

**PERSPECTIVE: The Solution Starts Here**  
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As I prepared to travel to the Florida Nature and Culture Center for the Culture Department conference, the last thing on my mind was the issue of diversity. I had been there two weeks earlier for a district leaders conference, so I was thinking about the food, bike riding, relaxed atmosphere and camaraderie among the members.

When I saw the issue of diversity on the agenda, I thought I had that all together. After all, I am the regional attorney in the Philadelphia District Office for the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Every work day, I spend my time advocating on behalf of people who believe that they have been discriminated against because of their race, religion, national origin, sex, color, age or disability.

As I sat in my small diversity discussion group at the FNCC, I realized that I did not have it all together — I was not dealing with my personal issues of diversity. I spent my time dealing with the problems of others. I listened to others discuss discrimination based on sexual orientation, I realized that I had not dealt with that issue because my agency doesn't handle those cases. Wow! I thought to my self, I have completely ignored this one issue! My new perspective empowered me.

The Culture Department conference gave me a full weekend of sharing with others and training on dialogue and communication. This was helpful, and maybe sometime I will use some of this at work, I thought vaguely.

I was happy to get back to my job after an activity-packed three days. I would make sure my Monday morning back at the office was easy and laid back, because I was exhausted after the “FNCC works” — talking, eating, jet-lag.

But when I got to the office, I was shocked to find a memo from one of our trial attorneys — an African American — requesting that she be reassigned to a different supervisor, because she did not feel that her supervisor — who is white — respected her as a person.

Timing is everything! It was eerie. I had just determined in Florida to “deal with” the diversity issue, and now I had stepped smack into the middle of it as I set foot in my office!

I began to chant to myself. How do I deal with this problem — ironically happening at the EEOC, where employees help others resolve this type of problem? Reflecting upon the discussion I had participated in at the FNCC, I knew I had to resolve this situation in a way other than by reassigning the African American attorney to an African American supervisor. There had to be a better solution that would enable the parties involved to treat each other more humanistically.

I decided to engage in dialogue with the attorney and the supervisor separately. Since each trusted me, they told me honestly how they felt. When informed of the reassignment request, the white supervisor was shocked. She could not believe that one of her attorneys was accusing her of being racist. I convinced her that the very fact that the allegation had been raised meant that it also had to be addressed.

Because the separate meetings occurred over a period of two days, I could go home each night and chant for the wisdom to handle this problem. On the third day, I met with both of them together.

Even though both were apprehensive about the meeting, I encouraged them to be honest about their feelings. The meeting lasted about three hours, but when it was over, they were smiling and happy. They embraced each other and pledged to work together with mutual respect and sensitivity.

Within two weeks, I had to deal with another incident involving race, and a third involving religious intolerance. Since the issue of diversity was slapping me in the face, I realized that working for the EEOC does not insulate me or anyone else from personal prejudices, which have the potential of poisoning the fruits of our labor.

These experiences have helped me to become more sensitive to the problems that intolerance can create. Confronting this issue directly and being forced to work out a solution acceptable to all parties has given me more tolerance toward corporate offenders. This does not mean that I will not address discrimination when I see it, but that I am far more interested in the human part of the equation.

In my office, fear and distrust have arisen because people were unable or unwilling to communicate with one another over differences. Of course, if communication does fail, I am always in a position to file complaints in court to eradicate discrimination. As I see it, court is a forum that can be used to help people listen to one another and, in that sense, it can be used to do good. The more difficult part is the human revolution that should occur within and among people before their differences land them in litigation.

What I now deeply understand is that I must deal with the issue of diversity personally. It is not someone else's problem. It is my problem because I live in a society in which there are so many differences among people that can lead to hatred and crime.

I will spend my life fighting discrimination wherever I encounter it in the world.

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