



Building Diversity Competency: When Good Intentions Go Wrong and How To Make it Right

By Dr. Maura Cullen

Conversations about issues of diversity can be anxiety producing for many of us. Have you ever found yourself unsure of what to say, or what word to use, so said nothing at all? Are there times when what you meant to say didn't come out exactly as you had hoped? If you are like most, your response is probably a resounding "Yes!" People often make statements they intend to be supportive or complimentary, but end up being problematic.

It's Just Sticks and Stones. Right?

Wrong. Words have the power to literally start wars or end them. Words can ease your ability to make a connection or they can hinder those connections, often without your awareness. They are the vehicle through which communication is exchanged and reflect how we see our world and those around us. What you say matters.

We have all said the 'wrong' thing at the 'wrong' time. But what if we were able to know beforehand what some of these statements are which hurt or offend people? What if we could avoid saying them and reduce the risk of negative personal and professional consequences? Wouldn't you want to know?

2 Simple Concepts To Avoid Common Pitfalls

Two concepts serve as cornerstones that enable us to make immediate shifts in our ability to have effective interactions while avoiding some of the pitfalls and consequences that often accompany our diversity discussions.

1. Intent vs. Impact

Most would agree that even well intended people cause harm. However, just because we may not intend to hurt someone doesn't mean it still doesn't hurt. Say for instance, someone accidentally runs over your foot with a shopping cart at the grocery store. They didn't mean to hurt you but your foot still hurts . . . doesn't it?

Undoubtedly, you've said things you really didn't mean to say; realizing just how wrong you were after it was too late.

Or at times we intend something as a compliment but the other person does not receive it that way. The bottom line is that good intentions are not enough. We must also acknowledge the pain we cause without getting defensive.

P.O.P. (Pile On Principle)

In order to understand why people sometimes "overreact" to comments that may seem innocuous to you, take a minute to wrap your mind around the Pile On Principle. Simply stated, words have a way of accumulating on a person's mind over time. That person's reaction to any individual statement may actually be a reaction to the sum of all of the statements before it.

Building Diversity Competency:

The *Pile On Principle* is easily demonstrated by the parent who loses their patience after the tenth time their child has asked the same question. For many, a similar frustration comes from the experience of being asked the same questions repeatedly over a lifetime. For Black people it might be excessive questions about their hair or for people of Asian descent, it could be when people ask, “Where are you REALLY from?”

Break it down in real world terms. Remember that fellow who ran over your foot at the grocer? Say another customer does it again on the way out of the store. Then, when you pick your kid up from daycare, the first thing they do is jump up for a hug, miss, and land square on that same foot. By now it’s throbbing. You hobble home and when you open the door the dog rushes to greet you (like he always does) and stomps right on that foot. After the day you’ve had, and the pain your foot is in, you explode, yelling at the dog and putting him outside.

Replace those shopping carts, children’s feet, and dog’s paws with inappropriate jokes, passively aggressive statements, and small acts of exclusion and it’s a little easier to understand how a single sentence could really set someone off.

5 Statements You May Want To Reconsider

In my book, “*35 Dumb Things Well-Intended People Say: Surprising Things We Say that Widen the Diversity Gap*,” I outline 35 statements people say without realizing just how harmful or offensive they can be. Some of the most common are:

- 1) “Some of my best friends are . . . “
- 2) “I don’t think of you as . . .”
- 3) “I don’t see color: I’m colorblind.”
- 4) “That’s so gay” or “That’s so retarded”
- 5) “Where are you REALLY from?”

Can’t quite figure out what makes those statements “dumb?” What you don’t know can hurt you. Your lack of knowledge and awareness can compromise your effectiveness both personally and professionally. It is critical to continuously expand your knowledge base through reading, attending workshops and other educational means.

3 Skills to Improve Your Diversity Competence

Learning what not to say is a good start but here are a few suggestions that might de-escalate an uncomfortable situation.

- 1) B.A.R. (Breathe Acknowledge Respond)--A simple technique to diffuse uncomfortable or emotionally charged situations (and prevent them in the first place.)
 - a. Breathe – Take a deep breath. It’s a simple way to calm you immediately.
 - b. Acknowledge – Acknowledge what the person is saying either through active listening or asking questions to further your understanding their perspective. Remember, in order to acknowledge what someone is saying does not mean you have to agree with it. This is a critical distinction.

Building Diversity Competency:

- c. Respond – Don't react. Reaction is action without thought. That deep breath you took will give you a moment to think before you speak. Another benefit of taking a deep breath as first action is that it is impossible to speak if you are breathing deeply. Therefore, you cannot say anything regrettable in that moment.
- 2) Shift from "Me" to "We"—You'll never be able to empathize with others if you're constantly self-centered. Step back and try to see where the other person is coming from--the B.A.R. technique will help this a great deal.
- 3) Do good intentions still count? Yes. Most people would rather deal with someone whose intentions are good than someone that intentionally inflicts harm. People will be quicker to forgive your transgressions, or work with you to resolve issues that arise if your original intentions were good.

While good intentions are important, they cannot eradicate the harmful impact that some statements may cause. The only way to reduce the negative impact of our words is to change our conversations. Fortunately these skills can be learned, and as a result, effectively improve our relationships.

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Dr. Maura Cullen is the author of "35 Dumb Things Well-Intended People Say: Surprising Things We Say That Widen the Diversity Gap". She is widely considered one of the nation's foremost authorities of diversity issues on college campuses today. Maura has over 25 years of experience as a keynote speaker and trainer. She earned her doctorate in Social Justice & Diversity Education from the University of Massachusetts, is a Founding Faculty member of the Social Justice Training Institute and Founder of the Diversity Student Summit. To learn more visit www.TheDiversitySpeaker.com.