
LEADERSHIP EFFECTIVENESS: BANISH DIVISIVENESS

Ten executives were meeting in a board room. I was there with a team of nine white men and one black man, whom everyone called “Preacher.” Some might say this was a racist designation; others might say it was a kind tribute. Some might have no reaction to the appellation.

These days when someone calls a woman “ma’am,” the woman may be offended. Some 40 years ago, that was the normal polite form of address. You can’t get men to stop saying it to women in certain regions of the U.S.

In addition, other labels have begun to cause divisiveness in the workplace: “OK BOOMER” or “SNOWFLAKE.” The many potential factors that can cause people to find and focus on differences include age, gender, race, sexual orientation or identity, political leaning, rank and position in the organization, religious affiliation, food preferences, and more. How can leaders continue to be the inspiration for collaboration, mutual understanding, trust, and focused energy in such an environment? Here are four tips that may help you.

1. Consistently review and articulate what brings your organization together: its mission, vision and values: “We here at XYZ Organization are engaged in this purpose and mission, strive for this vision, and live by these values.”
2. Provide an opportunity for people to disagree agreeably. It is useful—not destructive—for people to have different opinions. Differences create better solutions, more innovation, more dynamic and healthier systems, and growth. Get the message out that “We do not advocate for compliance. We do honor values. We expect and want people to speak the truth to leadership, argue for the betterment of the system and results for stakeholder. We give every position in the room airtime so that people feel heard and honored.” Generosity about differences of opinion is part of being tolerant.
3. Build trust by ensuring no bad blood is spilled, no acting out occurs, hostilities are defused, people are heard, and values at all times are front and center.
4. Excuse people from the system who consistently step outside the clear and defined cultural boundaries of values and team competencies. A no tolerance policy for any below the belt behavior is an imperative.

It is a no-brainer that insulting people is not a way to build healthy relationships. To get very practical about it, leaders who allow certain types of language are potentially opening themselves up to lawsuits. In the case of boomers, for example, it would be the Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967 that would be violated.

Tossing off an insult is a cheap way of getting one’s point across. While a leader (as well as the Supreme Court) wants to encourage diversity of opinion, standing up for one’s point of view and speaking truth to power, they should also set the example and “train” people to express the thinking and logic behind their argument. To that point, Justice Anthony Kennedy said: “A law found to discriminate based on viewpoint

is an 'egregious form of content discrimination,' which is 'presumptively unconstitutional'... Instead, our reliance must be on the substantial safeguards of *free and open discussion in a democratic society*." Calling people names is an inelegant, superficial, unreasoned and disorganized way to get one's point across that displays not only bad manners but a lack of depth of thought and a lack of intellectual courage.

The Supreme Court were unanimous in finding, as Kennedy did, that hate speech is not an exception to the First Amendment. [Supreme Court unanimously reaffirms: There is no 'hate speech' exception to the First Amendment](#). Justice Samuel Alito said: "Speech that demeans on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, religion, age, disability, or any other similar ground is hateful; but the proudest boast of our free speech jurisprudence is that we protect the freedom to express 'the thought that we hate.'"

It is our conditioning, our environment, and our values that determine the interpretation of words and the meaning attached to them. The same is true for many of the word labels we use. No one has a definitive answer. The real answer is, "If it hurts the other person and feels disrespectful, it is unacceptable." In addition, we do have some boundaries around "below the belt" slang terms that constitute offensive labels—we know them when we see them.

What stories do people inside your organization tell one another about generational labels? How do you as a leader ensure that the competence of a person defines their contribution rather than the date on the birth certificate.