

Through the looking glasses

Workers have different views on discrimination on the job

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If you think achieving diversity is simply a matter of overcoming prejudice against minorities, consider the responses of 4,000 people to a Gallup survey question: "Have you ever been discriminated against or harassed in the workplace based on race, culture or ethnicity?"

Twenty-six percent of all respondents -- including 52 percent of African Americans -- said they had. But what might surprise many people is that 20 percent of white workers said they, too, had been discriminated against or harassed.

Mark A. Williams thinks people need to look at the issue through a different lens -- or 10 or them, in fact. The founder and chief executive officer of The Diversity Channel, a Bethesda, Md., multimedia company that offers diversity training, has come out with a book that offers a different way of thinking about racial issues, "The 10 Lenses: Your Guide to Living & Working in a Multicultural World."

Williams says people and companies often oversimplify the issue, categorizing workers simply as for diversity or against it -- or, depending on your perspective, good or evil. "I think we had a notion that a person was either prejudiced or non-prejudiced," he said in an interview.

Instead, Williams believes that each worker sees diversity issues primarily through one or two of the following 10 lenses. Each lens has ways of helping the workplace, but also can do serious harm. The lenses are:

-- TRANSCENDENT: Those who focus on people's shared humanity. The Gallup survey says more than 40 percent of respondents have this as their primary lens.

-- COLORBLIND: Those who see people as individuals and ignore ethnicity and cultural factors. This is the second most common lens.

-- MULTICULTURALIST: People who celebrate the different cultures, and the contributions they make to the nation's character.

-- INTEGRATIONIST: Those who want to merge people of different cultures in the workplace.

-- MERITOCRATIST: People who believe talented, hard-working employees will succeed, regardless of race.

-- ASSIMILATIONIST: Those who believe people should submerge their individual and cultural identities in favor of nationalistic ideals.

-- ELITIST: People who believe in the importance of family roots, wealth and social status. This and the three lenses below are the primary lenses for 1 percent or less of workers, according to the Gallup survey.

-- VICTIM/CARETAKER: Those who feel they are still suffering from the generational impact of previous oppression, so they deserve compensation from society.

-- CULTURALCENTRIST: People who want to improve the welfare of their cultural group by accentuating its history and identity.

-- SECLUSIONIST: Those who want to separate themselves from ethnic and cultural groups that they feel will diminish their own group's experiences in society.

As an example of how all groups can benefit or endanger the workplace, Williams writes that Transcendents can promote tolerance and help bring different people together, but they can also be unable or unwilling to recognize when other people are in conflict or feel oppressed.

He said in the interview that followers of the Rev. Jerry Falwell could well be identified as Transcendents, but so could followers of Deepak Chopra. Yet the two groups would have big ideological differences.

Some groups, such as Assimilationists and Culturalcentrists, are opposites, which can make it harder for them to appreciate each other's points of view. Williams explains in the book which strengths and concerns arise out of each group, and how to work with people in each category. He also includes a hypothetical court case for each group, pointing out legal challenges an employer might face if someone in any category ignores other issues.

The Gallup survey found that although only 8 percent of the respondents are primarily Meritocratists, the ones in that group tend to be white male executives with high socioeconomic status. Williams said their influence can be good for a company in terms of such things as setting high performance standards and supporting individual accomplishment, but they can also overlook how organizational barriers penalize those who don't fit the dominant culture.

Williams said that if a Meritocratist is in charge of hiring, for example, the executive might unconsciously make it harder for members of certain groups to be brought in or promoted. They might not have some of the style or connections that the Meritocratist considers to be important.

Williams explained that a company might have a broader philosophy of welcoming people of all cultures, but that could get undermined if those doing the hiring let any one

lens dominate their thinking. Just as too much of a Meritocratist could be harmful, so, too, could too much of a Multiculturalist - - someone who is excessively critical of white males simply because of the power they have been given in the past. That could lead to reverse discrimination.

He said the people who seem hardest to change are those who are a combination of Meritocratist and Colorblind. Although both traits have their good qualities, people with the combination can firmly believe that talent will overcome any inequity in the system.

They believe that "even if there is prejudice, you just overcome it," Williams said. They will point to someone like Secretary of State Colin Powell, and overlook other African Americans who have not been able to overcome prejudice.

Williams said he hopes the book will help change the dialogue about race in the workplace, helping people to see the similarities that all groups share -- and understand that differences in attitudes about diversity cut across racial and ethnic lines.

It might be predictable, for example, that many Assimilationists are Republicans or older Americans. What is less predictable, though, is that many members of that group are Asian Americans.

"We are not black, white and other," Williams said. "There are tremendous differences among members of cultural groups."