

“Rethinking Political Correctness,” by Robin J. Ely, Debra E. Meyerson, and Martin N. Davidson, examines how politically correct organizations not only create more inclusive workplaces, but also form barriers to effective collaboration. The authors contend that when employees tiptoe around issues and each other, misunderstandings and mistrust can result. This conflict erodes productivity.

In the past forty years, more women and persons of color have entered the ranks of professionals and managers. Today, laws protect underrepresented groups from blatant discrimination, and prejudice is unacceptable. Many companies have sensitivity training and policies that attempt to eliminate bias. However, minority groups cannot openly discuss their concerns about fairness, and majority groups walk on eggshells for fear of breaking the rules of political correctness.

This article proposes how coworkers can engage with one another, learn from one another, and be more productive in the workplace. Examples of various emotional reactions to honest communication are addressed, such as divisiveness, self-doubt, overprotection and underdevelopment, self-limiting behavior, polarization, and suspicion and withdrawal.

When defensiveness is replaced with a desire to learn, constructive interactions can occur. In diversity-related dilemmas, the following principles are suggested to deal with tension: pause, connect, get genuine support, and shift our mind-set.

Taking a few moments to identify our feelings after a perceived threat is necessary in considering a response. Initially, we might feel angry about an insensitive remark and react by casting blame and judgment. But a more effective way to communicate is to stop and think about how best to address the issue at hand.

Another way to deal with abrasiveness is to focus outward on common goals, which can include broadening social ideals or living up to the values of the organization. Connecting with others and focusing on a similar interest leads to positive change rather than isolation and resentment.

Questioning our motivations and perceptions is important in the collaborative process. We must ask if there is another way to see a situation, or if feelings are distorting our view of something.

Others can sometimes reinforce and justify our reactive behavior to conflict, but this is not always constructive. What is needed is the counsel of trusted colleagues who can objectively look at the problem. This support can help us see alternatives and make the best choices.

Changing our ideas through self-reflection can help us break negative patterns. Some people are able to radically alter their way of thinking by developing self-awareness, analyzing their behavior, and looking for opportunity in conflict.

To request a copy of the full journal article as posted in *The Harvard Business Review*, please contact Martin at www.leveragingdifference.com/contact/