

Chapter 4

Barriers to Diversity

People are diverse in many ways. We have a number of differences that offer a wide range of opportunities and possibilities to make organizations successful and our world a better place. When we accept our differences and learn to work with them, we enrich our lives and improve the creativity and productivity of the organization. However, too often organizations find they work against the effective use of differences and allow them to hinder instead of help.

Why do we have so many problems dealing with diversity? Diversity itself isn't a problem—our differences have always been there; they are what make us unique. The problems lie in our attitudes toward diversity. People who have negative attitudes toward other people's differences often engage in negative behaviors including

- ❖ Prejudice
- ❖ Stereotyping and discrimination
- ❖ Ethnocentrism

To keep these negative behaviors from becoming barriers to organizational diversity, we must learn to recognize and avoid them in all types of situations such as working with employees, business relationships, customer relationships, hiring, firing, and the like. Prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination hurt people and ultimately destroy an organization's effectiveness and bottom line. Let's explore these barriers in more detail.

Prejudice

Prejudice is a preconceived feeling or bias. Each of us has biases of one kind or another. Some people wouldn't be caught dead driving a certain make of car or wearing a certain brand of clothes. Other people may swear by that car or brand. We all have likes and dislikes. As long as our biases are about unimportant things, like our brand of toothpaste, they are relatively harmless. However, when we hold prejudices against other people, we create all kinds of problems.

Prejudice against people comes from a belief in the superiority of one's own race, culture, class, or other group. Often, prejudice takes this ethnocentric form. Although America was founded on the principle of "liberty and justice for all" and most people want to believe in equal rights, current studies show that 10 to 20 percent of Americans still express bigotry. However, there is a trend toward not openly expressing prejudice, but subliminally still viewing nontraditional employees as less competent (Dovido, 1993, p. 37).

Other studies highlight the impact of prejudice even further and show that even people who want to avoid bias are *conditioned* for a biased response. In one experiment, executives were given resumes and photos of job applicants and asked to describe jobs they might offer the people. All the resumes were identical, but the pictures were different: a white man, an African American man, a Hispanic man, an African American woman, and a Hispanic woman. White executives typically assigned administrative tasks to the women of color and line tasks to the men of color. Further, in an illustration of how broad reaching prejudices can be and how they can create internalized oppression, when women of color were given the same assignment with the

same photos and resumes as the white executives, they made the same job assignments.

Another study revealed that biased behavior is largely unconscious. People who display negative non-verbal reactions to others are usually unaware they are doing so (Bass, 1990). One of the most devastating aspects of prejudice is that people deny they have biases. Denying it only perpetuates the problem. It can also be related to a sense of not wanting to admit to a loss of control, similar to incidents when people get lost and need directions. Often, they do not want to admit that they are lost and certainly don't want to admit it to a stranger!

At other times, prejudice can come in the form of “backlash” when people perceive diversity as nothing but an attempt to fill quotas and take jobs away from others. When this mindset exists, resentment, poor teamwork, and sabotage can result that affects productivity. Some prejudice is a matter of blind conformity to prevailing cultural beliefs and customs. However, in most cases, prejudice seems to fulfill a specific irrational function for people such as making them feel superior to others, or using others as scapegoats for the prejudiced person's own resentment or guilt. Prejudice is usually tied to a person's deepest fears, although the connection is normally subconscious and therefore hidden from awareness. Researchers have uncovered some interesting facts about prejudice:

- ❖ Prejudice is found in all types of people in every ethnic group.
- ❖ Prejudice occurs in the mind, but can be acted out in ways that exclude others.
- ❖ Prejudiced acts can be performed by non-prejudiced as well as prejudiced people.

- ❖ The best way to decide if an action is prejudiced is to notice how it affects another person. You can't prove someone is prejudiced, but you might prove that his or her actions excluded and placed another person at a disadvantage.

We talk about prejudice in terms of workplace prejudice, sexism, racism, ethnic prejudice, and other "isms." Workplace prejudice is active in organizational workplaces today. According to the National Opinion Research Center, some people still believe the stereotypes that women and ethnic minorities are less intelligent, less hard-working, less likely to be self supporting, more violence-prone, and less patriotic than they are. Organizations such as the U.S. Glass Ceiling Commission and Catalyst have stated in their research reports that prejudice is the biggest barrier to advancement that diverse employees face.

Sexism

Sexism is prejudice based on gender and is said by some to be the root of all prejudice and discrimination. As children we literally begin learning this form of inequality in the cradle. It doesn't involve a majority and minority, since men and women are relatively equal in number. However, women in all countries are a minority in economic and political arenas and have fewer rights and privileges than men.

Racism

Racism is typically a problem in societies such as the United States where there is a predominant majority group and one or more cultural minorities. People often use the term *racism* in discussions of prejudice. The term *race* has little meaning in anthropology. Because of intermarriages, you can have some

experts say there are 3 races and others say there are 300. This fact notwithstanding, a major explanation for discrimination in society takes place in the name of race.

Ethnic Prejudice

People who try to distinguish between race and ethnicity typically say that racial traits are inborn, inherited, and given by nature, while ethnic traits are learned, cultural, and acquired through nurture. Since most ethnic characteristics are learned and are not permanently fixed in our genes, they can theoretically be changed. Ethnicity is much more flexible and changeable than race.

An ethnic subculture is a segment of a larger culture or society. Members of the subculture participate in shared activities in which the common origin and culture are significant ingredients. A subculture is unique because of its particular beliefs, customs and values, its heroes and heroines, its myths and stories, and its social networks. Ethnic discrimination against minorities occurs when “minority” status carries with it the exclusion from full participation in the society and the largest subculture holds an undue share of power, influence, and wealth.

Other “Isms”

Other isms include ageism, classism (or class snobbery), and homophobia (or antigay prejudice). Besides ethnic minorities and women, groups that experience discrimination in the workplace include persons with disabilities, gay people, older employees, and obese people. To a lesser extent, people from lower socioeconomic groups may be targets of prejudice, as symbolized by such derogatory terms as “trailer trash” and “poor White trash.” Prejudice knows no boundaries, however, and some people believe that all Post Office employees are

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deadbeat bureaucrats, all administrators are corrupt political sharks, and so on. Complete Exercise 4-1 to examine your experiences of being tolerated versus appreciated.

Exercise 4-1. Self-Assessment: Being Tolerated Versus Being Appreciated

Purpose: To experience the difference between tolerance and appreciation.

Step One: Being Tolerated

- ❖ Think of a time when you felt tolerated. Write a few words about it.

- ❖ How did it feel to be merely tolerated? Write a few words about your feelings.

- ❖ How did feeling tolerated affect your relationship with the tolerant person(s)?

- ❖ If it was a job situation, how motivated and effective were you after you realized you were being tolerated?

Step Two: Being Appreciated

- ❖ Think of a time when you felt appreciated. Write a few words about it.

- ❖ How did it feel to be truly appreciated? Did you feel respected? Write a few words about your feelings.

- ❖ How did feeling appreciated affect your relationship with the appreciative person(s)?

- ❖ If it was a job situation, how motivated and effective were you after you realized you were truly appreciated?

- ❖ Based on this exercise, what are the lessons learned and/or what would you change in your own behavior from this point forward?

Stereotyping and Discrimination

As we discussed earlier, stereotypes are defined as fixed, inflexible notions about a group. Stereotyping occurs when we apply our biases to all members of a group. If you were raised to think all members of a particular ethnic group are lazy, you may still hold this stereotype, no matter what your day-to-day experience tells you. If you believe strongly in this stereotype, you may also spread it to others. A more technical look at stereotyping finds that it is a process that allows us to manage complex realities using categories to store information, to quickly identify things, to handle multi-sensory experiences, and to make sense of things. We often attach strong emotions to these stereotypes, even when they're false, and often use stereotypes to justify our dislike of someone.

We stereotype when we apply an experience with one member of a group to the entire group. If you met one member of a particular culture who was rude to you, it might be hard for you to recognize that not everyone from that particular group behaves in a rude way. But just because one member of a race, gender, age group, or culture acts a certain way, doesn't mean every other person of that group will act the same way. Your perceptions could be based on a lack of knowledge because you haven't taken the time to understand the other person's culture. Many stereotypical generalizations are based on misconception and errors in judgment.

Sometimes people generalize too much or stereotype simply because they do not have the facts, have limited personal experience, or are working with distorted information. Stereotypes often lead to assumptions that are insupportable and offensive. They cloud the fact that all attributes may be found in all groups and individuals. Stereotypes show up in

phrases like “men won’t ask for directions” or “you know ‘those people’ can’t handle responsibility at this level.” The stereotypes we attach to people hurt us as much as they hurt everybody else, because we can’t get to know other people for who they really are. However, we can change when we discover how this stereotyping behavior develops.

We must deal with a lot of complexity in our lives and often need a process for sorting things out. When we stereotype, we form large classes or clusters of information for guiding our daily adjustments to life. We may not feel that we have time to get to know everyone and every situation, so for sanity’s sake, we “generalize, delete, and distort” information to align it with information in broad categories. Unfortunately, we may associate this information with established categories just to make sense of the world. By doing so, however, it can prevent us from being completely open-minded.

These categories become our short cuts. We tend to place as much as we can in these classes or clusters to categorize events in order to take action. We are “inference focus beings” who like to solve problems. When left with little or no data, we will generalize, delete, and distort to come up with an answer to solve a problem or make sense of a person or situation. Because we like to problem solve as easily as possible, we try to fit things neatly into a category and use this category to judge what it is or means.

A stereotype enables us to readily identify related things. Stereotypes have a close and immediate tie with what we see, how we judge, and what actions we take. In fact, the purpose of stereotypes is to help us make responses and adjustments to life in a speedy, smooth, and consistent manner. For each mental category we create, we have a thinking and feeling

tone or flavor. Everything in that category takes on that flavor. For example, we not only know what the term *Southern belle* means, we also have a feeling tone that is favorable or unfavorable that immediately comes to mind along with this concept. When we meet someone who we decide is a Southern belle, that feeling tone determines whether we like her more or less than we would if we got to know her on her own merits. Does labeling her as a “Southern belle” cause you to instantly predict that this experience will be pleasurable or painful?

Rationality and Justifying Our Fear

Stereotypes may be more or less rational. A rational stereotype starts to grow from a kernel of truth and enlarges and solidifies with each new relevant experience. A rational stereotype gives us information that we think can help us predict how someone will behave or what might happen in a situation. An irrational stereotype is one we've formed without adequate evidence. When you add emotions to this mixture, you get an overwhelmingly powerful sense of conviction about something that may or may not be based in truth. An irrational idea that is engulfed by an overpowering emotion is more likely to conform to the emotion than to objective evidence. Therefore, once we develop an irrational stereotype that we feel strongly about, it is difficult for us to change that stereotype based on facts alone. We must deal with the emotion and its ties to our deepest fears.

Sometimes we form stereotypes that are linked to an emotion related to fear such as hostility, suspicion, dislike, or disgust and set up the framework for prejudice toward an entire group of people based on our experience with one person or a few

people. When people become prejudiced toward a group, they need to justify their dislike, and any justification that fits the immediate conversational situation will do. We constantly make others prove us wrong in our negative assumptions, rather than assuming the best. In addition, when people don't fit the stereotype, we think they're the exception rather than questioning our stereotype of them or the group they belong to.

Stereotyping is a double-edged sword. On one hand, it allows you to handle a world full of multi-sensory data so that you do not become overwhelmed; however, left on its own without a conscious understanding of how it affects the way we categorize, it can be fatally problematic. When our categorizations become too fixed, our labels too permanent, and our perceptions too rigid, it often leads to prejudice and discrimination against people.

Discrimination

Discrimination does not mean failing to hire enough women, minorities, or gays; it doesn't even mean refusing to associate with people from other cultures. Discrimination is treating people differently, unequally, and usually negatively because they are members of a particular group. We develop prejudices, turn them into stereotypes, and allow them to grow into discrimination. Unfortunately, prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination are still facts of organizational life and our society with all the associated negative consequences. We see these diversity barriers in the form of racist or sexist jokes, rude remarks, or the refusal to hire or promote. If you encountered a person being discriminated against today, how would you handle it? Keep in mind doing nothing is taking a position. Complete Exercise 4-2 to gain some insight into this matter.

Exercise 4-2. What's Your Experience with Discrimination?

Have you ever been discriminated against? Have you ever witnessed someone being discriminated against? If so, what did you do? _____

My Experience: _____

Situations I witnessed. What I did. _____

If others you know are discriminatory and you accept that part of them without protest, you are actually allowing discrimination to continue. You can discriminate by merely being a part of an organization that itself unintentionally discriminates through its traditional business practices. This can come about due to a power-privilege imbalance that automatically favors a dominant majority and is unfavorable to minorities—unfavorable, that is, until some actions are taken to offset and correct this imbalance. The press is filled with cases that highlight

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organizational inability to deal effectively with diversity and the financial and other costs incurred:

- ❖ Racial bias claims alone cost the U.S. economy about \$215 billion a year. That's almost 4 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP).
- ❖ More than one-third of Fortune 500 companies have been sued for sexual harassment, many of them more than once. A *Working Women* magazine survey of Fortune 500 businesses as far back as 1988 determined that the direct costs of sexual harassment averaged \$6.7 million annually per company in lost productivity, absenteeism, and turnover. One expert estimates that when overall gender bias is figured in, organizations lose over \$15 million per year.
- ❖ Age discrimination cases are up since the Age Discrimination in Employment Act went into effect in 1967, with a median of \$219,000 awarded in successful suits.
- ❖ Disability claims have also been rising since the Americans with Disabilities Act went into effect in 1990. It is having a major effect on the way organizations do business by adjusting access to include all available talent.
- ❖ Court costs, attorney fees, settlements, stress-related illnesses due to hostile work environment, poor productivity, poor quality, impacts on short-term and long-term disability insurance expenses, impact on customer service level maintenance, and ability to compete must also be included in the cost side of the ledger.

A power imbalance is a key aspect of discrimination. Power is a force that is absolutely essential to perpetuate discrimination. For example, an African American clerk may dislike a white

executive and never try to get to know him as a person. Her actions are not called “discrimination” because she does not have the power to take actions that exclude him in ways that disadvantage his career. On the other hand, the executive does have the power to discriminate against her, and that type of power differential is not unusual. White men still hold nearly all of the top-level economic and political power in the United States. They hold 92 percent of the top-level positions in mid-to large-sized businesses and about 80 percent of the seats in Congress, even though they comprise only approximately 35 percent of the population and 39 percent of the workforce, according to the U.S. Census Bureau and the U.S. Glass Ceiling Commission. Civil rights measures are based on the fact that a power imbalance exists and represent an attempt to break the cycle of centuries of discrimination.

Discrimination against diverse workforce employees not only affects their career progress, it also affects their trust, motivation, and productivity in addition to their relationships with the rest of the workforce. It affects them in every phase and aspect of their work experience. These include areas such as

- ❖ **Recruitment Practices.** Examples include unwillingness to hire people who are different, selective advertising of high-level positions in media rarely used by minorities, etc.
- ❖ **Screening Practices.** Examples include using preferences as if they are real requirements to be effective in the job, stereotyping intelligence attributes to different groups, prejudices against education received at specific minority-focused colleges or universities, vague or arbitrary assessments made by others who may be prejudiced in their view then using that assessment to determine who will be interviewed.

- ❖ **Terms and Conditions of Employment.** Examples include the fact that women and minorities typically earn about 70 percent of the amount white males do for the same job with equivalent experience, and may receive fewer benefits and fewer opportunities to be in succession plans and development or mentoring experiences.
- ❖ **Tracking and Job Segregation.** Examples include “women jobs,” “men jobs,” and “minority jobs,” even though in today’s “politically correct” environment they would never be called that.
- ❖ **Performance Evaluation.** Examples include the way job performance of women and minorities is viewed versus others. Successful performance by women and African American men on tasks traditionally done by white males tends to be attributed to luck, while white men’s performance is more likely attributed to their abilities according to the research of J. H. Greenhaus and S. Parasuraman (1991). Minorities and women are often held to a more limited range of acceptable behavior than others. Assertive behavior for example may be viewed negatively if exhibited by a woman or a person of color.
- ❖ **Promotion Practices.** Examples include unwritten, informal rules or expectations that are rarely shared and administered equally for women and minorities, prejudging a woman’s career potential based on her family status.
- ❖ **Glass Ceilings, Sticky Floors, and Compressed Walls.** Examples include research that shows white men at the top of organizations prefer colleagues of their same gender and race and clear statistical evidence that shows multi-year patterns of poor development, succession planning,

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promotion, and retention of high-level minority and women executives.

- ❖ **Diverse Standards.** Examples include standards such as “not aggressive enough,” “lacks initiative,” “too passive,” or “too emotional” when the real reason is misreading a person’s cultural traits.
- ❖ **Layoff, Discharge, and Seniority Practices.** Examples include protecting workers who have been employed the longest, knowing that minorities and women are often the last hired and the first fired or laid off, or cannot get into the trades and other programs to meet seniority requirements. In some cases, minorities have been barred from certain occupations.
- ❖ **Career Alternatives.** Discrimination can make it even more difficult for diverse employees to choose alternatives to corporate careers that hit a glass ceiling. Many women and minorities, in general, may have fewer assets and more difficulty in getting business loans than do white men, however, this is changing. Use Exercise 4-3 as a tool to determine the privileges you may or may not have.

Exercise 4-3. Self-Assessment: How Privileged Are You?

Please respond to the following questions:

1. What are some privileges you enjoy in life? List a few.

2. How do privileges affect your life? Do they affect your personal power? Your ability to achieve your goals? Your success?

3. Which of these (or other) privileges are unavailable to some people because of the group they belong to? Beside each unavailable privilege, write the name of the group(s) that don't enjoy these privileges.

Privileges unavailable to others	Group(s) that don't enjoy this privilege

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4. What are some privileges that are unavailable to you that people from certain groups enjoy? List each privilege and beside it, the group or groups that have access to it.

Privileges unavailable to me	Group(s) that have access to this privilege

5. How does this lack of privilege affect your life? Your personal power? Your ability to achieve your goals? Your success? _____
- _____

Ethnocentrism

Another barrier to diversity that shows up in the workplace is “ethnocentric” behavior. Ethnocentrism is the belief that a person’s own group is inherently superior to all others. People who exhibit ethnocentric behavior have a “my way or the highway” attitude that negates anyone else’s opinion as worth considering.

Ethnocentrism, like prejudice, stereotypes, and discrimination, places barriers in the way of performance for those considered in the “out group.” In order to be effective, ethnocentrism

must be rooted out of the organization. It is counterproductive to high performance and dampens efforts of creativity and innovation.

Non-Verbal Communication

Our non-verbal communication or body language can be another obstacle to a diverse, high-performance work environment. Our actions do in fact speak louder than our words. When people know us as individuals, our gestures, eye contact, and odd movements are usually understood and, therefore, are not interpreted as threatening or negative. However, someone from another race, gender, culture, age, or economic background might easily misinterpret them. Although our world is becoming smaller, there isn't a common language, culture, or set of mannerisms. No gestures are universal. Worse yet, sometimes our tongues say one thing, our gestures say another thing, and our symbols (clothing, jewelry, hairstyles, facial hair, body markings) say still another thing. Mixed signals can be very misleading to other people, especially people who come from an area where the words, gestures, or symbols mean something entirely different.

Gestures

Have you ever folded your arms, flashed a victory sign, extended your left hand to someone as a handshake, made direct eye contact with someone while talking, etc.? If you have, you have offended someone in a particular culture. For example, the victory sign shown with the palm inward is an insult with vulgar overtones to Australians. It's easy to offend someone without even knowing it.

The gestures that mean “OK” to people born and raised in the United States have various meanings in other countries. To a co-worker from Japan, for example, it means “money.” To business associates who grew up in France, Belgium, and Tunisia, it signals “worthless” or “zero.” To those from Turkey, Greece, and Malta, it refers to homosexuality. To people who grew up in the rest of Europe and Mexico, this gesture represents an obscene or lewd comment. The crooked finger that native-born Americans use to say “Come here” is also considered obscene in many cultures. It’s often the way people call prostitutes, animals, or “inferior” people! So it is easy to see that you could insult someone from another culture without even knowing it or why it might have been offensive.

Movement

Something as simple as how we sit and the position of our body can communicate a negative message. For example, people with a European heritage are sometimes offended by the way American men cross their legs while sitting. From their perspective, it is considered crude. Americans on the other hand may consider some European men effeminate due to the way they cross their legs and the lack of firmness in their handshake.

Even when you talk with Americans, there are different messages communicated by the way people in America sit, stand, shake hands, or cross their legs. There is plenty of room for things to be misunderstood. A woman with her arms crossed around her chest may not signal that she is closed to anything you have to say—she could be cold or it could simply be the way she likes to stand. A person with a weak handshake may