



*“Diversity is the one true thing we all have in common.  
Celebrate it every day.” — Author Unknown*

## **Diversity and Inclusion Training Challenges**

**H**earth-Centered Programs has delivered hundreds of ‘Diversity & Inclusion’ programs to organizations, corporations and higher educational institutions. What we have found is that while these programs have been well attended and received, without a plan to apply the strategies and ideas presented, within a very short period of time, inevitably things return to ‘Business as Usual’.

In my experience, a ‘One-and-Done’ training approach that ‘checks the box’ for diversity training, falls short in meeting its objective. At best it brings awareness to the topic. At worst it forces people to attend a training that puts them on the defensive.

To maximize the investment in these training programs, two things need to be addressed. **One** - there must be personal accountability and a willingness to change ones own biases, and **two** - there must be a institutional commitment to an ongoing diversity and inclusion ‘practice’ within the organization. It must be a sustained effort.

What works better is creating a diversity committee or task force, made up of people from the organization from different departments and different ranks following training. They come together, examine their own department or function or team, and learn of specific barriers to diversity.

Then they develop tailored solutions, follow the implementation and, ideally, report on progress. This strategy becomes the ‘practice’ that continues to be reformed, refined, and repeated!

Whether you develop your own training program or hire an outside vendor, be aware of these seven strategic areas where most organizations fall short in their delivery:

## The Top 7 Areas Diversity Training Programs Fall Short

### Mistake #1: Failing to Address Micro-aggressions and Specific Unconscious Bias Behaviors

#### Micro-Aggressions

Diversity programs overall do a good job addressing the common stereotypes and biases that exist in the world today; some of which have been around a very long time. What many of them fail to address is an area called ‘Micro-Aggressions’ which according to one definition is ‘a statement, action, or incident regarded as an instance of indirect, subtle, or unintentional discrimination against members of a marginalized group such as a racial or ethnic minority.’

The term was first coined by psychiatrist and Harvard University professor Chester M. Pierce in 1970 to describe insults and dismissals which he regularly witnessed non-black Americans inflicting on African Americans. By the early 21st century, use of the term was applied to the casual degradation of any socially marginalized group, including LGBT, the poor and the disabled.<sup>i</sup>

Micro-Aggressions are being called the new face of racism and tend to fall broadly into three categories:

- **Micro-assault:** an explicit racial derogation; verbal/nonverbal; e.g. name-calling, avoidant behavior, purposeful discriminatory actions.
- **Micro-insult:** communications that convey rudeness and insensitivity and demean a person's racial heritage or identity; subtle snubs; unknown to the perpetrator; hidden insulting message to the recipient of color.
- **Micro-invalidiation:** communications that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person belonging to a particular group.

These dismissals and insults run the gamut touching every class and category from race, ethnicity, gender, age, physical and mental disability, to sexuality and sexual orientation.

Some examples of different Micro-Aggressions include:

- a. 'What are You' questions regarding racial or mixed racial background.
- b. Where are you *really* from?
- c. Dismissing the proper pronunciation of names.
- d. Asking someone to speak for their entire race.
- e. Crossing the street to avoid walking past someone of a different race, ethnicity,
- f. Telling a black person they speak like a 'white' person
- g. Asking an Asian person to help you with math
- h. When you call a tech hotline and if a woman answers asks to speak to a man
- i. Implying a woman is a lesbian because she doesn't want children
- j. Calling all Asians Chinese
- k. Assuming all people of Arab descent are Muslim

Addressing Micro-Aggressions is challenging because many people guilty of them are completely unaware of their discretion. They believe their comment is well-meaning or even a compliment. If confronted by the minority person or an observer, they will often defend their Micro-aggression as a misunderstanding, a joke, or something inconsequential.

Because Micro-Aggressions are subtle and often unintentional, the recipients themselves may dismiss them or blame themselves as being overly sensitive to the encounter. They also can put everyone on 'guard' watching their speech, afraid of saying anything that could be misconstrued.

But, not addressing Micro-Aggressions is doing a disservice to the organization. It's important to raise awareness and allow people the opportunity to reflect, rephrase, rewind, and repair relationships in the workplace.

## **Specific Biases**

**Bias** is an inclination toward one way of thinking, often based on how you were raised. Because there is a tendency to lean in a certain direction, bias often hinders the free flow of ideas. Those who are **biased** tend to have strong beliefs refusing to take into consideration the opinions of others.

Diversity and Inclusion programs address the most common forms of bias; race, gender, and cultural. That leaves a huge gap in discussing specific unconscious biases that affect our judgment in recruiting, hiring, promoting, and teambuilding.

Three types of bias can be distinguished: information bias, selection bias, and confounding. They affect our decision-making processes in a number of different ways:

- **Our Perception** – how we see people and perceive reality.
- **Our Attitude** – how we react towards certain people.
- **Our Behaviors** – how receptive/friendly we are towards certain people.
- **Our Attention** – which aspects of a person we pay most attention to.
- **Our Listening Skills** – how much we actively listen to what certain people say.
- **Our Micro-affirmations** – how much or how little we comfort certain people in certain situations.

A partial list of specific biases:

**1) Confirmation Bias:** We love to agree with people who agree with us. It is an unconscious act of referencing only those perspectives that support our pre-existing views, while at the same time ignoring or dismissing opinions that threaten our world view.

**2) In-group Bias:** Similar to confirmation bias, we prefer people that are part of our ‘tribe’. Causes us to overestimate the value of those in our group at the expense of those outside of our immediate group of people we know. (Also known as *Affinity Bias*)

**3) Expectation Bias:** The belief that things will turn out the way they did in the past, by placing more value on previous events to determine future outcomes than other information.

**4) Status-Quo Bias:** Believing that change is bad or that it will be worse than what we have. It leads us to make choices that don't change things too much or guarantee they stay the same. 'If it ain't broke, don't fix it'.

**5) Negativity Bias:** We're more attracted to bad news & believe it's more important than good news.

**6) Bandwagon Bias:** Our innate desire to belong to the 'crowd' makes us enter into a 'group-think' mentality. Our individual preferences are unconsciously ignored and we just go with the flow of the group.

**7) Projection Bias:** We assume everyone thinks like we do, believes what we believe, should behave the way we do, etc.

**8) Current Moment Bias:** As humans we would rather experience pleasure in the current moment without regard for the consequences in the future.

There are literally dozens more biases that are operating at an unconscious level within your employees at all levels of the organization. Diversity and Inclusion programs need to broaden their definition of bias to include as many of these as possible and how to overcome the negative impact they can have.

## **Mistake #2: Ageism, Weightism, Heightism,**

Due to the uncomfortable and sensitive nature of these ‘socially-acceptable’ bias most organizations tend to brush over them. And as all unconscious bias, there tends to be lack of awareness that they’re even taking place.

### **Ageism**

Ageism – especially - is commonplace even though more and more workers over the age of 65 are valuable contributors in the workplace. Although the Age Discrimination Employment Act of 1967 prohibits discrimination against people 40 and older, a recent survey by AARP showed that two-thirds of workers between the ages of 45 to 74 said they have seen or experienced ageism.

Baby Boomers are experiencing ageism in increasingly higher frequency as workers push their retirement age higher and older. Instead of being viewed as wise and knowledgeable, they’re being ignored and passed over for projects.

### **Weightism**

Weight bias generally refers to negative attitudes toward a person because he or she is overweight or obese, such as the stereotype that obese persons are lazy or lacking in willpower. These stereotypes can be manifested in different ways, leading to prejudice and discrimination. For example, weight stigma can take the form of verbal comments (e.g., name calling, derogatory remarks, being made fun of), physical bullying and aggression (e.g., hitting, kicking, pushing, shoving), relational victimization (e.g., social exclusion, being ignored or avoided, being the target of rumors), and overt discrimination (e.g., not being hired for a job, being denied a promotion, being assigned lower wages because of one’s weight, or being denied admission to college).

Weight discrimination occurs in employment settings virtually as often as race discrimination, and in some cases even more frequently than age or gender discrimination. For women, weight discrimination has increased by 66% and is more common than race discrimination. (Puhl, Andreyeva, & Brownell, 2008).

## **Heightism**

Height discrimination (more commonly known as heightism) is prejudice or discrimination against individuals based on height. In principle, it refers to discriminatory treatment against individuals whose height is not within the normal acceptable range of height in a population.

Height bias in the workplace may influence interactions and salaries and evidence (both academic research and anecdotal experiences) indicates that short people are disadvantaged in the workplace earning hundreds of thousands of dollars less than their taller coworkers over the course of a career.

In addition to earning more money, tall people receive more promotions and are generally viewed as more intelligent. They are perceived to possess higher self-esteem and confidence. Our colloquial English expressions validate this when we 'look up' to someone we admire, and 'look down' on people who are thought to be of little consequence. We praise someone's 'towering intellect' and describe people we admire as having 'impressive stature'. Short people are literally receive the short-end of the stick!

Diversity and Inclusion programs need to address the 'unearned privilege' bias of heightism, the negative effect of weightism and the short-sighted practice of ageism.



### **Mistake #3: Generational Differences = Communication & Value Differences**

The generation gap between Traditionalists, Boomers, Gen-Xers, Millennials and Gen-Zs, is widening, according to a new study from Deloitte and the Billie Jean King Leadership Initiative (BJKLI). One of the biggest challenges facing leaders will be managing an employee age profile which in theory could range from 18 to 80.

One of the biggest differences in the generations is their values and communication styles. While these aren't specifically addressed in Diversity & Inclusion training programs, failing to do so misses an important piece of the puzzle.

There are many negative stereotypes and unconscious biases within the different generations. Older workers may perceive Millennials as entitled, tech-obsessed or too eager to challenge norms while millennial employees could see previous generations as being 'stuck in their ways' and difficult to train.

It is important to note that, as with every diversity issue, although the five generations have different values, different ideas, different ways of getting things done, and different ways of communicating, there is little homogeneity within each group.

Each generation has its outliers and will resent being put into a generational box. It's critical to treat everyone as individuals and not members of a particular group. This is no different than how you'd treat traditional diversity issues, such as race, age and ethnicity.

Finally, when it comes to defining diversity and inclusion at work, there is a huge disconnect between the generations as to what they actually should look like. To assume that your definition fits everyone's will create business hardship and challenges that can be avoided.

## **Mistake #4: Disability Sensitivity Awareness**

Many organizations treat disability diversity as primarily a legal requirement. Creating a culture that promotes inclusion goes beyond legally required modifications to workspaces or processes to making a conscious effort to empower employees with disabilities to be successful as integrated members of their workforce.

We must also remove the stigma of talking about disabilities and acknowledge that many ‘non-disabled’ employees lack the tools and skills to work with different learning and communication styles. Very little has been done to educate the workforce in how to accommodate disabilities in their workplace.

One of the most impactful things an employer can do to promote disability inclusion is to conduct trainings that address perceptions — and, often, misperceptions — about individuals with disabilities. These educational sessions can be incredibly beneficial for all team members because they can give employees tools to become more comfortable interacting with people with disabilities.

The hurdle for most organizations is lacking the resources to create programs to educate people how to communicate with specific disabilities, such as hearing impairment, vision impairment, speech impairment, or autism.

There are a number of government programs, such as the Federal Office of Disability Employment Policy, and local community organizations that can provide resources and tools to organizations for creating a diversity inclusion program.

The benefits of creating a culture that embraces people with disabilities go beyond customer goodwill and employee satisfaction. Employers that include disability inclusion training empower individuals and have the power to make an impact, not only in their workplaces but also in their community.

## **Mistake #5: Incivility and Disrespect is Tolerated**

According to many surveys we have become a rude nation. As our work becomes faster-paced, more technologically complex, and culturally diverse, workplace incivility and disrespect are on the rise. The number of people reporting incidences of disrespect due to their race, ethnicity, disability and other protected categories has increased as well.

Incivility, gender harassment, and racial/ethnic harassment have a lot in common. Each behavior is antagonistic and violates standards of interpersonal respect. The little acts of incivility that go unchecked by authority figures, which are another form of micro-aggressions, can spiral into bullying and even workplace violence.

Workplace incivility creates a wide range of negative effects including lower employee engagement, reduced work effort, increased worry or anxiety, withdrawal, lower individual satisfaction, and reduced organizational commitment. In extreme cases, affected employees leave the organization eroding the organizations diversity and inclusion initiatives.

The long-term impact of workplace incivility can create a toxic culture that is challenging to correct. It can also be financially costly in terms of time spent managing conflict, absorbing the costs of employee distraction and discontentment, job accidents, substance abuse, sick leave, work team conflict, productivity decline, and turnover.

There is a positive relationship between civility and diversity and inclusion in the workplace. Having a diverse and inclusive workforce is a business imperative for organizations today. Diversity and Inclusion training at all levels is a must!

*“The evidence that D&I also contributes to civility and respect among colleagues suggests that acknowledging, addressing and adapting to our differences is a business imperative that companies must embrace to build reputations and organizational endurance in the future.” Tai Wingfield, SVP, Diversity, Equity & Inclusion, Weber Shandwick*

## **Mistake # 6: Assuming Diversity and Inclusion Policy and Adherence is only for Human Resources**

Organizations today widely embrace both Affirmative Action and Equal Employment Opportunity laws in their corporate diversity and inclusion policies. The vast majority of employers publish a statement on their website, on their employment applications and in their employee handbooks that indicate a commitment to equal opportunity employment.

It's important to have policies and procedures and to communicate them to both your workforce and potential employees. Everyone should be knowledgeable of the laws governing discrimination and harassment in the workplace. But to assume that human resources is the only department that is responsible for its implementation and adherence is a huge mistake.

Compliance alone does little to create an inclusive workplace where everyone feels valued unless it's practiced in all departments, across all levels of staff and leadership. It is the responsibility of every employee to create an environment of inclusivity.

Diversity and Inclusion training needs to include an aspect of accountability and responsibility for everyone in the organization. To hand someone an Employee Handbook and assume they will read it is not enough. Managers should take the time to make sure everyone in their department is not only well versed in their companies' policies but also practice inclusive activities.

## **Mistake #7: Shortsighted Diversity & Inclusion Training**

The last mistake made by most organizations is not implementing Diversity and Inclusion training as part of their initiatives. Or, only offering it after there has been an incident. This usually has the adverse effect of its original intent. As stated at the beginning of this report, a 'One-and-Done' approach misses the mark.

The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission strongly recommends a workplace diversity component within every employer's training and development offerings. The agency states: "Such training should explain the types of conduct that violate the employer's anti-harassment policy; the seriousness of the policy; the responsibilities of supervisors and managers when they learn of alleged harassment; and the prohibition against retaliation."

Effective training teaches employees how to recognize behavior that's inconsistent with company policy and actions that demonstrate lack of respect for differences among employees, customers, vendors and suppliers.

Diversity and Inclusion training needs to go over and above educating employees about violations of company policy. It must address the specific challenges outlined in this report. It should be incorporated into your onboarding practices and delivered as an annual program to foster inclusion across the organization.

The training needs to include follow-up and an ongoing commitment to creating and maintaining a diverse and inclusive workforce for everyone to thrive. It's good for your employees. It's good for your customers. And it's good for business. Period!

## ONLINE RESOURCES

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<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Microaggression>

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5100338/>

<https://www.psychologicalscience.org/observer/this-stigma-of-obesity>

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<https://www.fastcompany.com/3046358/millennials-have-a-different-definition-of-diversity-and-inclusion>

<https://www.bloomberg.com/diversity-inclusion/blog/challenges-managing-multi-generational-workforce/>

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<https://www.forbes.com/sites/audreymurrell/2018/07/16/stopping-the-downward-spiral-of-workplace-incivility/#51cff93554ef>

<https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/the-hidden-toll-of-workplace-incivility>

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## **Heart-Centered Programs**

**Phone: (818) 983-1853**

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Dr. Ellen Contente, M.A. DSS, is the founder of Heart-Centered Programs. She has over 30 years experience in Sales, Management, Training and Coaching. She holds a B.S. degree in Business Management from the State University of New York at Buffalo and a Masters in Spiritual Psychology from The University of Santa Monica. Her expertise is in the area of Diversity & Inclusion, Work/Life Balance, Creating a Positive Workplace, and Self-Leadership. Her programs have been delivered to thousands of people across hundreds of organizations and higher educational institutions. She is available for Keynotes, Conferences, Break-out sessions, and ongoing professional development training.