

# Building Inclusive and Respectful Workplaces and Communities

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Headline—“**White supremacists, anti-racism protestors clash in Calgary**” Good Friday, March 21, 2008

Regrettably discrimination continues in our communities, organizations and workplaces. When I was a career counselor assisting those on unemployment insurance prepare and interview for job interviews I worked with a man the staff secretly called *Dinosaur Guy*. He treated me differently from the male professionals referring to me as *The Blonde Dame*.

Other derogatory terms for women included *Ditz Sticks* and *Peanut Brains*. No matter the gentle persuasion, the pleas, the confrontations about his demeaning and objectionable language he just didn't clue in to his offensiveness. I can't tell you the number of women I have counseled who have told me similar and more alarming stories.

Behaviors that discriminate or harass can wear away self esteem, confidence and a sense of safety. Excerpts from the *Canadian Human Rights Act* will help clarify the line between *wanting* to be treated in a certain manner and a true right:

- For all purposes of this Act (The *Canadian Human Rights Act*), the prohibited grounds of *discrimination* are race, national or ethnic origin, color, religion, age, sex, sexual orientation, marital status, family status, disability and conviction for which a pardon has been granted.
- *Harassment* is any behavior that demeans, humiliates or embarrasses a person, and that a reasonable person would have known would be unwelcome. It includes actions (e.g. touching, pushing), comments (e.g. jokes, name-calling), or displays (e.g. poster, cartoons).
- *Sexual harassment* includes offensive or humiliating behavior that is related to a person's sex, as well as behavior of a sexual nature that creates an intimidating, hostile, or 'poisoned' work environment, or that could reasonably be thought to put sexual conditions on a person's job or employment opportunities. A few examples are: questions and discussions about a person's sexual life; touching a person in a sexual way; commenting on someone's sexual attractiveness or sexual unattractiveness; persisting in asking for a date after having been refused; telling a woman she belongs at home or is not suited for a particular job; eyeing someone in a suggestive way; displaying cartoons or poster of a sexual nature; writing sexually suggestive letters or notes.
- *Abuse of authority* occurs when a person uses authority unreasonably to interfere with an employee or the employee's job. It includes humiliation, intimidation, threats, and coercion. It does not include normal managerial activities, such as counseling, performance appraisals, and discipline, as long as these are not being done in a discriminatory manner.

- Each employee has the right to be treated fairly and respectfully in the workplace. Each employee also has the responsibility to treat co-workers and customers in a way that respects individual differences.

The following suggestions to increase inclusiveness and respect come from three main sources: 1) a workshop with Tara Maniar, a diversity educator, 2) a workshop with Stephen Hammond, lawyer turned human rights expert and author of *Managing Human Rights at Work: 101 practical tips to prevent human rights disasters* and 3) conversations with my hubby, Les, a corporate Ombuds.

- Embrace the changing demographics in North America. Our workforce and communities more and more depend on and benefit from immigrant participation and contribution.
- Pay attention to when your perceptions, beliefs, words and behaviors may be offensive to others.
- Be willing to apologize if you offend or wound another. Defending your position does the opposite of building an inclusive atmosphere. "You're too sensitive" sounds and is *insensitive*.
- People can not see, hear nor guess your intentions. They only hear your words and see your actions.
- Acknowledge that we often cluster in the company of like minded people.
- Many workplaces have a *tolerance* policy. Take the highroad and ask yourself, "Would I want others to *tolerate* me?" Do what you can to move you and your organization from *tolerance* of differences to *respect*. Then consider moving to *appreciation* and finally *celebration*. Celebrate differences and similarities!
- Listen with curiosity to those who appear or sound different. Consider each person as a *cultural (background) entity onto themselves*.
- If you are the recipient of discrimination or harassment it is imperative that you don't give in and believe any shaming, blaming or demeaning messages and comments. Note that they often come from those *addicted* to being in power-over positions. If asserting your rights doesn't get you the support you deserve, access the Human Rights Commission.
- Notice what you can do to create increased trust, belonging and appreciation at your next organization's meeting. Then act on your observations.

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