

## Should Simulation Activities Be Used As Diversity Training Tools?

By Dr. Maura Cullen

Walking the proverbial mile in a person's shoes suggests we are able to capture a glimpse into another's worldview through brief simulation activities. The "Day in the Life" simulation is a controversial training activity. It is intended for dominant group members to "experience" what it must be like to be a member of a specific target group. Two of the more common examples of this activity focus on people with disabilities. Non-wheelchair users may spend as little as ten minutes to a couple of hours using a wheelchair in an effort to "know" what it must be like for wheelchair users to navigate through life. Others will wear a blindfold to capture what it might be like to be blind. With regard to sexual orientation, participants walk in public holding the hand of someone of the same-sex to simulate what it must be like to be gay/lesbian/bisexual.

Although activities like these are intended to provide a glimpse into someone else's experience, it can NEVER capture the depth of having that particular identity. It would be comparing a snowball to a glacier, simply not comparable.

This is one reason why so many people feel this activity does more harm than good. It minimizes or dismisses the other person's life experience and reinforces stereotypes. The "Day in the Life" activity can never replicate the cumulative effect of everyday slights and micro-aggressions. Sue et al. (2007) describe micro-aggressions as, "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color". This can also be broadened beyond issues of race.

Micro-aggressions blossom into further discriminatory practices. Target group members are not afforded equal access and opportunities that are granted to the dominant members. Systemic rights and privileges such as laws, policies, formal holidays, and the normalization of cultural norms are created to favor dominants.

That being said, is there value in conducting such an activity? Personally, I am conflicted. I believe even a little insight and knowledge can direct participants towards a path of becoming an ally. It might serve as their "Ah-ha" moment that is so critical to people getting on the path of ally-hood.

I recall my own experience of breaking my pelvis. For two months, I had limited mobility. When I went grocery shopping, I needed the use of an electric scooter. The problem on this particular day was even though electric scooters were made available, none of them had been charged, thus rendering them useless.

I sought out the manager to share my frustration and disappointment. It had taken me a great deal of effort to arrange a driver to take me to the store. In fact, having scooters available was the entire reason I chose that particular store. I was angry.

So here's the thing. I cannot and will not compare my experience of having a temporary mobility issue with someone who has that experience everyday. But, I must admit that brief experience allowed me the opportunity to see the world a bit differently. The experience granted me a glimpse setting me on a path of being more mindful of issues of physical accessibility. I began to train my brain to be more purposeful in noticing ways to improve accessibility. This was an "Ah-ha" experience for me.

There are critical differences between the "Day in the Life" activity and what others experience as everyday life. However, the more often potential allies can place themselves in situations that stretch their comfort zones or enter environments which are unfamiliar to them, the more "Ah-ha" moments are likely to occur.

These quick glimpse moments must NEVER be confused with the belief that you now know the other persons experience completely. The experience of target group members will never be captured by such a simplistic activity. It may however, help dominants how to be better allies.

Dr. Maura Cullen is the author of the bestselling book "35 Dumb Things Well-Intended People Say: Surprising Things We Say That Widen the Diversity Gap". She is a highly-acclaimed diversity trainer who has educated and inspired people worldwide in over 400 universities and organizations on how to be more inclusive and authentic when communicating with others. She is widely considered one of the nation's foremost authorities of diversity issues today. [www.TheDiversitySpeaker.com](http://www.TheDiversitySpeaker.com)