

Cape

Cultural Sensitivity: What does it really mean?



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Marleen is a qualified attorney specialising as a facilitator and management consultant, helping companies design Employment Equity Plans and conducting cultural sensitivity sessions in the workplace. Her approach is to facilitate the dialogue and to help companies design policies around respect and sensitivity that meets the need of the individual organisation.

'It is strange how advocates believe that tried and tested corporate human resources training tools such as leadership diversity assessments somehow cannot find application in the legal fraternity. Perhaps they simply don't know that these things exist and are used globally to ensure proper management of members with diverse cultural backgrounds within a group.'

Anton Kruger 'Hlophe: The thorn in our side' 2008 April Advocate 29-30

It is 2008, we are more than 10 years into the new South Africa and we are the Rainbow Nation that we wanted to be – right?

The Rainbow Nation is a myth

Even a passing disinterested glance at the news items in our country in the past months will tell us that the Rainbow Nation ideal is a myth. We started out the year with the Free State racism issue – an incident we did not think possible in 2008. The fact is that racism is alive and living – in all of us. Lest there was any doubt about that, the recent xenophobic attacks stripped away our thin veneer of acceptance and tolerance of 'the other' and exposed our racism in all its brutality for the entire world to see.

Most of us belonging to any organisation, or affiliated to an industry or association, have undergone some form of 'Cultural Sensitivity Training' or 'Diversity Management Training'. These have either been of the 'let's all hold hands together and tripple down the yellow brick road' variety, or the more damaging (and polarising) 'let's examine what the apartheid regime did to the black population' variety. The former let us feel all warm and fuzzy for the duration of the course. We had the opportunity to gaze meaningfully at our black/coloured/white counterparts and talk about an aspect of our culture in a protected safe space. The latter left us with a greater understanding of history but bruised by the memory of it all, or feeling guilty about the harm inflicted on our fellow South Africans. Neither brought about unity, or an in-depth understanding, or a road-map for the future of how we deal with each other, when cultural conflict arises.

We have not examined our differences

In the flush of the new South Africa we were all 'guilty' of trying to achieve the ideal of this so-called Rainbow Nation of ours and we lost sight of the fact that we are all fundamentally different. We were so busy forging oneness, that 'difference' was a dirty word. We have not examined that difference.

We also profess to be non-racist when we embark on an intellectual exercise of examin-

ing our own racism. We are clever enough to know what makes us racist in our response. When confronted with our own racism and prejudice, we know that we have simply generalised and stereotyped. What we have not done is spoken to each other about our differences. We have not started to understand and accept our differences, let alone designed protocols and manuals for our managers and supervisors about how to deal with each other in a culturally sensitive way.

A global corporate tool

When European management teams go to Japan to do business, whatever the nature, they study the protocol of what may be perceived as an insult/insensitive behaviour and they go to great lengths to prevent such harm caused by ignorance and lack of understanding.

We have not even begun to examine the protocol in South Africa and the differences in approach. Instead we create conflict by issuing uniforms that are culturally incorrect to our supervisors and factory workers, and then wonder why production goes down. We organise cocktail parties where the dress code is short (and black) dresses, when our guest list is peppered with married women who will not be seen in a short black dress, because it is not culturally correct. We discipline union members for displaying insubordination and disrespect when they walk away from an encounter with an angry supervisor out of respect for him. We fail to understand that our municipal by-laws are not reflective of the norms of our society because we still ban the ritual slaughtering of animals in our suburbs, whereas probably 80% of our society engages in this practice on a daily basis in our very midst, with no ill effect to our health.

Intellectual understanding does not translate into showing respect

Us legal practitioners, for the most part, can understand our socialisation process and intellectually what makes us insensitive to others – but do we understand the fundamental difference between how we show respect to each other?

By way of example: White people for the

most part, find the question of: 'Hello, how are you?' from a call-centre agent whom you have phoned simply to obtain a telephone number, deeply irritating. The question precedes any introduction to the person one is speaking to and one's instant response is: 'Do I know you? What is your name? And why are you asking me how I am, if I don't know you?' In the culture of most white people in South Africa, asking how one is is a genuine enquiry, whereas for most black people this is part of the greeting ritual. It is considered rude not to complete the greeting ritual: 'Hello, how are you?' 'I'm fine thank you – how are you?' And so, on a daily basis, simply in the greeting ritual, many people leave such an encounter irritated and saddened by the rudeness of the other – and yet we have never spoken about this simple difference in the show of respect.

Now is the time to engage and to be educated

We have an obligation to teach ourselves to be more understanding of the different values in our very midst. We can no longer be arrogant about 'the prevailing norm' - we have to arrive at norms and protocols that are inclusive and we must meet each other half-way. We have to educate ourselves about the real differences between us. We are all socialised in a divided society and we all have an obligation to go into the future armed with better knowledge about each other, if this fledgling and fragile democracy of ours is to work at all. We have all been left bemused, if not a little frightened, by the insensitivity of the xenophobic attacks in South Africa. If we are honest, then we have to admit that there is a xenophobic tendency in all of us.

We have never been better poised to start the dialogue and engage with real issues as we are now. We should educate ourselves. Our societies have to examine these issues at length and in great detail. Not only our judges but all those claiming membership of the legal profession should be trained. We should design manuals on ethics and protocols.

We should all take the initiative to examine ourselves, inform ourselves and start talking to each other about each other. 