

LEAVING PEOPLE OUT

At an international conference, the speaker ended his prayer “in Jesus’s name.” Another speaker referred to the children we raise as “biological children,” though his audience included step-parents. These women and men do business all over the world, yet they were unintentionally leaving people out.

A manager’s toolbox needs to include knowledge about how quality people can get left behind at four gateways to the organization: interviewing, training, supervising and evaluating.

Realizing that we exclude people can make us defensive. Here’s one way to work through this defensiveness: One key to excluding others lies in the way perception happens. We select, often without realizing it, what to pay attention to. Then we interpret, again without thinking, what we see and hear. Both what we see/hear and the meanings we give them are influenced by life-long training, much of which eludes our awareness. For instance, we take in cultural norms the way we breathe, effortlessly and unawares.

For a client in heavy manufacturing, I developed a workshop series to teach supervisors and managers how to spot attitudes that inadvertently exclude women.

- In spite of mandates about equal treatment, women and men may be judged by different standards. “I wouldn’t want my wife working here,” a heavy manufacturing plant worker says. How will he see a woman co-worker?
- Some will have higher or lower expectations for different groups. An employee, not fully realizing his attitudes toward women’s strength, tests the new hire’s ability to lift sheet metal.
- Co-workers are critical when a new person performs a task differently. A new supervisor wants to wear gloves to handle abrasive materials; other supervisors go barehanded. She decides to get her hands cut up because, she explains to me, she’s the first woman in this job and knows she is being watched.
- Until women number a quarter to a third of the workforce, norms of communication favor “fitting in with the guys.” I hear guys in one plant rib each other, for example, but notice they are formal with their woman colleague.

The right column outlines ways we can learn and teach greater care in our perceptions, understanding and evaluations of others.

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Including People...

- You can’t learn about every cultural difference, but you can educate yourself and your staff about gendered communication styles; these styles influence every workplace.
- Start a brown bag reading group. Pat Heim, Deborah Tannen, Julia Wood and Mark Gerzon are just a few writers who address communication style differences in readable books, articles and videos.
- Devote some minutes of staff meeting to learning about difference. See Fern Lebo’s *Mastering the Diversity Challenge* (St. Lucie Press) for 10 minute exercises.
- Teach people how to question their generalizations and perceptions. “When you say...tell me more about how you see that.”

I’ll be happy to help you implement ideas.

A client writes...

“Thank you for your help...We appreciated your gentle and thoughtful facilitation of difficult discussions.”

Director of a Vermont Non-profit