

DIVERSITY - 'POLITICS AND PRACTICE'

A brief overview from Chiatulah Ameke, Backstop Race and Diversity Consultant

Politics

One of the major reasons I left my job after 8 years as a Probation Officer in 1999, and became a full-time trainer, is because of the persistent horror stories I heard from staff of all levels about how Diversity in general, and Race in particular, was being handled, or mishandled, by established trainers, consultants, academia, and senior colleagues. The issues seemed to be dominated by a climate of fear and one-upmanship where if you innocently said or asked 'the wrong thing' you were likely to be mercilessly torn apart, named, shamed and blamed. Listening to how so many decent and committed professionals were often scarred and crushed by their experiences I felt there was an obvious gap in the market for a fresh approach to Diversity that would inspire and empower as well as inform, that would be practical, fun and challenging in a positive and constructive way. Seven years on I've still got my hands full trying to plug the gap - because the horror stories if anything are more widespread. Many have asked me: where did it all go so badly wrong? From my perspective and discussions there seem to be a number of key factors:

Academia

Many who entered university did not experience it as a haven for open discussion and the free flow of ideas that would help them make a difference in the world. Diversity for example became a battleground riven with the bitterness, ignorance and mistrust that mirrored wider society and presaged their experiences in the criminal justice sphere. Students learned that to survive you had to play various games: learn the right things to say, appear to be on the ball, be in with the right crowd, attack as the best form of defence, or say nothing at all. These treacherous dynamics were given free rein by gutless and careerist tutors and lecturers who retreated into pompous navel gazing around semantics and abstract, outdated theory instead of facilitating a more relevant and courageous analysis of society and of daily life in the work settings students were supposed to be being prepared for.

Training and the Workplace

Many anti-racist and equal opportunity trainers of the 80's and 90's took these fundamental errors to disastrous new lows believing it was somehow instructive and beneficial to indict and browbeat practitioners into a paralysing sense of shame and guilt. These were in reality utterly counter-productive and deskilling exercises, with far-reaching consequences.

Today, too many current Diversity trainers and consultants, in equally misguided attempts to appear edifying, have merely mimicked the conceits of a few parochial academics and foolishly reduced the serious issues of Race, Gender, Disability etc to a largely irrelevant study of the alleged negative connotations of certain words and phrases. Here we are talking not of phrases such as 'nigger in the woodpile' which most would accept as a clear error, but descriptions such as 'black coffee' or 'blackboard', or phrases such as 'nitty gritty', 'rule of thumb' or 'brainstorm' where common sense and context would usually indicate no offence is meant - but where on some courses participants are taught or made to feel that a lack of intent is no defence.

These tragic mistakes are often replicated in the workplace beginning with lists of prohibited words and phrases which are constantly added to and which when used in everyday innocence often invite vicious and patronising condemnation or discipline - and a shameful, devious disregard for the obvious lack of malicious intent by the user. Ironically, at the same time, blatant and serious issues around Diversity are often criminally ignored or paid lip service to. Pulling people up on their language becomes an easy shallow cop-out to the alternative of facing the clear evidence of deep long-standing issues. All this creates a corrosive and demoralising sense of disorientation and paranoia which many staff adapt to by resorting to the machiavellian games of survival they encountered at college. New staff in particular find they have entered a thoroughly bewildering minefield sown by experienced and senior colleagues they look to for professional validation and advancement.

Media

Rabid and reactionary elements of the media hunt like sharks in this sea of confusion, deceit and fear – and help sustain their own power by greedily consuming morsels of crass and clumsy errors on Diversity from any corner of the country. This is in order to undermine and ridicule genuine and successful efforts to rebalance widespread and existing inequality, efforts which they instinctively see as a battle of power, not of morals. Media elements achieve power by programming regular,

hysterical, misleading and seductive front pages and articles that embed themselves in the mind and become folklore and accepted wisdom, so that a foolish mistake by one school headmistress or local council leader, employer, manager or politician becomes a 'national outrage' and an 'attack on the British way of life' signifying 'yet again' how 'political correctness has gone mad'. The effect is to create incalculable hostility and resentment towards easily targeted and marginalized communities who usually had no part to play in the original sin – but who now are all tainted.

Practice

My training tackles head on the daily practical implications of all the above for clients and colleagues, as well as the communities we live in and those we seek to make a difference to.

My course participants are immediately made to feel safe and valued by giving them the space to share what is important to them. Their experiences and perspectives are not seen as tiresome distractions but as an integral part of the vibrant, interactive methodology I work to. I enjoy giving them licence to ask any question, especially on 'pc' issues and terms, without fear of causing offence or being met with ridicule. I work in a dynamic partnership with my participants to create and sustain an enthusiastic collective spirit focused on generating workable solutions they can own to the challenges arising from the realities of everyday practice. The result is a hugely enjoyable, liberating and productive event that finally addresses long-standing issues and questions such as:

Q: How do I gain the trust of people from completely different backgrounds and experiences to me?

Q: What issues within the field of Diversity are relevant to offending?

Q: How can I motivate people whose experiences in terms of Diversity are so different to mine?

Q: What are the key links within Diversity I can utilise to understand a broad range of clients?

Q: How can I improve the quality of my PSRs in these areas – what should I include or leave out?

Q: What are the common stages many people go through despite eventually forming diverse identities?

Q: What are the relevant questions to ask? – when should I ask? And how should I phrase them?

Q: How can I use my personal experiences to break down barriers?

Q: How should I respond if my questions are seen as offensive?

Q: How can I get offenders who have also been victims of discrimination to take responsibility for their offending?

Q: What are the most effective ways to challenge discriminatory attitudes and behaviour?

Q: What are the most effective ways to work with BME offenders?

Q: What are the most effective ways to challenge racism and racially motivated offenders?

Q: Where can I find relevant and accessible resources I can use immediately?

Q: How do I deal with denial and minimisation?

Q: How can I effectively incorporate Diversity when delivering specialised groupwork programmes?

Q: Are my skills and knowledge transferable – and if so in what ways?

Q: How can I improve the way I supervise and manage Diversity in terms of people, policy and practice?

For me becoming a trainer was one of the best decisions I ever made because I get to boost the confidence and self-esteem of so many fantastic members of staff nationwide - who then go on to do the same with the people they work with in ways that merely emphasise the fundamental unity we all share beneath our diversity.

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