



Guess Who's Coming to Dinner? Diversity Food for Thought

By Dr. Maura Cullen

Imagine you are invited to dinner at a colleague's house. They create an elaborate invitation and send several emails and a couple of phone calls to let you know how excited they are to have you to their home.

The night of the dinner you receive a text from your colleague asking if you wouldn't mind picking up the take-out they had ordered from a local restaurant.

"No problem." you say.

When you arrive at their house, they direct you to the kitchen. Once settled, instead of taking your coat, they tell you where to hang it.

"No problem." you say.

When you sit to eat the meal that you have bought and paid for, you noticed most everything has meat. You of course, are vegetarian.

"No problem." you say.

When the meal is complete, they ask if you would not mind giving them a hand cleaning up so that the process goes quickly. Many hands make for fast work they muse.

"No problem." you say.

As you prepare to leave, they comment how much fun they had and that they should do it again soon!

Problem.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

1. If you were the guest, what might you be thinking and feeling?
2. If you were the host, what might you be thinking and feeling?
3. What dynamics would need changing to create a more mutually positive experience?
4. How do these dynamics play out in the workplace?

Every work place has a culture, ways of conducting everyday business. These norms, traditions, informal and formal practices and communication patterns can impact the success and loyalty of employees.

The dinner example is similar to how some people experience their work environment. At some point, many of us have felt devalued and unappreciated. You work hard to be a team player and never complain when you are asked to take on additional responsibilities, often without additional pay. You sacrifice your own needs for the greater good. At times, you may feel disrespected or taken for granted.

With that being said, people from underrepresented or marginalized groups tend experience these dynamics at a disproportionate higher level. It goes far beyond the personal affronts and biases that exist at the individual level.

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There are systemic practices, norms, and policies providing greater access and advantages for one group at the expense of another.

Here are a few examples of formal and informal discriminatory policies and practices in the workplace.

- People of color are asked (expected) to join several committee's because the organization wants/needs a "diverse" perspective. There is no additional compensation or reduction of other assignments. If the person declines, they are perceived as not being a team player and receive the negative consequences that accompany that stigma.
- People without children may not be given the same grace as staff with children to leave work on time. If there is a project due, employees without children carry more of the burden to stay after hours. As a result, they often work more evenings and weekends.
- People in gay or lesbian relationships who live in states that do not legally recognize same-sex marriage may not be permitted to have health benefits for their partner. If they are permitted, they may be taxed additionally for the same benefits that heterosexual couples receive without tax consequence.
- People with disabilities are at a higher risk of discriminatory hiring practices, as employers may not want to deal with making their work environment ADA accessible.
- Older workers who earn higher wages are 'downsized' for younger people at a lower wage.
- People who observe non-Christian religious holidays have to take personal days to be with family because only Christian holidays are recognized.

Another dynamic that tends to be more unique to people from underrepresented groups than their counterparts from dominant groups, is the feeling of being "tokenized." When people of color, white women, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender people, people with disabilities, etc....are hired, members of the dominant group may wonder if they were hired to represent "diversity" within the organization or if they were truly hired because they were the best candidate for the job. This creates a sense of doubt that people from dominant groups do not have to contend. As a result, people from underrepresented groups feel they must overcompensate to prove their worth. This additional stress and strain takes its toll over the long haul.

If they bring attention to these inequities, they are seen as rocking the boat or perceived as wanting special privileges. They pay a price if they hint there is a problem in how they are treated, systematically or individually. They will not be invited to the dinner party or asked to play a round of golf. Not being welcomed at these events is akin to being left out of the circle of power and information. These informal gatherings are where so many relationships are forged and important decisions made.

These are all contributing factors as to why people leave organizations that marginalize their presence and minimize their contributions. Organizations that foster a more inclusive decision-making process and equitable distribution of labor will increase the likelihood of a mutually beneficial and inclusive work climate.

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