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# Race Talk in the Workplace

## Unraveling Intention and Impact

*By Deborah L. Plummer*

**T**HE CHALLENGES OF living in twenty-first century America and maintaining productive work teams is now even more complicated by the varied ways of knowing and the conceptual understanding of work brought to the workplace by diverse populations. The statistics speak for themselves. Large numbers of immigrants to the United States have added to the changing face of America. Non-Hispanic whites will become a minority in the United States population in the next fifty years. Latinas are the fastest growing female minority population. A growing, affluent Black population has become a powerful voice in politics and corporate America. Asians have a significant presence in the wealthiest cities. Native American voices continue to influence our culture, especially in spirituality and the arts. Thus, White Americans today are more likely to work with People of Color than just thirty years ago. Similarly, minority owned businesses must engage the majority culture in order to prosper economically.

With these swift demographic changes taking place in the U.S., a number of benefits are also afforded to us. Our culture is able to draw from a rich pool of diverse individuals who can enhance work environments by redefining markets, products, strategies, missions, and business practices. Diversity, when used as a business asset, can lead to increased productivity and increased market shares. Yet, with every benefit there is a challenge. The challenge of managing diversity, particularly in work teams, communities, and interpersonal relationships, requires

new skills that were not always necessary in homogeneous environments.

The purpose of this article is to provide a framework for understanding the dynamics of communicating across racial differences. The article delineates a set of skills designed to improve the communication process in mixed-race settings

### EVERY DAY OCCURRENCES

Many of today's best and brightest managers lack the diversity competency skills to handle race relations in the workplace. Here are a few case scenarios. A colleague tells you that she was waiting in line to process some paperwork at a finance office. She noticed that the African American clerks were very friendly with all the other African American employees. When other African Americans approached the counter, the clerks laughed, smiled, and joked. While all of the joking was taking place, no one appeared to be working. Your colleague tells you that she was forced to walk over to the counter to the White clerk, who seemed to know how to work and talk at the same time. She wanted to say something to the Black clerks, but she knew that by bringing the problem up the topic for discussion would not be efficiency but race.

A sales executive begins a meeting with a potential Native American client by telling him that the restaurant was inten-

tionally chosen because it did not make any references to the controversial Indian mascot for the local baseball team. He thought this introduction would immediately show the potential client that the company was sensitive to concerns of Native Americans, but from the client's facial expression it is unclear whether the topic should have even been brought up.

An Asian American worker is overheard on the phone saying that he knows he must attend the company's award dinner, but he is tired of the kind of food that will be served, the choice of music, and most of all, the stereotypical remarks that are made to him that will be passed off as "conversation starters."

Four days after the September 11, 2001 National Tragedy, an Asian Indian health care worker was with a multiracial group of friends celebrating a birthday. After the restaurant staff called for a moment of silence and lit candles on the table in commemoration, he shared with the group that at work that day someone asked him, "Are you one of them?" "It's O.K." he continues over his friends' gasp, "I didn't get upset. They can't tell the difference. They are just ignorant."

Being afraid to talk about race and not having the skills to successfully communicate in racially mixed environments, can lead to mistakes in marketing, building team spirit, mentoring and creating a shared vision for the direction of an organization or community. Sometimes these mistakes can lead to legal expenses for the organization. Sometimes, the hidden costs associated with not having these skills are even greater. These include:

- Absenteeism
- Employee turnover
- Damaged morale
- Lost productivity
- Impact on quality
- Damaged reputation
- Increased work stress

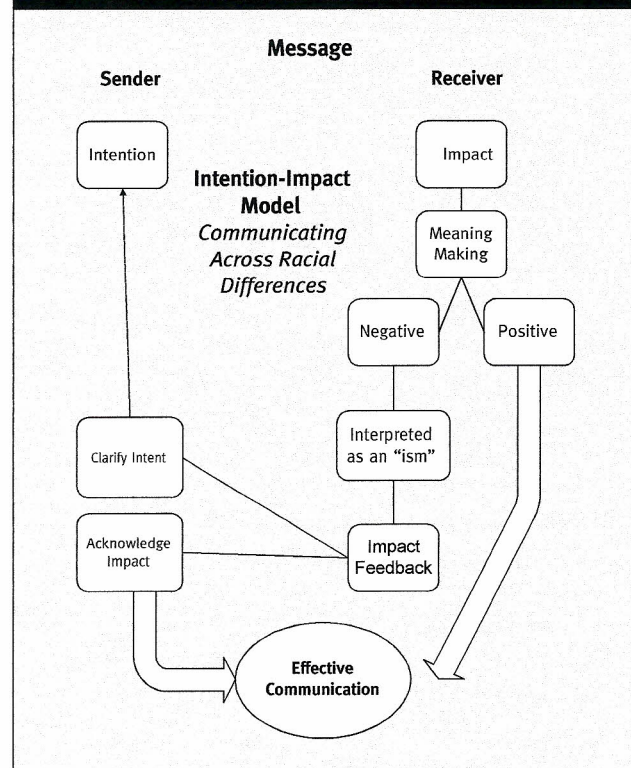
## INTENTION-IMPACT MODEL

As a diversity consultant with almost 20 years of experi-

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**Figure 1:**  
**INTENTION-IMPACT MODEL**



ence, I have had many opportunities to help mixed-race audiences try to create dialogue and better understand each other. The diagram below presents a simple framework that generally helps people get off to a good start. The Intention/Impact Model (Figure 1) was designed to expand the concept of the dynamics of intention by the sender and the impact received in cultural clashes.

In this framework, the communication process starts with a message depicted at the top of the diagram. That message is usually somewhat neutral, and delivered with a positive intent. On the part of the sender, there is intention, and on the part of the receiver, there is impact. A meaning-making process usually follows on the part of both the sender and the receiver. The sender is doing a mental check, to make sure that his words match the intent of his message. The receiver is taking in what has just been said and is experiencing an impact. Both the sender and the receiver make sense of what has just been exchanged between them. If the impact is felt as positive, then effective communication contact takes place. The receiver, who now becomes the sender, usually returns another message. If the impact is experienced as negative, then the communication contact becomes ineffective. At this point, the impact needs to be shared and acknowledged and the intention needs to be clarified. This sending-receiving exchange happens numerous times in any given conversation.

On the part of the sender, we have intention that is



informed by the person's level of awareness of diversity, knowledge of the possible impact on the receiver and skill in relaying the message. On the part of the receiver, we have impact, which is influenced by the person's personal history, and degree of comfort with the relationship. Other elements include the power dynamics between both parties and their personality characteristics.

If the person is my boss, it complicates the exchange. If the reference is experienced as racially motivated and I am uncomfortable about correcting a workplace superior, the only recourse may be to correct the situation in the courts. This is too often the case in a world where diversity education is readily accessible. As professionals, we may believe that people need not be "so sensitive" and allow for honest mistakes that are not ill intended. Yet, the meaning-making we do is determined by the individual, interpersonal, organization, or societal context we place it in, the patterns of behavior that have been created, and objective and subjective reality.

People of Color tend to expect that in the twenty-first century, Whites' level of competency should be at least a minimum of basic — after all it has been almost 40 years since the civil rights movement and the impact of such behavior has been repeatedly communicated. Thus, very little slack is given, especially to leadership where more is expected and required. Whites, on the other hand, tend to focus on the intention and view how much progress has been made in American race relations, thus expect People of Color to be more patient and forgiving of such minute mishaps.

An example to illustrate the interplay of intention and impact comes from an event that made national news. In 1999, a local official in Washington D. C. told two coworkers that because of local budget problems, he would have to be "niggardly" in the use of certain funds that year. "Niggardly" means "miserly" and has no relation to the other word that most of us find so offensive. The white official tried to explain his intentions to his colleagues. One of his coworkers accepted his explanation, but the other did not. The official resigned, after the incident was reported to the media and the story flared up in national news. After considerable interaction about the incident in the community, the mayor invited the official to return to his position. This process of intention and impact in this situation can be routed through the Intention-Impact framework:

The official was clear in his intention — to state that they needed to be frugal about spending money. The coworker was clear on the impact of the message — it felt like a racial slur (The coworker felt uncomfortable, ugly, butterflies in the stomach, yucky). The official's intention did not include the possibility that using a word that sounds so similar to an offensive term might have resulted in a negative impact in a racially mixed environment. The coworker's impact was informed by historical influences, his degree of comfort with his relationship with the official, the power dynamics between them, and his own personality characteristics. Remember, one coworker accepted the explanation and one did not. As in this case, it is very likely that

the impact of a statement will vary depending on the individual.

What needed to happen differently? The official needed to explain his intention and, in fact, actually did so. The coworker needed to express the impact on him. He also had to react to the explanation of the official's intention. Although the receiver of this message told the sender the felt impact, he did not acknowledge the intention of the sender to be acceptable. Meaningful communication contact was broken as a result. The receiver had a choice to accept or reject the person's stated intentions. Attorneys who practice in this area of law know how difficult it is to prove a person's intention. It is no clearer in the everyday workplace. Here is my advice on the acceptability of intention: Unless you have solid proof that your sender's intentions were not honorable, give the person the benefit of the doubt. Doing so supports effective communication and generally leads to greater satisfaction for both parties. In a leadership role, the official was expected to understand the possible impact of his choice of words. Arguably in this case, more was required and expected from him in regards to competency.

Effective cross-racial communication is supported when both parties are responsible for making sure that the outcome is positive. The sender needs to be clear on his or her intentions and possess some awareness of the potential impact on the receiver. The receiver needs to share the impact and sort out the personal or historical interpretations from the present-day reality.

We can interrupt the conversation at any given point and still achieve effective communication. If the message is not clear, re-state it so that your intentions produce the desired impact. If you experience the impact as negative, give yourself time to sort out where the negative feelings are coming from, then share the impact with the sender of the message. Staying engaged in the conversation is critical to effective communication for both parties.

## RACE TALK SKILLS

There were many cross-racial communication skills embedded in the examples previously discussed. Three skills in particular: The Principle of Staying Dumb, Holding Multiple Realities, and Staying the Course will be explained in the following paragraphs:

The Principle of Staying Dumb is a skill set that that I enjoy teaching others and using myself. We can learn much by remembering to stay dumb when it is appropriate. Staying Dumb in a cross-racial interaction means remaining curious about what is going on for the other person or for the group in the interaction. We do a lot of assuming in cross-racial interactions. When someone says something that affects me negatively, I may assume that it was done intentionally and with awareness of the received impact. This is not always the case. Slowing ourselves down and *staying* dumb (not *playing* dumb) helps to increase communication and lessens the negative impact.



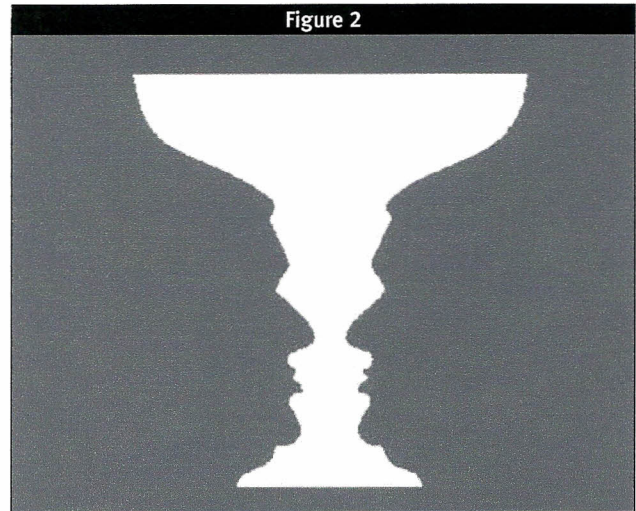
Denzel Washington, in the film *Philadelphia*, plays a lawyer who asks his clients and witnesses to “tell it to me as if I were a seventh grader.” He is staying dumb. Clearly he has some idea of what the other person might be trying to say. In most cases, he is probably in the ballpark about what the other person intended to say. Yet he makes sure that both parties agree about the conversation and what was meant by the words that were actually used before he moves on to his next point. When someone understands a statement to be racially insensitive or believes it to be a racist remark, it is easy for that person to become defensive and proceed to defend oneself. When defensiveness begins, it is more difficult to move a conversation to a positive outcome. For the receiver, it is better to stay dumb and say, “Gee, I have never thought of myself as racist. Can you tell me how my remark reflected that?” Or “My intent was not to be racially insensitive, so I am curious about how it felt to you?” Staying dumb and asking for more information not only de-escalates the tension in the situation, but directs the conversation to an outcome that is more likely to be productive. Similarly, if someone says, “The Jews have all the money,” one would need to resist giving that person a history lesson and chastising him or her for stereotyping. Rather, stay dumb and ask, “Gee, I am Jewish, and I have never experienced that reality. I wonder from where you got your information?” Or “I have known some Jewish people whom I wouldn’t consider wealthy. I am curious about your experience.”

Staying Dumb for the sender means to think before you speak. State your message in a way that delivers the intention, rather than stating a message for what you might believe to produce a positive impact. Staying dumb takes a lot of smarts and patience!

The next competency to be introduced is that of holding multiple realities. A Gestalt psychology principle with which you are probably familiar helps to make the point. The principle is the perception of figure/ground. You may have seen this image of the vase and two faces. If we look at this picture and concentrate on seeing the white as the foreground and the black as the background, you’ll see something that resembles a vase. If you reverse it and look at the black as the foreground and the white as the background, two profiles or faces emerge. What is intriguing about this image is that you cannot hold both images in your mind at the same time — a perceptual shift has to take place in order to see the other image. This perceptual shift is the skill that we need to communicate effectively across racial lines. I have to possess the ability to see both the vase and the two faces. I have to be able to see my reality and the other person’s reality. The ability to hold multiple realities is critical to effective communication and especially to managing diversity conflict.

When someone states that they see an issue as a racial issue, and the other person states, “It has nothing to do with race. I see it clearly as a personality issue (or poor management skills, or bad judgment.)” In cases such as these, multiple realities exist. The degree to which each component — race or personality, poor management skills, bad judgment — contributes to

Figure 2



the issue may vary, but all components are generally a piece of the larger puzzle. Just as in the vase/two faces picture (Figure 2), multiple realities of perception exist in workplace situations.

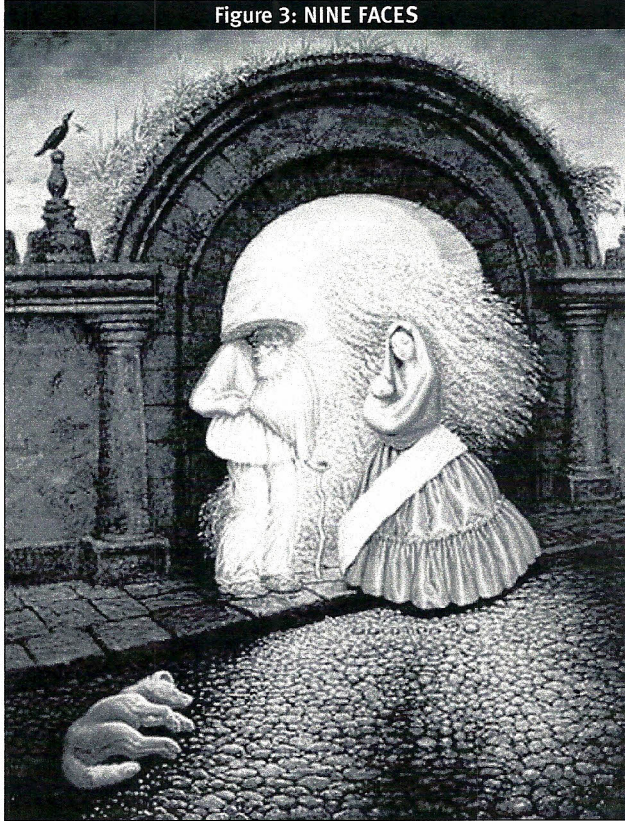
For our understanding, the figure of the vase and two faces presents a clear image. Most people have very little difficulty seeing the vase and two faces. But sometimes images get so embedded, that it becomes impossible to see the individual images clearly. For example, in Figure 3 there are nine human faces. Most likely, you will not be able to identify them all immediately— but trust that there are nine faces.

As in this embedded image picture, diversity-related conflict often holds embedded images. Some images may be clearly visible to one party, while at the same time they may be invisible to another. Because an image may appear invisible to an individual, does not mean that it is not there. One may see only five faces in the picture, however nine faces are present. When dealing with others whose racial lens of the world is different from our own, time needs to be taken to see what is in their picture. Support needs to be given to each other in seeing all the images.

Staying the course is the last skill to be introduced in this article. Staying the course means staying engaged in the dialogue, or staying engaged in the conversation. If someone says something I believe to be racially insensitive and I simply walk out and complain about it to members of my own group without stating the impact to that individual, then I haven’t stayed the course. Or suppose I make a remark and someone corrects me, and I am a bit embarrassed by my mistake. After this incident, I shut down and avoid being in mixed-race settings because it feels to me as if I am walking on eggshells — then I haven’t stayed the course. Staying the course is not easy. It requires patience and, sometimes, the emotional stability of a rock. In our stressful work environments, this kind of patience is often not easy to find. However, we do need to learn ways to creatively manage projections — those feelings that instantly pop up for us and those we automatically attribute to the neg-



Figure 3: NINE FACES



ative intentions of others. For example, consider the case cited earlier, with the use of the word *niggardly*: Many people — Black and White Americans — projected negative intentions onto the official who used it and refused to continue the dialogue, locked into their sense of rightness or wrongness of its use. Without staying the course, the lesson that is learned is that it is risky to engage in mixed race, multicultural interactions.

Staying the course means that we pay just as much attention to content — what is being said — as to process — how it is being said, in what context, by whom, and for what reason. It takes time to unravel process, but doing so leads to collaborative interpretations and increases the probability for effective communication. More problems in organizations arise over process loss than over content loss. For example, when I come into the office and fail to greet someone as I enter the room, or if I don't speak when I am greeted, these seemingly simple acts can turn into major losses in terms of team building and good morale in racially mixed settings. The meaning that is interpreted from such actions varies by racial groups. For some, this seemingly simple inattentiveness or preoccupation ("They are so sensitive!") can be experienced as a demeaning gesture ("They believe they are too good to speak!"). These kinds of losses are unnecessary and can be easily managed with just a small amount of diversity competency.

## METHODS FOR INCREASING EFFECTIVE RACE TALK

Here are some helpful hints for increasing your skills in communicating across racial differences as a means of enhancing diversity competency. For busy managers, they do not require much more than heightening awareness. If adhered to, these suggestions will not only improve your cross-racial professional relationships but will enhance your personal life as well:

1. Learn the value of a variety of opinions and thoughts. See "the vase and the two faces."
2. Recognize the challenges and learning opportunities that new perspectives bring. Where there is discomfort, there is learning — if we stay with the discomfort long enough.
3. Base your expectations of others on individual qualities and traits, rather than on racial group identity.
4. Seek out ways to personally and professionally develop diversity competencies. Take a class, watch a video, read a book on racial issues.
5. Encourage and accept openness in others. Don't assume.
6. When you make a mistake that involves race — get over it! Become emotionally resilient. Learn from it and move on.
7. Spend time with a variety of people — don't avoid situations or events where you might be the "only one" or one of a few.
8. Make other people feel valued. It will increase your own sense of worth.
9. Have a clear sense of yourself as a racial being. Understand how race has affected your life and influenced your thinking and behavior. Stop being an expert on what the other race is thinking.
10. Talk with and socialize with your friends of different races. Don't be afraid to ask the stupid questions. Don't be afraid to give the honest responses.

In the last scenario depicted in the introduction, an Asian Indian male makes the inference that most matters of racial insensitivity are the product of ignorance. Organizational cultures cannot afford such ignorance. In America's increasingly diverse and global workforce, race talk cannot be avoided. Race talk can be an opportunity for the most meaningful form of communication that takes place in our world today. As a result of the national tragedy experienced in September, many people made reference to the fact that the tragedy seemed to set Americans back to looking at the color of a person's skin with fear. Many would argue that with racial profiling so prominent in our society that we never really stopped looking at color. Yet, these words sent over the Internet state: "as the soot and dirt and ash rained down, we became one color." The ability to see "one color" and not be colorblind is a competency. It is a competency that hopefully will be learned not just in times of tragedy, but in the more often, peaceful times. As microcosms of society, it is imperative that organizations promote effective race talk not only for increased productivity but also for survival. ■

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## OD Practitioner

## Call for Articles

For Vol. 36 #4 Issue (Fall 2004)

### **Special Issue - Gestalt Organization and Systems Development Perspectives**

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- 1) feature articles that examine the theory underlying Gestalt practice
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- 3) creative, thought-provoking essays on the past, present, or future impact of Gestalt on OD professionals or on the OD field of practice

Viable papers will successfully integrate the following

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- 2) documents and demonstrates successful Gestalt OSD practices and case studies
- 3) provides specific guidelines, principles, and lessons learned that can further shape and guide OD practice from a Gestalt OSD perspective

Contributors should send their manuscripts electronically, no later than June 15, 2004

- Include an Abstract of your paper of approximately 150 words.
- Articles should be no more than 4000 words, including Abstract and References.
- Author biographies need to be approximately 50 words.
- Your submission will be acknowledged electronically when reviewers are assigned. Acceptance decisions will be received by September 1.

Please submit your manuscript by June 15, 2004, via e-mail as an attached WORD document to [ODPSubmit@ODNetwork.org](mailto:ODPSubmit@ODNetwork.org).