

# White Men & Diversity: What White Men, White Women, and People of Color Can Do to Make a Real Difference in Their Workplace Diversity

by Bill Proudman

My teacher says,  
*You've got to stink first.*

I tell her, I don't have time to stink—  
*at 64 years old*  
*I go directly to perfection*  
*or I go nowhere.*

*Perfection is nowhere,*  
*she says, So stink.*  
*Stink like a beginner,*  
*stink like decaying flesh,*  
*old blood,*  
*cold sweat,*  
*she says,*  
*I know a woman who's eighty-six,*  
*Last year she learned to dive.*  
—Lisa Colt

The notion of “stinking” at something is unfathomable for most accomplished adults, yet the willingness to have a “beginner’s mind” is critical to learning and practicing effective diversity partnerships. In many workplaces, people fear that any “messiness” regarding diversity is unacceptable. As explained in detail in the March/April column, this attitude promotes a “fake it until you make it” approach to diversity learning. The result is that real learning does not take place. What emerges instead may be politically correct rhetoric and hallway conversations

like “They just don’t get it” (from white women and people of color) and “We are damned if we do and damned if we don’t” (from white men). Expectations of perfection are counterproductive when negotiating difficult diversity conversations.

How can we expect to deepen and expand our partnerships if we are never allowed to “stink”? Partnership work is a critical component of embracing diversity and inclusion, and the road to mastery must be littered with mistakes. Effective partnership work requires perseverance and practice, a willingness to risk and be vulnerable, and enduring missteps.

Below are some partnership tips to consider while on the diversity learning journey. As you move forward, make sure you have an able support team you can talk to about what you know, what you don’t know, and why diversity is important to you and your organization.

## WHAT CAN WHITE MEN DO?

*I will act as if what I do makes a difference.*

—William James

Here are eight things white men can do to strengthen partnerships with white women and people of color:

## BE A LIFELONG LEARNER

Many white men invariably think of diversity as a problem to solve. It is important to resist the temptation to see diversity as a finite issue to fix. While problem-solving skills are helpful, the role of an effective and ongoing diversity partner is building the stamina to hang in there for the long term.

It is also key to adopt a stance of life-long learning about this topic, including asking the question, "As a white man, how is diversity about me?"

Here, it's okay to become comfortable being occasionally uncomfortable with the topic. Try to see the discomfort as a part of your learning, not as something that must be tolerated. Relish the confusion and the uncertainty and resist the urge to fix it. Learn to use any discomfort in service to your learning.

## CULTIVATE AN APPETITE FOR NEW LEARNING

White men, who rarely if ever have to experience being in the minority, will often say, "The more I learn about diversity, the more I realize I still don't know." Not knowing can feel awkward for many white men, who usually expect to quickly master a new skill or be able to follow clear rules. They may ask, "What name should I call 'them' and their group?" and become frustrated when there is more than one "right" answer.

The need to be right can block learning. Diversity learning is not about being right or wrong. It's simply that one has an incomplete picture of the whole. Act on what you know, while

also seeking insight and a broader perspective through the eyes and voices of others. Stay in touch with your wisdom and humility. In doing so, others will be able to experience you as human and imperfect, and as an ongoing learner. They will feel more comfortable learning and working with you. "Stink" a little.

## WORK HARD TO BETTER UNDERSTAND SYSTEMIC PRIVILEGE

Systemic privilege is the web of unspoken, invisible benefits that come to a person by no virtue of their own. The benefits are made to look achievable through effort and, hence, available to any person. Being a recipient of systemic privilege based on skin color, gender, and sexual orientation does not prevent straight white men from feeling mistreated or personally powerless in individual interactions. That said, not understanding how the benefits of systemic privilege impact day-to-day interactions can create enormous barriers to effectively understanding, communicating, and leading diverse organizations. Here are some examples of systemic privilege:

White Privilege:

- I don't have to think or worry about whether I got a job or promotion solely because of my race. Nor do I have to worry about whether my peers think this was the case.
- I can be pretty sure I will never be asked: "Do you speak English?" or be told: "You speak English very well."
- I do not need to ask myself if each negative episode or situation I experience has racial

overtones.

- I routinely witness and benefit from the many positive white-male role models displayed in the media, politics, and entertainment that far outweigh the “Tim McVeighs” and “Ted Kazinskis” of white maleness.

#### Male Privilege:

- I can more easily put my work and work schedule first without regard to key obligations to my family and/or significant others.
- I can, in many more situations than not, take up more time, get more respect, and be listened to more often than a woman.
- On the job, I am not judged by the attractiveness of my appearance.

#### Heterosexual Privilege:

- I can have pictures of loved ones on my desk and not have to worry about what people will think.
- I can talk about what I did last weekend without having to edit what I say.
- I can bring a date to company functions and offsite events to which spouses are invited without the risk of it negatively affecting my career.

The ultimate privilege for heterosexual, white men means they do not have to think about or question the dimensions of their identity in each workplace situation. They can choose to address—or not address—diversity issues without much professional

consequence. If they choose not to intervene in a diversity issue, their colleagues will not think less of them.

When white women, people of color, and gay/lesbian/bi-sexual/transgendered (GLBT) groups share struggles related to not having privileges (like some of those described above), white men often unconsciously invalidate or discredit their experiences. Often this comes from not understanding how group membership affords white men protection from what others must face on a daily basis. They may dismiss the dilemmas of their white women colleagues and colleagues of color by thinking or stating, “I’ve overcome obstacles in my life; why can’t you stop whining and overcome yours?”

Anyone whose reality is consistently invalidated may get angry and frustrated, and respond with, “You just don’t get it.” Everyone involved walks away feeling a little worse. White men feel misunderstood and bashed. White women and people of color feel marginalized and invisible.

#### KNOW THAT YOU WILL BE PERCEIVED AS BOTH A MEMBER OF THE WHITE MALE GROUP AND AS AN INDIVIDUAL

White women and people of color have to understand and operate in two worlds—theirs and the white male culture (the dominant culture of the business world). Like chameleons, they navigate back and forth between both worlds.

For white men, one privilege means not having to acknowledge membership in the white male group. There is no long-term cost or consequence

to white men to consider themselves only individuals. As examined in the March/April column, white men aren't ever asked to speak for their entire group. They do not have their actions scrutinized to the degree that white women and people of color do, simply because of their gender or skin color.

Many white women and people of color, however, view white men as both individuals and as representatives of the white male group.

When white men can acknowledge their group membership as well as their individuality, they develop the skills to be able to distinguish whether a person is talking to them as an individual or as a member of the white male group. Making the distinction reduces the possibility that they will take personally a remark that is meant as a general observation. Every comment a woman or person of color makes about white men is not necessarily about a specific man. Explore how this perception influences and impacts communication and understanding between white men and others.

### IT'S NOT YOUR FAULT AND YOU ARE RESPONSIBLE

Sometimes, when issues regarding the systemic mistreatment of blacks, Asians, Hispanics and other marginalized ethnicities enter into a conversation, whites may feel they are being asked to personally apologize for something they did not cause or perpetuate. They may feel discomfort, withdraw completely, or shut the conversation down.

The solutions are simple: Don't apologize for things you have not done. Take responsibility for showing up fully in the partnership. Pay attention to how the issue is impacting the substance and mood of the conversation.

Don't allow any insinuation of guilt or blame to mute your voice or prompt you to respond from a shameful or defended place. Guilt can be an interesting place to visit, but it's not a helpful place to stay. It can deter you from learning about other people's experiences. It can also deter you from recognizing how you unintentionally collude in prohibiting any examination of inequality. Transcend the blame conversation, so you can study what is really going on in the moment.

### LEARN HOW TO LISTEN ... AGAIN

White male culture socializes white men to take action. They are doers and problem-solvers. White men often hear from a spouse or significant other, "I don't want you to fix me or solve this; I just want you to listen and hear me". White men have to learn that when someone shares a problem, it doesn't imply a request or responsibility for them to fix it.

Many white men have also been trained that the purpose of conversation is debate—a debate they must often win. As a result, many white men spend most of their time advocating their own position and little time inquiring and hearing others' perspectives. When others do share their perspectives, white men sometimes use this time to plan their next point. This approach does

not promote mutual understanding. It does create a winner and a loser and great frustration.

The goal of a conversation for learning is mutual understanding. Work to hear the other's perspective. Don't judge whether you agree or disagree; the conversation is simply two people with different perspectives conversing.

Being a member of this advantaged group shields white men from accurately hearing others and understanding their reality. Inquire about how others would like to be treated, rather than making assumptions.

### LEARN TO BE BOTH "COLOR/ GENDER" BLIND AND "COLOR/ GENDER CONSCIOUS" SIMULTANEOUSLY

*"I am color or gender blind. I don't see someone as black/white or male/female. I just treat everyone the same. The best person gets the job. Everyone has equal opportunity. After all, this is America."*

The intention of these comments is often to reassure others that the speaker is fair and equitable to all involved. They recognize the uniqueness of the individual. However, it doesn't encompass the complexity of diversity.

When people say they treat all people the same, it usually is defined by the dominant culture's definition of expected behavior. If you are white, male, and heterosexual, this distinction is usually difficult to notice, since white men never have to leave this culture (see the March/April issue). Yet white men are oblivious to the difficulty caused to others by having

to continually fit into the white-male culture box.

To white women, people of color, GLBT, and the differently abled, being treated the same usually means suppression, or a change of behavior. They must modify their talk, dress, or thinking style to fit into the dominant culture as well as act and contribute like a white man.

White men must notice how gender, race, and sexual orientation impact basic workplace interactions. It lessens all of us when someone cannot fully show up at work as they really are. Ask questions, observe patterns and interactions, and speak up about what you notice. Don't wait for those most adversely affected to constantly have to raise inequity issues.

The other unspoken reality is that white men also assimilate into the dominant culture. They are even less aware of this assimilation than white women and people of color, because white men never have to leave the culture. As white men become more aware of how others have to be bicultural, they, too, can make more deliberate choices about who they are and what they wish to bring of themselves into the workplace.

### LEARN TO CHALLENGE AND SUPPORT OTHER WHITE MEN

White men can demonstrate full partnership in the workplace by publicly engaging their white male colleagues about diversity dilemmas or issues. This should be accomplished without looking to white women and people of color for validation. White wom-

en and people of color notice when white men engage each other on this topic and it can be a sign of hope for them. They no longer have to be the only ones to speak up.

Recognize that speaking publicly demonstrates one's own learning and imperfections. Remember to risk "stinking." This outspokenness counters a white man's ultimate privilege: that he can choose whether to engage or ignore diversity issues. Vary the tool used when speaking out. Don't "use a hatchet to-kill a mosquito." Too heavy a hand can further reinforce a fear-based culture that already pervades too many organizations.

It's okay to experiment. Try new ways of challenging and supporting other white men such as:

- Talk about how what was said or just happened impacts you.
- Don't scold, lecture, or degrade.
- Support what you saw as the person's intent, but probe for what the impact might have been on you or others.
- Take risks.
- Assume your colleague was doing the best he could and that he can and will do better.
- Act as a coach, not as a judge or referee.
- Intervene most with other white men with whom you have a preestablished relationship (and hence some permission) to publicly discuss controversial diversity topics.
- Talk to your colleagues in advance about how together you will handle difficult conversations. Have some pre-

established agreements about how and when to intervene.

- Share your own insights—both glorious and painful. Use yourself as an instrument of learning, a work in progress.
- Don't assume you are "there" and others aren't. Stay humble. Learn something new every day and try to view your diversity learning journey as a series of gifts to behold.

## WHAT CAN WHITE WOMEN AND PEOPLE OF COLOR DO?

*The whole of life, from the moment you are born to the moment you die, is a process of learning.*

—Jiddu Krishnamurti

Here are some things white women and people of color can do to strengthen partnerships with white men:

## EXAMINE HOW YOUR ASSUMPTIONS STOP YOU

Recently, at a daylong learning session on engaging white men, a number of white women and people of color found themselves questioning the authenticity of a group of white men. They felt the white-male managers were reading from scripts when they shared their diversity journeys. They simply couldn't believe these white men were speaking genuinely. They had never seen white men speak so personally about diversity and what it meant to them.

They were asked to consider how questioning the authenticity of these white men might reinforce some of their own biases (for example, "White

men don't care, and when they do, it must be because of a performance measure or something else"). Further, they examined how this attitude might be unintentionally blocking what they so desire—engaged, self-interested and truthful white male partners.

A key to diversity growth is re-examining words and actions to make sure white men who are on their learning edge are supported.

Assumptions and previous experiences sometimes get in the way of being better diversity partners to white men. First, be aware of what your assumptions are. Explore them. Notice cynicism, frustration, or suspicion of white men's intentions when expressed by white women or people of color. If one whispers, "There goes another white man who doesn't get it," force the whisperer to articulate what he might not know and how one might be unconsciously keeping him in the dark. Perhaps it is the time to stop whispering and risk "stinking," so that a partnership can be forged to advance diversity issues in the organization.

### USE AN INQUIRY APPROACH

Don't assume to understand the diversity journey of a white man. Don't assume he doesn't have one or doesn't want to have a deeper understanding. Ask questions that uncover how diversity is a part of his life. Ask him to describe his journey and current diversity challenges. Ask what can be stopped, started, and continued to increase his willingness to engage as a diversity partner. Acknowledge the work he has done, the ways he identifies himself as an ally, and his willing-

ness to engage in diversity dialogues.

### ONE WHITE MAN IS NOT WHITE MALE CULTURE

Learn to separate white male culture from the actions and behaviors of individual white men. They have been conditioned to operate in, and are affected by, this culture. Make the results of the culture (positive and negative) visible to all, without putting individuals on trial or holding them personally responsible for systemic wrongdoings. Notice what white men are doing to uncover and acknowledge systemic infractions within the organization. By their very nature, injustices can be so interwoven in the fabric of how things are done in business cultures that they are invisible and appear normal.

### DON'T DO THE WORK FOR WHITE MEN

Don't allow white men to become dependent on white women and people of color to be their teachers or guides. Convey to white men what is needed from the partnership and be willing to point out when they are using others as a crutch. As partners, white women and people of color need to know what white men will do that will demonstrate they are learning and applying their learning at work.

Avoid the invitation to teach white men about diversity. Help them strengthen their diversity partnership muscles by doing their own heavy lifting. Keep in mind that doing such may be frustrating or demoralizing.

This article is drawn in part from WMFDP's series of field guides on diversity partnerships: Diversity Partnership Tips for White Men and Diversity Partnership Tips for White Women and People of Color to Engage White Men.

## LEAN IN AND STRENGTHEN YOUR SUPPORT SYSTEM WITH WHITE MEN

If white men were fully aware of systemic inequities, the most divisive inclusiveness issues would already be transcended. Thus, it is important to work in partnership with white men. Find one white guy who has the potential and spark to be a voice to lessen the pressure that falls on white women and people of color. White men can make great diversity allies. Value their partnership and push them to go deeper to do their own learning.

Partnership work never ends. It represents an endless series of next steps. Moving forward must be combined with a heartfelt acknowledgement of your present position. Know that "stinking" occasionally helps make your partnerships vital and real.