

Fake It Till You Make It?

Taking the right steps to courageous leadership

by Bill Proudman

Many of us think that learning more about diversity is a linear process. I have found it to be a non-linear journey —sometimes taking a step back to revisit what I thought I'd already learned. My learning never ends, nor should it.

One of my more powerful learning moments that created an opportunity for change came a number of years back. It is significant because it happened as I was kicking off a daylong inclusion learning session for a senior leadership team of almost all men in the Midwest. It reminds me how invisible privilege is to me as a white heterosexual guy with economic means, particularly the privilege I, and other white men, experience when traveling on business.

It started on a classic hot July day with thunderstorms threatening the Midwest. I was headed to Michigan changing planes in O'Hare. Due to the storms, my plane from Portland was diverted to Rockford, Illinois. After an hour of sitting on the tarmac, I made a decision to get off that plane and take matters into my own hands. I wanted to make sure I showed up in Michigan in time to facilitate the session the following morning.

I was supposed to meet my co-facilitator, another white male colleague, at O'Hare. When I got off my plane at Rockford, I jumped into the first cab I could find, telling the driver to take me to O'Hare. My cabbie's name was John and the inside of the cab was not

your typical yellow cab. It looked a little battle worn: the ceiling upholstery was in a late stage of defoliation. At first glance John was a bit battle worn as well. He asked if I knew how to get to O'Hare. I did not, but fortunately my cell phone did.

During the hour drive, I called every car rental company at O'Hare and quickly discovered there weren't any rentals to be had (the norm when thunderstorms disrupt flights in the summer). I also learned our connecting flight to Michigan was canceled. Right then I made John a proposition: "How would you like to make some money by driving us five more hours to central Michigan?" He said he thought he could do that and tried to call his dispatch to discuss a fixed price. He was unable to reach them, so he and I negotiated a price. We would arrive at our destination at about 2 a.m. with enough time for a nap before our session start at 7:30 a.m. What an adventure.

RUGGED INDIVIDUALISM AND CAN-DO ATTITUDE MEET THE REALITY OF PRIVILEGE

When we picked up my colleague at O'Hare he was a little shocked by the condition of John and the car, but he was game and we both were motivated to make our engagement, so off we went into the night. We joked about how our adventure would make a great story. It was a storms-plane-car epic in the making.

My learning never ends, nor should it.



Along the way we bought John dinner at a truck stop and invested in a map of Illinois, Indiana and Michigan as we learned John had never before driven outside the greater Rockford area. We also insisted that he stay overnight at our destination hotel rather than turn around and drive the five hours back to Rockford—we would cover the cost of his room.

I remember feeling rather smug and excited by our adventure, knowing that we would make it despite the odds. My first dawning of the privilege I enjoyed happened when John finally reached dispatch and they grizzled at the fee he'd negotiated with us. I felt bad for him and added another \$100 to the tab. But dispatch then told John that they needed the cab back in Rockford by 8 a.m. and that he would have to drop us and turn around and make the long drive back to Rockford. He acquiesced. I was annoyed and puzzled about how he agreed so quickly but then learned the following: John was a single dad of a 12-year-old daughter and driving the cab was his sole income. He could not afford to lose his job by refusing to get the cab home even if it meant he would risk bodily harm from 12 hours of all night driving. It made me conscious of how my economic privilege allows me great choice about what I do, the freedom of movement I have and my ability to dismiss other's requests of me professionally.

At 2 a.m. we bid John farewell reminding him to drink lots of coffee before beginning his return drive. Safe in our rooms, we immediately fell into a deep but short sleep and arrived the next morning to kick off the session.

THE COURAGE TO RAISE YOUR VOICE

The senior team of this \$4 billion business unit consisted of all white men except for the vice president of HR, who was a white woman. Also in the room was our client, the Diversity and Inclusion Manager, also a white woman. It was our first meeting with this leadership team. We started our session by telling of our epic journey as a way to connect to this new group.

With great courage, our female client spoke up and said, "You know, if that was me, I would not be here this morning. There is no way, I would get into a strange cab on my own and drive half the night over three states to do whatever it took to get here."

It never crossed our minds that our adventure was another vestige of white male privilege—the ability to move about our society pretty much wherever and whenever.

She further went on to explain that not only would she have not gotten to the meeting, she would have had to really think hard about how to explain her absence so it would not be perceived as a lack of commitment to the team.

I will never forget the opening of that session. It was a learning moment and we, the diversity consultants, had the opportunity to notice some of our unconscious privilege as men, to look at what we almost never have to think about or negotiate.



In doing so, we were able to acknowledge our privilege and our unawareness and model to the other male leaders in the room how to fully step into owning this unconscious privilege and using it to deepen our ability to notice and validate other's reality. We processed this for 15-20 minutes with the group, pulling forth insights, key learnings and take ways.

We thanked our client for the courage to raise her voice for this immensely valuable learning moment.

THE JOURNEY OF BUMPING INTO PRIVILEGE

Whenever I bump into some of these unconscious benefits, I can still feel awkward or even occasionally guilty. I am learning ever so slowly to notice and then use my privilege honorably. Being born white and male is not my fault. It is a part of who I am. When I really notice how I get treated in airports, on the road, in stores—in fact most everywhere I go—and how different this can be for many others, it has helped me to see how systemic inequity plays out and is invisible to me and other guys. It has also helped me to strengthen my voice and resolve to lead by example. No one gets it right all the time. Me included.

In hindsight, using these moments where I become conscious about something I didn't previously know or see is a great way to support other men to notice their own privilege. It makes sense to me that these benefits are invisible since I almost never have to negotiate them. This particular journey was memorable not just for my colleague and me but for the other male leaders in the session who witnessed how we responded when we came face-to-

face with some of the vestiges of male privilege we take for granted. These moments of great opportunity happen more often than I care to acknowledge. So I ask you to reflect on the following: What is most invisible to you related to your own privilege?

How would it benefit you and your partnerships if you were better able to see these micro inequities more quickly and easily?

How do you manage the tendency to want to beat yourself up or defend your good intentions to others when you notice—or someone else points out—your misassumptions or the invisible benefits you have that they don't?

Just notice your answers, soak them in and learn from them. I still find myself with ample opportunity to learn from these moments of rediscovering my unconscious privilege.

BILL PROUDMAN CEO, Founder

Bill started WMFDP in the 90s after noticing white men leaders repeatedly disengaging from diversity efforts.

For more than 30 years, he has served as a consultant, coach and facilitator to countless companies and organizations on issues of team effectiveness, diversity and leadership development.

Bill is a writer, blogger, and sought after speaker and co-author of a three-volume field guide on white men, leadership, and diversity partnerships.

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