

The Paralysis of Political Correctness

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Finally! I've made it to Las Vegas for the 2007 SHRM conference. The week has been long and the flight has been longer. Stung, once again, by the one bag rule I have compensated by packing a bag that is so heavy I can barely get it out of the overhead compartment. I managed to get down the jet-bridge and get past the gate agent when, darn it, a wheel broke.

If you know anything about the McCarran International Airport you know that it's not one where you walk out of the plane and out to the curb. So I'm standing there, frustrated, mad at myself for my weighty problem when I see a gentleman coming my way. I ask "Sir, would you mind helping me get my suitcase to that luggage shop about 50 yards down the corridor?" He stopped, took a long look, and then walked away! Feelings bruised but undeterred I looked for another man to help me. I saw a man coming my way who had a pleasant face and looked less preoccupied so I said, "Sir, I am very sorry to bother you but would you please help me get my suitcase to that luggage shop just 25 yards away?" He stopped, looked at me and my bag and said, "You look big enough to handle that yourself."

Well! I began to wonder if I was in West Hell or Las Vegas. My feelings were hurt and my ego was crushed but, having a chronically temperamental lower back, I knew my back was more important than my ego. As I was standing there feeling more than twice shy a man came along and just picked my bag up like it was nothing. Of course, I was in a bit of a fix – somewhere between fright and relief, when he said "I see that you need some assistance and I'm glad to help. I mean, you're fat!"

Before I could say anything to that insult he continued by saying, "Yeah, I was sitting behind you on the plane and I know you're really heavy." My best Southern magnolia, so sweet

that bees come to me for sugar smile was plastered on my face while my brain was going through various scenarios to make the psychological pain stop without losing my physical support he said, “You are what I would call solid!”

Thankfully, by this time we had arrived at the luggage shop. I picked out a bag and transferred all of my lotions and potions to my new, easy glide carrier, and I turned to him and said, “Thank you so much.”

Well, my expectations that he would leave were shattered as he continued to wait for me to make my purchase, assuring me that he would see me to the curb to be sure I was okay. “Oh, no!” I thought. How much longer will I have to endure the recitation of every possible synonym for overweight?

After an awkward moment where my face must have lost its ability to hold that face and now prolonged smile he looked at me and said, “I feel like I’ve said something wrong – maybe even something politically incorrect.” He smiled and continued with “when I said you were fat, I meant p-h-a-t as in ‘pretty hot and tempting.’ I sat behind you on the airplane coming into Vegas and listened to your conversation so when I said heavy, I meant you are a deep thinker. And, when I said solid, I mean like the earth. Like the kind of person I would like to know better.”

Now, while I was hurtling down the miscommunication superhighway, hearing and feeling only the worst, I never gave him the benefit of the doubt. I never stopped for a moment to consider that the words he said were meant to be complimentary. I could only hear them in the context of my recent bad experiences and my long-term insecurity about my own weight – which is considerably more than it should be.

After he helped me to get the rest of my luggage, helped me into my taxi, exchanged business cards, and made plans to talk more in the near future, I had several moments to consider

that I was in Las Vegas to speak at the Society for Human Resources (SHRM) conference on the topic The Paralysis of Political Correctness. It helped me to remember why I started to talk about the paralysis of political correctness almost a decade ago. It made me remember that communication is always hard work though we take it so much for granted. And communication is especially hard when the conditions (tired, frustrated, worried) are less than optimal.

In America today, we are awash in incidences where a casual comment, remark or question can invoke profound misunderstandings and consequences. People are increasingly hesitant and afraid to voice their opinions and communicate honestly. Words are chosen with a care and meticulousness that now often borders on the absurd.

Let me be clear on one point immediately. I am not talking about the Don Imus' of the world. There is no doubt that his kind of gross verbal abuse is suitable only for shock radio. No, I'm talking about the daily occurrences between well meaning people, co-workers, administrators and employees, employees and clients/patients/customers, and so on. I almost did it to myself in the Las Vegas airport when I interpreted three complimentary words from a perfect gentleman as all negatives. None of us are immune.

I define the "paralysis of political correctness" as "the fear that keeps us from doing our best in culturally and linguistically awkward situations; the fear that keeps us afraid of the word or phrase that *shuts down communication and hurts both the sender and the receiver*; that tongue-tied, stomach-churning sensation that makes us avoid those who may need us the most."

A wonderful medical doctor friend of mine came to me a year ago. He said he was going to present at the annual meeting of the Society for Cuban Physicians (sic) and he needed my help. Well I was flattered that he asked and I sought clarification by asking if he needed help with an opening statement, a joke, or some inspirational story. He looked at me in a querulous

fashion and said “No. I mean - what should I call them?” After a moderate pause I asked “call whom?” He said “the people at the conference. I mean should I call them Hispanics or Latinos?”

Astonished, I said, “Okay, let’s analyze the situation. There is a distinct clue here as to what you should call them if you feel that you need to give them a label. I believe they told you the name of their organization is the ‘Society for Cuban Physicians.’ So, if they are in some desperate need for you to call them by some arbitrary label then I think you would be relatively safe with ‘Cuban’ but I think that they know who they are. I think they are looking to you for a wonderful presentation demonstrating your clinical expertise and I can see that you are completely paralyzed trying to come up with the politically correct term.”

As we continued to talk about the PC nightmare he relaxed and I was able to reassure him and give him a little guidance by suggesting that if he was still concerned he should speak with the conference planner or the person who invited him to speak – and not me. Though I have spent a quarter of a century working to improve communication between cultural groups, I was not necessarily the best one to give him *the* answer.

What is it that makes perfectly brilliant people, and my friend is an extraordinary physician, become concerned to the point of paralysis over seemingly simple, common sense issues, when the circumstance involves someone of another race, ethnicity, gender, sexual preference, religion or physical ability. And, whether you realize it or not, visibly or invisibly, that can include just about anybody that you or I encounter on any given day.

I believe there are four basic fears that lead to the paralysis of political correctness:

- Fear based on lack of knowledge of client needs and expectations.
- Fear from regulatory and administrative reprisal.
- Fear of lack of competence.

- Fear of being found out.

My doctor friend was invited to address Cuban-American doctors in Miami because they wanted this expertise and bio-medical knowledge. They did not invite him because they needed his help in how to interpret their own ethnicity.

Human resource managers all over America are walking on egg shells because they never know when the next errant word or phrase will result in a grievance, a termination, or a law suit. Virtually every message, publication or email that is distributed to more than two people now has been wordsmithed to death for fear that that one single word, phrase or reference will ignite a controversy. Even corporate and academic executives, government officials, and celebrities of all shapes and sizes have seen careers destroyed after saying the wrong thing at the wrong time in front of the wrong people.

Yet, the response to these sometimes justified, but mostly overwrought responses to faux pas and unawareness has created an even more insidious problem. At no other time in our nation's history have so many Americans been so fearful of what they say, write and think and that simply cannot be a good thing.

Rick Lavoie, of Learning Disabilities Online said, "People have become so overly-sensitive that we all constantly find ourselves 'on guard' so that we don't offend anyone. I recently saw a bumper sticker which said, 'Political Correctness means always having to say you are sorry.'"¹

¹ Lavoie, Rick. Learning Disabilities Online
http://www.ldonline.org/ld_indepth/general_info/learning_differences_saved.html

Paralysis of political correctness causes the speaker to be hesitant in moving forward in the conversation. It also causes the listener to wonder about the reasons for the hesitancy and may create even more tension.

At the SHRM conference in Las Vegas, I was surprised and sincerely moved by the number of people who spoke with me privately and revealed that although they are human resources managers or chairs of diversity committees for their companies, they really don't know how to develop cultural competency among their workforce, expand their diversity and really move their companies forward to meet the new demographic realities in America. Many times a day I was told by people of every race, creed, and color that they are overwhelmed by the fear of failing to be politically correct.

So, how can we develop diversity and real communications? We first have to acknowledge just how much we fear offending others and now either won't communicate at all, or communicate in such a way as to be almost offensive in our very inclusiveness.

Here is a portion of a Father's Day resolution I clipped from the June 13, 2003 issue of the *Sacramento Bee* newspaper. They obviously are just trying to insure that all fathers know this resolution includes them, too, but come on!

“Single fathers, foster fathers, adoptive fathers, biological fathers, stepfathers, families headed by two fathers, grandfathers raising grandchildren, fathers in blended households, and other non-traditional fathers.”²

I have a good friend who is paralyzed from the waist down and he just hates being called “physically challenged.” He said, “I am not *challenged* to get out of this wheel chair. I am

² Doe, John. “Father's Day Resolution Taken to Extreme,” *Sacramento Bee*, page 12, July 13, 2003.

paralyzed from the waist down. I am disabled, for God's sake. 'Challenged' makes it sound like, if I'd only just try hard enough, I could walk."

Americans are categorically the fattest people on the planet, but we still have a large percentage of pediatricians who admit that they will not tell a parent that their child is obese because too many parents are offended.

In my SHRM presentation Q&A, I had a woman ask me about a situation at her company where an employee was discovered in some "risqué" photos posted on a gay Web site. In a meeting on the issue, which included several HR personnel, this woman and the employee's unit supervisor -- a man who was also gay -- the woman was asked what she thought of the gay Web site. She said when she blanched and shouted, "Why are you asking me, why don't you ask *him* [the unit supervisor]?" the others turned chilly towards her.

The way the woman described the scene and her response made me feel that perhaps she was offended to be asked her perceptions of the gay Web site, because it implied she might be gay, too. On the other hand, her passing the buck to the gay unit supervisor, however emotionally done, may have been the best action. A member of the gay community might better judge if this Web site violated company policy about pornography or was simply an upstanding social networking sight for gay people. If so, and the guy wasn't nude or engaged in clear sexual conduct, then the company should accept his right to social privacy.

However, it was the end of my workshop time so I couldn't go into all of that. I simply said, "I can't respond to your question because I'm from Nebraska, and we don't have sex in Nebraska -- except Saturdays in the missionary position only." It got the biggest laugh of my workshop.

How did we evolve this manic need to quantify and qualify what should be simple common sense communication with someone different from us? We keep thinking that we're taking a short cut to communication, when we're actually *short-circuiting* communication and killing it dead.

So, how is political correctness affecting the behavior at your corporation? Is it dominating all communication or just the communication that is visible to all? When developing policies, how much time and energy is spent on wordsmith and inclusivity?

The key to challenging this detriment to true communication and inclusiveness is for human resource managers to first do a self-assessment. What have you done to personally test your own cultural competency? Let me give you a clue. Don't just sit at company-sponsored tables at minority community banquets or attend cultural events. *You've* got really get to know the diversity of your base population.

Discomfort decreases with knowledge and exposure. Fear and political correctness diminish as people learn more. People who are responsible for diversity and multicultural development and inclusion need to be audited on their own skill sets and experiences and methods of interacting with all kinds of people. And companies have to allocate more funds for those responsible – using company “loose change” for diversity and cultural competency development won't cut it anymore.

I recently had a corporate human resources executive of a Fortune 500 company – a close friend of mine, in fact – look me in the face and say, “We don't have any issues with political correctness at my company.”

I just walked away shaking my head. Can there really be such an animal left in the rapidly changing American demographics today? Trust me; I think my friend and I will be having this conversation again soon.