fear that I heard in my father's voice … when he realized that I really believed I could do anything a white boy could do and had every intention of proving it, was not at all like the fear I heard when one of us was ill. … It was another fear, a fear that the child, in challenging the white world's assumptions, was putting himself in the path of destruction."
—James Baldwin, 1963 (Mazel, 1998).

To understand each group's fears and concerns, we reviewed the themes in each group as well as statements made by members of each group.

Women of color

For women of color, betrayal permeated their concerns. When discussing both white women and white men, they talked about being excluded or having their competencies ignored.

"I spent over a decade working with a white woman I considered a friend. When she had the opportunity to promote someone she totally overlooked me and later said she didn't realize I had the competencies required for the job. She didn't know my capabilities because she

> *"She didn't know my capabilities because she consistently failed to invite me to participate in decisions or problem solving that would allow me to use my skills."*

consistently failed to invite me to participate in decisions or problem solving that would allow me to use my skills. When I confronted her with this, she told me I was being too sensitive."

Another said, "White men are so busy taking care of white women that they often don't even see us. When I asked a vice president to mentor me, he acted surprised and then said he didn't realize I wanted out of the admin ranks. I never was in the admin ranks!"

Competition became a theme in talking with women of color for organizational recognition, jobs and promotions. "If they already have their token Latina, I may as well not apply."

Within communities of color, women also talked about being excluded based on class or status differences. "I knew from the beginning she wouldn't put me on the project team. I didn't graduate from Howard and am too dark so she doesn't want to be seen as promoting me in the company."

White women

White women's dominant fear with other white women was competition and resulting lack of support. "Every woman in this organization should be celebrating my success as a model for other women in the company. Instead, they are accusing me of not being qualified and of receiving favoritism."

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With white men, they were concerned about being patronized or seen as not really qualified. One woman reported having her boss treat her like his daughter. When she pointed this out to him, he was first surprised and then acknowledged that he did see her as "like a daughter." Once this conversation took place, she reported some tension between them until he "got over being called on his behavior."

White women also reported experiencing exclusion from critical meetings, decisions and events—behavior they interpreted as being related to their white male colleagues "not thinking about us."

With women of color, white women most feared being misinterpreted, but they also feared defensiveness on the part of women of color. "When I tried to ask an African American colleague what she meant by a comment about discrimination, she got very emotional and accused me of not being aware of what was going on around me. I asked her because I knew I wasn't as aware as I should be but her response made it hard for me to continue the conversation because I felt like I had just been accused of being the problem instead of part of the solution."

In discussing interactions with men of color, white women's concerns were whether they could be friendly and open without being perceived as being interested in a relationship beyond the work environment.

Men of color

Competition for organizational recognition, jobs and promotions was also a theme with men of color. Men of color were also concerned about whether they could compliment white women without offending them or being perceived as having ulterior or sexual motives. They often did not trust that what they said to either white women or white men would not be mis-understood or misused.

A primary concern was that white men would be looking for how black men fit stereotypes.

One black man said, "I feel like white men are often looking for errors in my language, my logic, my performance to validate a stereotype that I am not as good as them. I know this may be more my fear than reality, but it does affect the honesty of my interactions with white men."

A particularly difficult discussion surrounded the concern men of color expressed in interacting with women of color. Men of color reported wanting to be respectful of women of color. They also reported that women of color often remind them of their mothers and sisters, which sometimes stopped their ability to have candid conversations about some topics.

Being less than candid in these conversations appeared to come from two places: first, they didn't want to say anything that would be hurtful or disrespectful. Second, particularly for African American men, they feared the reaction they might get from their African American "sisters."

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One African American man explained it this way: "If we learn to be direct communicators, we also learn from our mothers and sisters early in life that we can expect a direct response in return. If we say something that our mother and/or sisters respond to in a negative way, it can feel like 'being hit upside the head.' This can lead us to become more indirect with our mothers and sisters to avoid such strong reactions. Later in life, if other women of color remind us of our mothers and sisters we might be less direct and/or less honest with them as well."

Men of color reported that this reaction to women of color creates a tension between wanting to be respectful and wanting to be authentic/honest. Not knowing what a woman's reactions might be (and therefore whether it is "safe" to have a conversation) can lead to avoiding the conversation altogether.

The concern about interacting with other men of color was particularly poignant. Men of color reported that much of the support they receive and those they feel can genuinely understand their experiences, are other men of color.

Consequently, there was a concern about how to disagree without negatively affecting a relationship since cultivating these relationships was often seen as a basic survival technique. They wanted to be able to be truthful without losing respect or unintentionally offending others.

Like the other groups, these concerns can be interpreted as fear of being mis-perceived. Additionally, however, men of color were clearly concerned about the negative career impacts if they were mis-perceived—concerns based on historical experiences that go beyond the disruption of effective work relationships.

White men

White men primarily feared being perceived as unsupportive or prejudiced when interacting with both white women and women of color. They were concerned that white women would perceive them as patronizing and that they could easily and unintentionally offend women of color.

"Women are so sensitive and I never know what to expect if we have a really difficult discussion. I am afraid to give any negative feedback for fear she will cry—and then I don't have any idea what to do. If I try to touch her physically to provide support it could be seen as sexual harassment. Conversations with women often feel very risky."

With other white men, they were most concerned about ego issues and competition. "Letting other men know you have any kind of vulnerability could give them an advantage that I am not willing to give—especially when we know we are in competition for resources and promotions."

With men of color, white men most feared being perceived as prejudiced or racist. One

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participant was particularly clear about this: "I know that having really candid discussions, given our history, will require development of trust first. Building trust takes time and, frankly, I am concerned about the career implications of taking too much time to get to real conversations."

Commonalities

Participants expressed many common fears or concerns, in addition to their differences. The commonalities can be viewed through three lenses: culturally-learned differences, personal history, and organizational or environmental factors, as illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Fears and Concerns Through the Lenses of Three Factors

Culturally-learned Style Differences that Complicate Interaction	Personal History	Organizational and Environmental Factors
Communication Styles	Misperceived or labeled by others (e.g., sexist, racist, playing the race card) Attempts to raise difficult issues punished by the organization	Attempts to raise difficult issues punished by the organization
Conflict Styles	Betrayed by a trusted other	Legal concerns about litigation if misperceived
Assumptions that disagreements will occur and destroy friendships	Being ridiculed or chastised for asking questions; lack of information resulting from segregation or lack of experience	Fast paced, results-driven environments with no reward for spending time on authentic dialogue or to build relationships
	Offending or being offended	Avoidance of conflict as part of organizational culture
	Competing for jobs, promotions or recognition	Belief that these topics are not appropriate to the workplace
	Being the target of sexual allegations	Competitive environments where conversations have winners/losers—and negative career impacts, especially if the dialogue is with a superior
	Excluded from professional opportunities	Organizational instability and fear that info will be used in downsizing or merger decisions.

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