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EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

TRUTH IN LOVE

How to Conduct
Culturally Conscious Conversations

By Parris J. Baker & Brandon Wiley
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Editor's note: Following is the second of a five-part series addressing a growing culture of incivility and contempt in the United States. Brandon Wiley, founder and executive director of Opened Eyes, Inc., and Dr. Parris Baker discuss "the ghastly executions of culturally conscious conversations." The series will continue on Tuesday, May 9.

Given the nature and polarization of ideological siloed communities, the obvious question becomes, "How do we bridge the diversity chasm extant in America culture?"

Brandon Wiley, founder and executive director of Opened Eyes Inc.,[1] believes his nonprofit organization has developed some answers. According to Wiley, "Generation Z or Gen Z is the most racially and ethnically diverse group in America. Contrary to popular belief, Generation Z is quite comfortable with diversity (The Pew Research Center defines Generation Z as anyone born after 1997.[2])

The discomfort with diversity or visibly recognizable differences, according to members of Gen Z, comes from repeated pressure to conform to traditional cultural norms. "What our organization attempts to do with diverse group members is to first enhance an individual's self-awareness and increase the cultural experiences of the self and then have that individual share his or her experience with others," notes Wiley. "We accomplish this task by engaging

individuals and diverse group members in a process called culturally conscious conversations or C^3 (C-Cubed)."

After the murder of George Floyd in the custody of police and the impunity displayed by the convicted murderer, then-Officer Derek Chauvin, diversity, equity, and inclusion training programs emerged in employment and education settings across the nation. Diversity training programs were initially developed in the 1970s to assist companies, nonprofit organizations, and educational institutions in implementing and better understanding the affirmative action policies and programs secured during the civil rights movement. Present-day diversity programs have a similar trajectory in that their development was also reactionary to current events. Hence, these diversity programs have been poorly designed and ill-prepared to address the changing nature of race-based discussions. In multiracial communities, group members soon discovered how difficult race-based discussions were, particularly when conversations concentrated on the historic, contemporary, and contentious issues of race and racism in America.

Research results regarding the effectiveness of diversity training are mixed or are generally inconclusive due to flawed research designs and attempting to measure imprecise or ambiguous outcome measures. Evaluations of diversity training programs in organizational settings report that the trainings are somewhat helpful in the recruitment and hiring of women and minority employees; are less successful in changing or creating inclusive work environments; and have little or no impact in modifying the behavior of men in general and white employees specifically.

In primarily white institutions, education administrations that design diversity trainings to cultivate an accepting campus climate have seen improved racial attitudes, a reduction in racial prejudices, and higher levels of empathy with their students and faculty.

Criticisms of diversity-focused initiatives in education settings tend to center on issues of academic freedom, ambiguous prerequisites for curriculum content, and the presumption that white faculty members who don't capitulate to institutional requirements are racist.

Reasons Why Diversity Training Programs Are Unsuccessful[3]

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion programs tend to fail for one or more of the following reasons:

1. Programs have poor research designs, seldom use theoretical constructs to guide program development and evaluation, and attempt to measure ambiguous outcome variables.

2. Programs have high institutional support and low employee/student motivation or low institutional support and high employee/student motivation.
3. Stigma, hostile feelings, belief it's a waste of time, or the attitude that the subject is not the problem are all associated with DEI training.
4. Training is generally unsuccessful in modifying workplace culture or creating meaningful long-term attitudes and behavior changes in employees.
5. Disingenuous employee participation in DEI training programs can be caused by a variety of reasons.
6. Most DEI training programs do not address structural and institutional oppression and systemic bias and discrimination.
7. Members of marginalized, oppressed, or discriminated groups may have intergenerational or untreated trauma. The attitude of majority group members may be "get over it!"

In multiracial, multicultural group discussions, a portion of white participants state they are very careful not to offend or retraumatize members of the BIPOC (Black Indigenous & People of Color) community. Others relay their personal discomfort or sadness for not knowing the far-reaching and heinous history of racism in the United States. A smaller subsection of white participants verbalizes racial exhaustion[4] and hurry to move the group discussion to other, less provocative topics ("Why are we always talking about race?").

A large segment of Black and brown group participants typically expresses a "felt need"[5] to explain or champion the horrors and worst moments of America's convoluted racial history. Others voice an ever-present malaise regarding race relations and racism in America. There is a segment of Black and brown participants who believe nothing will ever change regarding race-relationships, that racism is "baked into" the American ethos, and time would be better spent examining other issues. The size of their membership expands and contracts with each new example of racism.

Within employment or educational settings, it is not uncommon to have employee or student representatives from each subsection. Their diverse perspectives can make race-based discussion quite difficult to participate in or facilitate. According to Wiley, it is vital to meet people where they are, to identify the reason(s) for their resistance, to effectively use space and environment, and to help people explore their unique individual cultural perspectives and experiences and to share those lived experiences with others. Culturally conscious conversations help individuals address important existential questions like, "What does it mean to be human?" and more pragmatic questions like, "How do you get people who are resistant to participating in C3 to engage in honest conversations?"

Through mindfulness practices,[6] individuals are asked to conduct an authentic self-assessment and then become vulnerable and share their authentic self with another person, maybe a stranger or an adversary. This type of human engagement and interaction requires courage and epistemic trust. Wiley asserts that self-awareness becomes the foundation of diversity education and the catalyst for culturally conscious conversations.

Culturally conscious conversations (C[3]) are structured human interactions purposed to improve intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships, build bridges among culturally pluralistic and ideological siloed groups, and promote epistemic trust[7] and relational resilience. C[3] is not therapy. It is a communication tool used to assist individuals explore the self, mediate human interaction, and facilitate difficult discussions regarding differences in our humanity.

Culture, as we define it, involves the symbols, language beliefs, values (nonmaterial), and artifacts (material – physical objects) used by a society, institution, or group to transmit or communicate information that shapes and defines group members and guides their activities of daily living from one generation to another generation. Facilitators of culturally conscious conversations focus on the nonmaterial elements of culture (symbols and language), offer pathways of human expression, recognizing that language is socially constructed and coded with potential slang and multiple nuanced meanings, and that the meanings, codes, and definitions are symbolic[8] and may change over time.
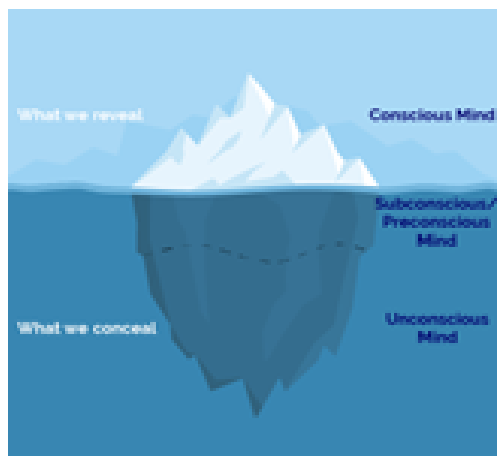
One of the goals of C[3] is to help participants investigate potential areas of implicit bias, prejudice, and privilege from the subconscious and unconscious into the consciousness. Conscious is what we are aware of at any moment in the present. The subconscious is where sensory information is stored just below the consciousness and is easily retrieved by the person. Our memories are an example of easily retrievable information. The unconscious is where information is stored, perhaps buried so deeply that we are not aware of its presence or its influence.

The need for culturally conscious conversations is becoming increasingly more evident as our national ecology becomes more toxic racially, religiously, politically, and siloed. The social putrefaction of ethics, morality, decency,

respect, and truth can be observed in greater expressions of xenophobia, bigotry, racism, misogynism, wokeness, and cancel culture. Unabated and persistent, these oppressive, communally infectious conditions can lead to severe social sepsis,[9] multiple system failures, and death.

[1] OpenedEyes, Inc. https://www.opened-eyes.com/
[2] Defining generations: Where Millennials end and Generation Z begins. Pew Research Center. January 17, 2019. https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/
[3] Read: Devine, P. G. & Ash, T. L. (2022). Diversity Training Goals, Limitations, and Promise: A Review of the Multidisciplinary Literature. *Annual Review of Psychology*. http://doi.org//10.1146/annurev-psych-060221122215. Asare, J. G. (October 7, 2022). Have We Been Wrongly Vilifying DEI Training? *Forbes*. https://www.opened-eyes.com/
[4] Darren Lenard Hutchinson, *Racial Exhaustion*, 86 Wash. U. L. Rev. 917 (2009), *available at* http://scholarship.law.ufl.edu/facultypub/385 Race Exhaustion is the perception that the race issue has been eradicated; tougher civil rights laws are unnecessary and futile, continued discussion about race is unfair to innocent whites and provides unfair advantages to blacks, and that economic, educational, and health inequalities are the results of nonracial factors.
[5] N., Sam M.S., "Felt Need," in PsychologyDictionary.org, May 11, 2013, https://psychologydictionary.org/felt-need/ (accessed April 1, 2023). Felt needs is need that is experienced consciously that may relate to a sense of deprivation or a discrepancy with the affective ideal. The desire to correct deficiencies in a community.
[6] Selva, J. (March 13, 2017). The History and Origins of Mindfulness. *Positive Psychology*. https://positivepsychology.com/history-of-mindfulness/
[7] Fonagy, Peter; Allison, Elizabeth (2014). The Role of Mentalizing and Epistemic Trust in the Therapeutic Relationship. *Psychotherapy, 51, 3*: 372-380.
[8] Dingwall, R. (2001). Notes Toward an Intellectual History of Symbolic Interactionism. *Symbolic Interactionism. 24(2),* pp. 237-242. https://doi.org/10.1525/si.2001.24.2.237
[9] Sepsis is the body's extreme response to an infection. It is a life-threatening medical emergency. Without timely treatment, sepsis can rapidly lead to tissue damage, organ failure, and death. https://www.cdc.gov/sepsis/what-is-sepsis.html

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Wiley photo from Opened Eyes.

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