



Calming The Racial and Ethnic Divide In America's Workplaces

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It is without question that racial and ethnic tensions and the divide between citizens and law enforcement have dominated the airwaves over the past several weeks. Demographers and other social scientists point to these recent events as a pivotal turning point in the American culture.

Simultaneously, the country is also growing more diverse. One other observation is certain, this “divided America” shares one place in common on a daily basis — the American workplace. With tensions and division running high, can the American workplace maintain its productivity in such a potentially toxic environment? Additionally, what can management do to bridge the divide amongst its workers and create an environment where everyone feels a sense of inclusion?

Many managers and some business owners trust that because of their workplace policies, their environment is free from the divisive tensions of life in America. In essence, these managers naïvely believe that their employees check their passions at the door when they arrive at work. This confidence is also driven by their efforts to have an inclusive culture. When individual employees are questioned however, symptoms of the larger schism in our society are readily present and available. These workers feel that the racial and ethnic divide facing America is also present in their workplace.

When left without an outlet to express these concerns around racial and ethnic tension in the workplace, increases in rudeness and incivility become common workplace experiences. A recent survey of workers showed that 98 percent reported experiencing some form of incivility at work. One other negative outlet for feelings of racial and ethnic tension in the workplace is the increase in micro-aggressions.

In response to increased racial and ethnic tension in the workplace, companies might consider establishing outlets for their employees and management to discuss difficult topics. For example, a company might convene a town hall meeting or conduct quarterly diversity training for employees, where difficult issues like race are discussed in the open, perhaps through the use of a facilitator.

Some companies have also established Employee Resource/Affinity Groups for direct connection between employees from underrepresented groups. These types of groups also establish an outlet for open discussion. Finally, companies facing increased racial and ethnic tension in the workplace might consider establishing a diversity and inclusion council within the company.

While many ethnic and racial tensions impact the workplace as they do the larger society, by working together, management, employment counsel and human resources professionals can create a diverse and inclusive culture in the American workplace. Diversity is not an imposition, but an advantage. Studies also establish a link between corporate diversity and increased profit, corporate productivity and employee morale.

In addition, companies should establish free and open access to human resources personnel to investigate and respond to any claims of workplace-based discrimination. Policies prohibiting discrimination, harassment and workplace violence should also be reviewed.

Human resources professionals should be aware that the racial and ethnic tensions of the broader society also definitely impact the workplace and should be vigilant to deal with the expression of this tension. Immediate steps must be taken to investigate claims and prevent problems before they manifest themselves. Taken collectively, these measures should help to reduce any racial or ethnic tension in the workplace and create an inclusive environment for all.

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