

political juggernaut weaves back and forth along the campaign trail. And sit back and watch the fun.

Look at the bright side. “Anybody can do everything” is a lie, but as a lie it’s a huge improvement on “except Jews” or “except blacks” or “except women” or “except gays.” The Me Generation has been an engine for social progress, bringing greater fairness, justice and democracy to even the realm of palpable untruth.

Or you can do what the Me Generation does whenever we do anything stupid, which is never because we don’t do stupid things. We have “learning experiences.” Or, as our current Me Generation president calls them, “teachable moments.”

“Anybody can do everything” has been one teachable moment after another for me as I refused to learn the wisdom of Chief Sochahtoia and got an F in trigonometry, put my motorcycle through a garden gnome and into somebody’s screen porch on a suburban cul-de-sac, yelled “Fascist pigs!” at a group of hardhats while walking alone near a construction site, tried to follow the John Belushi diet and fitness program, married my first wife and bought Pets.com shares at \$11. (Their stock certificates make lousy chew toys, btw.)

There’ll be no end to teachable moments until the last of the Me Generation is wheeled off to the extended care facility where we, in no uncertain terms, will be telling the nurses and doctors exactly how to get sick and frail and lose short-term memory.

Meanwhile you have to try to do what every good team-builder always has tried to do. Hire people who are better and smarter than you. A member of the Me Generation, for instance. We all are. ▀



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For Diversity to Work, Recognize Differences, Not Just Similarities

There is no question that embracing diversity by finding common ground with others has been a good idea. It has been a key to transcending racism, sexism, homophobia and other prejudices. Societies that have found a way to discover or create shared values to reconcile cultural clashes have experienced much healing and prosperity.

But this approach, heavily shaped by the gospel of tolerance and sensitivity, can also have a shadowy side. *Assuming sameness* can mask ways in which we are different. And if key gaps are not recognized by *assuming differences*, it can lead to a different form of bias. When we assume that everyone is the same, we are assuming that everyone is “just like me.” This, ironically, is the very essence of self-centeredness.

Tolerance is an antidote to defensiveness on the part of majorities toward those who are different. It’s manifested in statements such as: “I’m O.K., you’re O.K.” “We’ll agree to disagree.” “Live and let live.” It’s the answer to, “Why can’t we all just get along?” But tolerance does



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not delve into differences. It maintains a “truce,” rather than “seeking the truth” and the awkwardness that often accompanies uncompromising candor.

Sensitivity takes the cultural “cease-fire” a few steps further. It finds its voice in statements such as: “I will work at understanding that you have unique needs and preferences.” “When you say something bothers you and it doesn’t make sense to me, I accept that it is important to you.” Between the lines, it says, “I’ll let you have that gimme.”

But sensitivity and tolerance are not enough to guarantee progress after a “culture war” ends. Ignoring or glossing over differences won’t make them go away.

Here is one example of how I made a mistake in assuming similarity, and my co-workers erred as well.

I was working on the leadership team for one of the largest human resources consulting companies in the world. Most of my colleagues were white, Midwestern and female. I was a male from Peru. We liked each other personally and professionally. We seemingly wanted the same thing, which was to serve the organization well with our best thinking while living by the company’s values of collaboration, integrity and respect.

So when the breakdown happened, none of us saw it coming. It played out like this: I would present an idea to the group, and I would hear responses such as “Andrés, I agree with you 100 percent.”

So after the meeting, I thought I had gained agreement from the

group and took the next steps with assurance. But then the e-mails and voicemails started flying in: “What are you doing? This is something we did not agree to!” Confused, I replied, “What part of ‘100 percent’ didn’t I understand?”

What had gone amiss — I was to learn through much trial, error and observation of the Midwestern, European-American corporate culture — was that I was a middle-class Latin American guy with a direct style of communication inside a corporate environment where indirect communication was the norm. I had missed the code words signaling disagreement that people with similar cultural backgrounds would intuitively interpret, but which were lost on me. I saw them smiling, nodding and taking careful notes — body language that, for me, signaled agreement.

Turns out these actions signified careful and respectful listening, but not necessarily agreement. I had my own body language and code words that other Latin Americans would interpret correctly, but these messages were “lost in translation” to my European-American colleagues.

And so it went. They thought I did not listen and did whatever I wanted to do. I thought they were duplicitous. They thought I was disruptive. I thought they were inefficient.

All this because we assumed similarity. And as we did, we created exclusion.

An Antidote to Self-Centeredness

While recognizing that it is still a good thing to discover the many ways in which we are similar despite visible differences, being able to constructively surface our differences requires more than an open attitude. It requires skill.

And that set of competencies is what we call *cross-cultural agility*.

Cross-cultural agility requires three fundamental abilities:

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Awareness of our own beliefs and preferences – what they are and where they came from – which often feed our unconscious biases.

CULTURAL INTELLIGENCE

A knowledge of the ways in which people can be different due to culture, race, ethnicity, personality, thinking style, generation, functional role and other factors. Then being able to do the “compare and contrast” work between other perspectives and our own to identify similarities and differences.

BUSINESS INTELLIGENCE

The ability to go beyond the navel-gazing of insight and resolve the complex business issues brought about through our vastly global, hyperdiverse economy and societies.

Cross-cultural agility therefore will not only steer us away from self-centeredness, but even better, it will lead to greater inclusion that goes beyond the obvious positive impact of being more uplifting to all team members. It leads to higher-performing teams better able to cope with the inevitable clashes and make the most of the power of diversity to generate creativity and innovation. //