

Can a Middle-Aged, White, Straight Guy Teach Diversity Classes? (The Answer is: Yes and No.)

By David Nice

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Definitions of diversity are elusive. Some popular training materials that are used in businesses and organizations define diversity as "the differences that make each of us unique." That's kind of nice, but vague. In an attempt to not scare anyone, especially white males, some diversity materials are downright bland. In diversity matters, blandness won't do it. When trying to develop a definition of diversity with a large number of first-line supervisors in a Central Pennsylvania manufacturing company, a diversity trainer/facilitator came up with, or distilled, the following:

"It's about being open-minded, having many options. It's cultural, it's multi-cultural. It's about change, about continuous change. It's about ethnicity, different viewpoints. It can be divisive. It's about language. It's about knowledge and respect of religion, race, and origins. It's about thinking before you talk. It's about social classes. It's about a desire to work with others and understand them. It's about open, two-way communication. It's about tolerating others' points of view."

That's not bad work, really. It's a fair definition. Notice, however, that it doesn't specifically say it's about men and women, about old and young, or gay and straight or whether your first language is English. So, if the professional training publishers can't quite *simplify* it, and if some local supervisors can't quite capture it all, how is anyone supposed to teach it? Good question.

But, before we try to say who should teach it, there's more. Another barrier to diversity training is that people tend to confuse it with Affirmative Action, Equal Employment Opportunity legislation, and sexual harassment issues. So, there's the challenge of defining what diversity is and what it is *not*. On top of all that, much of the content in a diversity workshop cannot be said to be a clean "right" or "wrong." Most diversity issues are anything but absolute.

So, turning to the main question, what kind of person is capable and qualified to facilitate diversity sessions? Can a middle-aged, white, straight (MAWS) guy teach it? Speaking for the "yes" side, he definitely can provide one of the main ingredients by creating a safe learning environment where participants can engage in discussion and feel okay about asking "ignorant" or "dumb" questions. Like a skillful teacher, a MAWS guy can also explain that an honest exchange between workshop participants can be in itself a positive outcome for a session. Agreement does not have to be present for learning to occur nor does transformation have to be achieved to be successful. So, is the standard then just the usual criteria of being a good facilitator? Yes and no.

On the "No" side, most MAWS guys have only a tiny glimpse into the experiences of discrimination, stereotyping, sexism, or homophobia - at least from the receiving side. You can design experiential learning exercises for them to try. You can show them classic diversity videos. You can ask them to invest a few hours in watching a good film (like Lawrence Kasden's "Grand Canyon" or Spike Lee's "Do the Right Thing") and come back to discuss it. Employ all those diversity class tools, but let's face it, a white male in the typical business environment will still be hard-pressed to see the impact of the everyday ease and acceptance - what some would call their "white privilege"-that comes from looking like most of the other folks you're working with everyday. There's an old line that says asking someone to be aware of their dominant culture is like asking a fish to describe the water that it breathes and swims through each and every moment of its life. It's hard to gain that perspective.

Back to the "yes" side, since most participants in these workshops are still likely to be white males, it might help to have an instructor who looks like them-someone they can listen to and

identify with. If the instructor appears at ease talking about diversity and differences, then it helps reinforce the notion that this workshop is not just for women and minorities. White males can need help seeing that there is self-interest in promoting diversity or that there may indeed be some diversity "issues" that belong to white men. A MAWS guy as an facilitator can perhaps best make that link that diversity does not mean that white guys lose and women and minorities win-that diversity training is about examining *everyone's* assumptions whether by the numbers they are one of the many or one of the few. In business, there is increasing evidence that the values of diversity - inclusion, openness to innovation, superior problem solving abilities -- actually translate to bottom-line advantages for all stakeholders of the business, including MAWS guys.

Wise business organizations often answer this "yes and no" question by hiring or developing co-facilitators who work together to teach diversity - frequently pairing a male and a female trainer/facilitator, who may also have different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Is that more proof that there is strength and value in a diversity of opinions-two different heads are better than one? Perhaps the most fundamental requirement for a diversity teacher is that they are committed to inclusion, learning and trying. A final analogy might be this one: a great foreign language teacher does not have to be a native speaker to be effective, they just have to love learning, speaking, and sharing their language.

So, for white male diversity trainers and their organizations, here are 5 tips:

1. Make sure everyone knows that diversity and inclusion is NOT the same as affirmative action.
2. Create a safe learning environment where people can speak their minds and be politically incorrect.
3. Explore the idea of "white privilege" - don't sidestep the issue.
4. Show the evidence that diversity and inclusion has bottom-line business benefits which increase opportunity for everyone, including white males.
5. Co-facilitate with female and minority trainers when possible. The interplay and modeling enhances the training.

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