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Emerald Article: Misconstrued tolerance: issues for multicultural and diversity training
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Article information:

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D iscrimination in the workplace exists and has serious effects on both employee and organizational well-being. To address such concerns, many firms have undertaken multicultural training programs that attempt to improve interpersonal relationships among workers by asking participants to become more tolerant of others.

Two diverse views of tolerance

In Western democratic societies, tolerance is highly valued as a self-ascribed property and oftentimes conceived of as a virtue. Questions about tolerance rarely surface for fear that one be perceived as intolerant – not a label people would want today. Historically, tolerance was seen as a permissive practice of allowing a person, practice, or thing of which one disapproved (Weissberg, 2008); tolerant individuals were expected to ''put up with'' and endure what they found to be disgusting in order to coexist with those who were different. Such an interpretation has become objectionable today, leading contemporary understandings of tolerance to incorporate the idea of approval and acceptance. This reinterpretation of tolerance gained ground when the UN defined it as ''respect, acceptance and appreciation of the rich diversity of our world's cultures, our forms of expression and ways of being human [. . .]'' (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 1995). In line with this interpretation, Schwartz (1996, p. 24, italics in original) observed, ''I think that most of the time what we have in mind when we speak of tolerance is something closer to 'acceptance,' or even 'celebration.' Acceptance implies approval, and celebration implies *enthusiastic* approval'' of differences. Tolerance, it appears, has changed its definition from suffering the loathsome to an almost blank-check endorsement of countless differences.

Such tolerance is widely regarded today as an indispensable, commonly shared value for assuring the cohesion of plural societies and has been adopted by many multicultural trainers who want to promote inclusion by encouraging workshop participants to affirm and approve others' practices, opinions, and beliefs (Oberdiek, 2001). Yet, this modern interpretation of tolerance poses a dilemma: how can individuals be asked to accept all people's values and practices when they may believe some of those ideas and behaviors are wrong, perhaps even abhorrent? How, for example, can one ask supporters on opposite sides of the abortion and same-sex marriage debates to value or regard highly the validity of each other's perspectives? Are people obligated in the name of tolerance to endorse such practices as child sacrifice, female genital mutilation and cannibalism because a minority retain such customs?

Interestingly, the graciousness implied in this ''appreciate differences'' brand of tolerance may not extend to all. For example, while gay and civil rights groups are generally applauded, one might typically find silence when it comes to fundamentalist Christians or the military. Such a one-sided interpretation of tolerance as acceptance often engenders the

very divisiveness it proposes to eliminate. This understanding of tolerance may have led numerous Western leaders including French ex-president Nicolas Sarkozy, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, and British Prime Minister (PM) David Cameron to note multiculturalism's failure. PM Cameron in a 2011 speech indicated that ''[...] Frankly, we need a lot less of the passive tolerance of recent years and much more active, muscular liberalism [...] A *passively tolerant* society [...] stands neutral between different values. A genuinely liberal country does much more. It believes in certain values and actively promotes them'' (Cameron, 2011, p. 10, italics in original).

Diversity and multicultural training today

It is extremely important to preserve a notion of tolerance that is neither ''putting up with,'' which demands too little of us, nor ''acceptance,'' which demands too much. Tolerance is not a surrender of conviction. Tolerance does not require one to sacrifice personal ideals or temper beliefs to a toothless least common denominator. One does not have to compromise convictions to be compassionate.

To help trainees move past such circumstances and for multicultural training to do its good work, tolerance as civility is offered. This view of tolerance occupies a middle ground which lies somewhere between traditional and contemporary interpretations of the term and involves treating people with whom we differ, neither with forbearance or endurance nor approval or acceptance, but with civility that includes courtesy, politeness, manners, good citizenship, and concern for the well-being of our communities even as we recognize that some conflict and tension is inevitable (see Figure 1).

Researchers have surveyed the civility literature and suggested three elements that together constitute the term. The first element is respect for others. The second element is civility, defined as public behavior towards strangers in which we must neither love them nor hate them in order to be civil towards them. The third element is self-regulation in the sense that it requires empathy by putting one's own immediate self-interests in the context of the larger common good and acting accordingly.

Note that respect is accorded to the person. Whether his or her ideas or behavior should be accepted and appreciated, as suggested by modern interpretations of tolerance, is a different issue. This perspective is borrowed from the counseling literature of Ellis (2004) who declared that one is not required to ''[...] tolerate the antisocial and sabotaging actions of other people [...] But you always accept them, their personhood, and you never damn their total *selves*. You tolerate their *humanity* while disagreeing with some of their *actions*'' (Ellis, 2004, p. 212, italics in original). Ellis' position is similar to Immanuel Kant's view that moral law entails treating persons always as ends in themselves and never simply as means. A Kantian perspective requires that human beings be regarded as worthy of respect as human beings, regardless of how their values differ and whether or not we disapprove of what they do.

Tolerance as advocated here incorporates civility which involves treating others with respect without necessarily accepting their values, beliefs, practices, or the importance of these practices to others' way of life. Good people will sincerely disagree and the issues that divide them by their very nature impassion them. Individuals can, however, disagree without demonizing those with whom they differ; all points-of-view can be heard without venomous attacks.

Figure 1 Three interpretations of tolerance

Tolerance as Putting Up With	Tolerance as Civility	Tolerance as Acceptance
|--| |--|
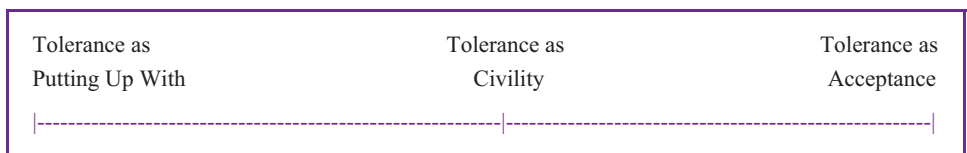
Managerial implications

Civility, a seemingly central social value as well as an important interpersonal value in the workplace, is also a meaningful predictor of organizational effectiveness with research showing that firms can improve performance by creating and maintaining norms of civility (King *et al.*, 2011). Subtle mistreatment characteristics of incivility have been shown to negatively impact job satisfaction, job withdrawal, career salience, psychological distress (Cortina *et al.*, 2001), and self-reported physical health problems (Lim *et al.*, 2008).

Diversity training activities might help employees overcome their (often unconscious) behavioral tendencies to disfavor out-group members by encouraging tolerance understood as civility in all interactions, and rejecting the contemporary definition of tolerance which seems to mandate acceptance, appreciation, and approval of all beliefs, values, conduct, and ways of life. ''Given the resistance and backlash that sometimes emerge in response to the terms 'diversity' and 'discrimination,' it is possible that focusing on 'civility' instead could improve the efficacy of existing diversity management programs'' (King *et al.*, 2011, p. 1113) and that ''Ultimately, organizations may be most successful when the challenges that arise from diverse interactions are overcome through civility'' (King *et al.*, 2011, p. 1114). Far from a minor inconvenience, workplace incivility is one of today's most substantial economic drains on business (Porath and Pearson, 2010) and reframing tolerance as civility in multicultural training may be one small step in attacking the workplace poisons of both discrimination and incivility.

The reinterpretation of tolerance offered here means treating people with respect and without malice but does not require persons to dissolve social norms or to weaken commitment to ancient and honorable beliefs. Such an understanding of tolerance incorporating civility can be invaluable when addressing multicultural issues. Tolerating people, however, must never be confused with accepting all their ideas and practices.

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