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Book Summary

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by Lizz Pellet
Promoting tolerance has become a key weapon in battling prejudice and bias in multicultural training but has had its meaning hijacked over the last generation. Tolerance has changed from the classical definition of incorporating grudging forbearance and indifference toward others and their beliefs and practices to the neo-classical meaning suggesting that every individual’s beliefs, values, behavior, and truth claims are equally valid and worthy of acceptance. This change has alienated many who value equality and fairness and may have limited the effectiveness of human resource initiatives because the neo-classical meaning itself is intolerant. This paper proposes an approach to human resource education which offers authentic tolerance incorporating respect, dignity, and openness to persons, but not necessarily their values or practices.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary American society is composed of a variety of ethnicities, races, beliefs, religions, and lifestyles—and this heterogeneity is still developing. Such differences have led historically to increased levels of prejudice, bigotry, ethnocentrism, segregation, and reduced levels of cohesiveness and communication among groups and between individuals (Leonard & Levine, 2003). Additionally, American culture has become an increasingly adversarial one in which individuals are encouraged to elevate themselves by debasing conflicting viewpoints (Dreher, 2008). In response to such harmful attitudes, behaviors, and other forms of social isolation and exclusion many organizations have implemented diversity training programs to address such ethnocentricity (Fiske, 1998).

In these training initiatives it is common to hear that such demographic mixtures are praiseworthy, non-exclusionary, liberating, and positive, and that individuals should recognize and acknowledge such differences and be inclusive and open to differences and value, embrace, endorse, and celebrate them (e.g., Greenberg & Baron, 2008). Trainees are advised to appreciate, affirm, accept, approve, and respect diverging opinions, views, and behaviors and to be tolerant (Nieto, 1996; Pless & Maak, 2004; Rynes & Rosen, 1995). Tolerance is a widespread practice as reflected in the 369,000 web entries obtained from the Google search engine when “teaching tolerance” was entered (Teaching Tolerance, n. d.).

Within the last generation tolerance has risen to the apex of America’s public moral philosophy (Horton, 1996). Today, it is believed that a good, moral person is, above all, tolerant
Tolerance.org, n. d.). Tolerance seems like a core human virtue, essential for democracy and civilized life. Indeed, its absence is at the root of much evil: peer cruelties, unjust discrimination, hate crimes, religious and political persecution, and terrorism (Lickona, 2002). But if tolerance is defined, as it often is, as “the ability to accept the values and beliefs of others” (Lickona, 2002, p. 1), it poses a dilemma because it is unrealistic to think that people will uncritically approve all practices and perspectives.

We address this controversial topic and posit that tolerance means that as individuals we may acknowledge different values and actions of others yet need not embrace and accept them. After providing definitions of tolerance, a presentation of intolerance and political elite relabeling is offered, followed by a discussion of tolerance in organizations. The paper concludes by offering authentic tolerance as a key element of human resource education that emphasizes respect and dignity of others rather than required acceptance of and agreement with their beliefs and behavior.

MEANINGS OF TOLERANCE

The origin of the word tolerance is the Latin term tolerare, which means to bear or endure, suffering through without action in response (Odell, n. d.). This meaning was continued in Webster’s Dictionary (Gove, 2002) initial definition of the term as involving a capacity to endure with pain or hardship—fortitude, stamina, forbearance and restraint. Thus, tolerance meant putting up with something one found objectionable. In other words, something repugnant, offensive, disagreeable or distasteful is allowed to exist without significant action on the part of those to whom it is odious. It involves recognition that a civil society must include a willingness to bear with people whose ideas and practices are not merely different, but believed to be wrong.

Webster’s secondary meaning of tolerance defines it as a permissive or liberal attitude toward beliefs or practices differing from or conflicting with one’s own. This is the dominant view of tolerance today (McDowell & Hostetler, 1998; Odell, n. d.; Stetson & Conti, 2005). Thus, the idea of tolerance has undergone a gradual change in definition from the obligation not to tolerate the immoral to the requirement to accept the legitimacy of the morally different. It has been largely redefined by those seeking to broaden what it means to endure while diminishing that which is defined as offensive and objectionable. In this paper the term “classical” represents the original definition of tolerance and “neo-classical” represents the secondary and more recent definition of tolerance.

Classical Definition of Tolerance

Traditionally, tolerance incorporated the idea that everyone was entitled to his or her own opinion and that people were to acknowledge others’ beliefs and practices without necessarily agreeing, sympathizing, respecting, or sharing in them; it involved bearing or putting up with someone or something not especially liked (McDowell & Hostetler, 2005). Within this view individuals support the right of others to hold disparate opinions, have dissimilar lifestyles, and be different—while not accepting others’ behavior as correct for themselves or society.
Classic tolerance means the ability to hold on to one’s convictions while recognizing the right of others to hold on to theirs. Classic tolerance is not acquiescence, but recognition of difference. Classic tolerance has nothing to do with accepting another person’s belief, only his or her right to have that belief. It is similar to Voltaire’s famous words: “I detest what you write, but I would give my life to make it possible for you to continue to write” (Guterman, 1963, p. 143). Thus, classical tolerance differentiates between what a person thinks or does and the person himself or herself (Stetson & Conti, 2005).

**Neo-Classical Definition of Tolerance**

More recent American understanding of tolerance and what the authors refer to as neo-classical tolerance promises members of minority and marginalized groups something more: respect, acceptance, and agreement with their beliefs, values, and practices in order to help them maintain the essentials of their identities and ways of life, and to help them to feel welcome and comfortable in the societies where they live (Walzer, 1997). Neo-classical tolerance is immediately suspicious of the idea that something may be offensive, and in the event it is, rejects the idea that one is free to express that distaste (Birrell, 2003). To evaluate something as questionable or wrong and publicly say so is considered intolerant, insensitive, and offensive. Thus, tolerance has evolved from abiding the objectionable to affirming the rightness of the nonconventional and nontraditional. Contemporary views of tolerance appear to be interpreted as “accept everything” (Weissberg, 2008, p. x).

Mistaking toleration for affirmation occurred in the United Nation’s (UN) decision to declare 1995 “The Year of Tolerance.” In the UN’s declaration, tolerance was defined as “respect, acceptance and appreciation of the rich diversity of our world’s cultures, our forms of expression and ways of being human. … It involves the rejection of dogmatism and absolutism ....” (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 1995).

**INTOLERANCE AND ORGANIZATIONS**

In the lexicon of neo-classical tolerance, respecting an individual means accepting, appreciating, and approving their ideals and practices. To disapprove of others’ beliefs and behavior is to risk being branded narrow-minded, oppressive, and intolerant. Those who are intolerant are said to be ignorant, divisive, and prejudiced. They are labeled ideologues and hate mongers—deplorable persons worthy of censure. Those who hold principles and firmly held beliefs are considered legalistic individuals with non-negotiable doctrinal convictions.

Consider the requirement of endorsing organizations’ beliefs and values. Albert Buonanno was fired from his job with AT&T Broadband after he refused to agree to portions of the company’s employee handbook that he felt violated his religious beliefs. All employees were required to sign a written acknowledgment that they had received AT&T’s new employee handbook and sign a “Certificate of Understanding.” The certificate contained a statement that the employee signing it “agreed with and accepted” all of the terms and provisions of the handbook, including its policies and rules. The handbook contained a provision that “each person at AT&T Broadband is charged with the responsibility to fully recognize, respect and value the differences among all of us,” including “sexual orientation.” However, Mr. Buonanno’s firmly
held religious beliefs regarding the homosexual lifestyle prevented him from condoning or approving the practice of homosexuality. Mr. Buonanno shared his concerns with his immediate supervisor and informed him that he had no problem declaring he would not discriminate against or harass people who were different from him, including homosexuals, but that he could not sign the statement because it contradicted his sincerely held religious beliefs. Mr. Buonanno indicated, “As a Christian, I love and appreciate all people regardless of their lifestyle. But I cannot value homosexuality and any different religious beliefs” (Henle & Holger, 2004, p. 155). Buonanno was informed that AT&T would terminate his employment if he refused to sign the certificate. He declined to sign the certificate and was immediately terminated.

Mr. Buonanno filed suit for wrongful discharge and a federal district judge ruled against the company and acknowledged that an employee did not have to adopt an organization’s beliefs when they contradicted the worker’s firmly held religious beliefs. The judge awarded the plaintiff and former employee, Albert Buonanno, $146,260 in damages (Buonanno v. AT&T, 2004). The Rutherford Institute, which sponsored the litigation, summed up the importance of the judge’s ruling with the following comment: “Employees shouldn’t be forced to forswear their religious values in the name of tolerance” (Hudson, 2004, p. 1C).

Yet, not all beliefs and behavior must be accepted. The phenomenon of tolerance is almost universally recognized by both critics and supporters as central to the liberal tradition (Murphy, 1997; Oberdiek, 2001) and, for the most part, only those principles, sentiments, ideas, and political attitudes approved by the shrill and intrusive cultural and political intelligentsia with their aura of self-assured moral and intellectual superiority must be endorsed.

These elites are “found among academics and intellectuals, in the literary world, in journals of political opinion, in Hollywood, in the artistic community, in mainline religious institutions, and in some quarters of the media” (Bennett, 1994, p. 26), and are more powerful than their numbers would normally allow because they are looked upon as trend setters in areas such as moral values, political principles, fundamental ideas, and important truths. They write articles and books, give speeches, make movies, report stories, and often interpret events that define the permissible and the impermissible, the acceptable and the unacceptable, the preferred and the disdained; in short, they are the filter through which many Americans are informed about events. These individuals also have more immediate access to the media and more opportunities to influence private citizens and society.

Such pundits garner public support in large part because of their ability to frame and reframe public discussion (Hunter, 2006). Framing involves more than simply taking positions or arguments about an issue. It involves constructing an issue (e.g., affirmative action, welfare, nuclear power, health care reform): it spells out the essence of the problem, suggests how it should be thought about, and may go so far as to recommend what (if anything) should be done (Entman, 1993). Framing/reframing involves advocates’ attempts to impose their own meaning on matters of political and moral import (Gamson, 1992).

AUTHENTIC TOLERANCE IN ORGANIZATIONS

Authentic tolerance, as proposed here, lies on a continuum between classical tolerance which suggests enduring the loathsome while also rejecting the individual and their beliefs, to
While at times it may be proper to engage in wordsmithing, spin doctoring, or framing/reframing (Watzlawick, Weakland, & Fisch, 1974), a generally more appropriate action would be to affectively and cognitively engage in dialogue with someone who is different or believes differently. Most Americans care little about the subtleties of framing/reframing by partisans and pundits (Luntz, 2007) and so one way to address understanding is to listen to others and treat them with respect and dignity as individuals concerned about important issues. Authentic tolerance, somewhere between the classical and neo-classical definitions, involves treating people with whom we differ neither with indifference or endurance nor appreciation or acceptance but with civility and dignity even as it is recognized that some conflict and tension is inevitable (see Figure 1). Individuals should be shown a basic respect as human beings even if they hold beliefs many people may not respect. People do not lose their dignity because they believe implausible, even offensive, things.

The authors argue, as does Hallemeier (2006), for charity toward others with whom there is disagreement—a charity that includes respect for the other and the acceptance of the other person as a basic object of moral concern. Charity permits conflict and criticism of others’ beliefs and practices, but it limits the ways in which this conflict can be pursued based on respect for the person (Swanton, 2003). We believe that asking people to accept and appreciate values and behaviors that violate their conscience is improper and so developed the idea of authentic tolerance which revolves around respect and dignity of the individual without necessarily agreeing or accepting his or her practices or values. Key components of authentic tolerance involve dialogue and openness to others.

Of course, some may feel that there are certain beliefs or practices that are so unacceptable that they are unwilling to enter a dialogue with those who keep them. Even so, the temptation to reflexively categorize alien customs and practices as contemptuous or immoral must be resisted. Such a judgment may reflect the limits of our own horizon, rather than the truth of someone else’s point of view. Steven Covey (1989), in his highly regarded text, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, refers to a similar concept when he suggests, “seek first to
understand, then to be understood” (p. 235); i.e., to better communicate, people must first actively and empathetically listen to others and understand their situation and concerns and to see the world from the other person’s perspective before presenting their viewpoints and ideas.

The authentic tolerance suggested here, emphasizing respect and charity is the simple etiquette of public life that helps maintain the dignity of people and is crucial to citizens’ quality of life. Authentic tolerance allows differing views to have an equal right to exist, not necessarily an equal share in truth. These are different issues. Is it intolerant to claim that the sun is the center of our solar system because others might think that it is the earth? Are scholars considered intolerant when they believe one hypothesis to be true and another false?

Individuals can be authentically tolerant without accepting another’s beliefs—only the right of others to have those beliefs. Denying differences is not helpful while acknowledging the possibility of disagreement gives people the freedom to challenge others with whom they differ. This opens possibilities for constructive conflict which can improve organizational productivity (Berstene, 2004). In organizations individuals should be inclusive of people but not necessarily their beliefs and behaviors. People should listen to and learn from all, but are not obligated to agree with all. It is sad when it is believed that tolerance, respect, charity, and dignity imply never saying or doing anything that might upset someone. Indeed, Barrow (2005) goes so far as to say that those who indicate that they are being offended by an interpretation engage in

“…. one of the supreme self-serving acts. Taking offence, when it means treating one’s personal hurt as grounds for punitive response, involves a refusal to show tolerance, to allow freedom or to play fair—for why should you be allowed to say what you want, when others are denied that right by you?” (Barrow, 2005, p. 273).

DIVERSITY AND TOLERANCE IN ORGANIZATIONS

Easley (2001) discussed how diversity training programs have had limited success because they do not really address organizational issues and may have conflicting messages from management. Riccucci (1997) also noted the failure of diversity training programs, possibly related to the “one shot deal” that might consist of an afternoon seminar, for example, with no follow-up training to reinforce the key issues. Perhaps one notable example of why diversity programs have failed would include forcing people to change as demonstrated by the focus on white males (Riccucci, 1997) when white males were described in negative terms; in fact, entire diversity programs were developed around what is wrong with white males (Von Bergen, Soper, & Foster, 2002). This is certainly an indication of intolerance when people cannot be accepted and included for what they are and are required to change to “fit in”. Authentic tolerance does not require individuals to change their beliefs or to accept that which is offensive or unacceptable to them, but to truly respect and include those with differences. This is not about giving up individuality but about allowing people to be diverse. Neo-classical tolerance as described in this paper forces acceptance of a set of norms to “belong”, thus dishonoring the initial intent of diversity.

Why, then, is authentic tolerance essential in organizations? Watad and Perez-Alvarez (2007) explained the importance and role of knowledge sharing in organizations and how some
people may not share opinions and ideas, afraid of being wrong or judged negatively by coworkers. The authors noted that managers must encourage employees to share opinions and to create an environment sensitive to diversity since failure to do so may create a liability for the organization. Environments where employees are included and respected through authentic tolerance are more likely to provide higher productivity than those in which neo-classical tolerance forces people to accept social norms and opinions with which they may not feel comfortable or with which they may openly disagree. We believe it is unproductive and inappropriate to ask a worker to appreciate values and behaviors that violate his or her conscience. It is indeed ironic that neo-classical tolerance forces individuals to give up their personal beliefs when diversity itself focuses on acceptance.

**IMPLICATIONS**

Organizations would do well to establish a culture of authentic tolerance which goes beyond the typical diversity training exhortations of being more tolerant, valuing and appreciating differences, and endorsing the belief that that everything is different—not better or worse—but equal, and that a person’s viewpoint is automatically wrong (intolerant) if it rejects the equal validity of all opinions. Multicultural training must move beyond such simplistic perspectives and recognize that there may indeed be significantly dissimilar values, beliefs, and behavior of program participants that may not be readily reconciled and that encouraging trainees to value, endorse, affirm, and celebrate differences and to appreciate, respect, and accept diverging opinions and ways of life is unrealistic and may create additional problems and difficulties for the good work that diversity programs are designed to do. How can individuals be asked to accept all people’s values and practices when they may believe that some of those ideas and behaviors are wrong? How, for example, can one ask supporters on opposite sides of the abortion and homosexuality debates to accept the validity of each other’s perspectives? Such contradictory views cannot both be correct.

President Barack Obama spoke of such an ideological tension when he delivered the commencement address at Notre Dame University in the spring of 2009 amid much public controversy and protest demonstrations. Some “pro-life” persons thought that the president should not be invited to speak at a Catholic university because his “pro-choice” position on abortion is inconsistent with Church doctrine, and many objected to the university awarding him an honorary degree. The President devoted a section of his address to the protests—not on the merits of one abortion position over another, but rather on public discourse; i.e., on how Americans should engage in public debate on issues with which they fundamentally disagree. Mr. Obama observed that while opposing views would and should be presented with passion and conviction, they could be done “without reducing those with differing views to caricature” (Obama, 2009). Then he suggested a model: “Open hearts. Open minds. Fair-minded words” in the context of “… friendship, civility, hospitality and especially love” (Obama, 2009). These words are remarkably consistent with our concept of authentic tolerance.

Note that respect is accorded to the person. The view that no person’s ideas are any better or truer than another’s is irrational and absurd. It would be inappropriate to tolerate such things as racist, sexist, or hate speech. This view is consistent with renowned psychotherapist Albert Ellis’ (2004) concept of unconditional other-acceptance which declares 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).

Authentic tolerance speaks clearly to the need for human resource education and training for all employees and in particular managers who oversee day-to-day processes with employees. Organizational leadership and managers should demonstrate the effectiveness of authentic tolerance on a daily basis so other employees can understand behavior expectations beyond human resource training and education efforts. For example, an organizational culture that supports neo-classical tolerance would require everyone to agree with the values, beliefs and practices of others may reduce employee contributions and set a dangerous precedent that only some opinions are acceptable. This may create a repressive environment which does not encourage ideas or thoughts from everyone, thus reducing the number of ideas, employee participation, and even employee morale. Those who believe they are being forced to accept that with which they disagree may also resist other changes. When all opinions are not heard there may be less than effective decision-making, reduced productivity and disengagement; complaints may also increase. There may also be potential situations where perceptions of discriminatory practices and EEO issues could arise with individuals.

Implementing authentic tolerance in organizations would require a close examination of both the organizational culture and human resource education and training practices to determine how differing beliefs, values, and practices are currently handled in both the workplace and in education efforts such as training programs. Once an organization has an overall understanding of current practices, clarity on what specific goals relative to authentic tolerance needs to be provided and integrated into leadership and management behavior and human resource training conducted by the organization or by contractors. Specific goals would need to be identified and aligned with behavioral requirements for all employees including all levels of managers; tracking these goals with consistent measurement practices and requiring accountability on yearly evaluations would support efforts to move to an environment where all employee opinions can be discussed openly and with respect but without repression or forced acceptance.

**SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

Historically, the classical view of tolerance involved grudging endurance and simply allowing differing viewpoints without necessarily agreeing with them. It was not a particularly noteworthy quality but tolerance is now considered the supreme virtue of U.S. society (Hallemeier, 2006) and seemingly one of the few non-controversial values today (Kreeft, 2007). Nearly everyone in American society accepts the significance of tolerance. It is a powerful selling point for any theory or practice that can claim it. Nowhere is this more evident than the prominence given to tolerance in education and training programs addressing issues of diversity (Vogt, 1997).

The ascendance of tolerance occurred as its definition was hijacked by partisan pundits who wanted to downplay differences and emphasize impartiality across a number dimensions, from equality of races, sexes, ages, ethnic groups to equality of beliefs, values, practices, behaviors, and lifestyles. Disagreement with such opinions led to accusations and charges of
intolerance. Cultural restraints and traditions of mutual respect and common decency that allowed individuals to debate civilly among themselves, despite their differences, are fast disappearing. As evidenced by the earlier AT&T case, organizations need to take a close look at how their diversity strategies deal with tolerance. If the organizational focus favors the neo-classical definition of tolerance, then there may be potential legal problems. We need authentic tolerance in order to address, with honesty and civility, that which divides us. To speak from one’s conscience and convictions, which flows from free speech and religious freedom, is not bigotry as many pundits have indicated. Since individuals are influenced by conflicting viewpoints often seen in the media, care must be taken to ensure that neo-classical tolerance is not preventing participation and limiting productivity.

Authentic tolerance as incorporating dignity and respect for individuals without necessarily sharing in or appreciating others’ beliefs and behavior must supplant the classical and neo-classical views. Individuals can be truly tolerant without accepting others’ thinking or convictions. Inclusiveness should not demand that differences be denied. Authentic tolerance employs respect and dignity for the person but does not require accepting another person’s belief—only his or her right to have that belief.

The proponents of the neo-classical view of tolerance argue that individuals are free to believe whatever they like but that they should just keep it private. Rather than keeping beliefs private, however, the authors agree with sociologist S. D. Gaede who said, “I cannot be mute about my convictions. . . . It is precisely those convictions that committed me to truth and justice in the first place” (1993, p. 54). Authentic tolerance does not mean the acceptance and endorsement of all human behaviors; there are intolerable behaviors, meant to ruin the very expression of tolerance, such as the propagandas of the fascist or racist types.

All citizens—not necessarily their beliefs, behavior, or values—should be accorded equal respect in their pursuit of their idea of the good. The idea of a truly pluralistic society where differing views have an equal and legal right to exist should be vigorously pursued, but not a society where ideologically driven interest groups and political and cultural elites require all to accept their worldviews and where disagreement is misconstrued as bigotry, stupidity, and hatred, and where tolerance simply means forced acceptance. The words of noted English philosopher William Rowe are fitting: “… those who are most eloquent in demanding freedom for their own views and practices are the first to deny freedom of thought or action to their neighbours” (1930).

Finally, it is worth noting that our conceptualization of authentic tolerance is supported by Eastern philosophical thinking. Asian societies, particularly countries like China, Japan, and South Korea, stress building harmonious interpersonal relationships through avoidance of conflict, deference to authority, and compliance with social norms. This is based on the teachings of Confucius for whom tolerance implies harmony without conformity (Jiang, 2006). This Confucianism-based principle is clearly consistent with authentic tolerance advocated in this paper. As such, there are important implications of authentic tolerance not only for human resources in general but also for specific situations such as cross-cultural managerial practices. Managers in charge of multinational firms with operations in Asian countries traditionally influenced by Confucianism would be well-advised to take heed of the proposed concept of
authentic tolerance and develop their corporate diversity programs accordingly. The more culturally diverse an organization becomes, the more need there is for authentic tolerance to support not only true inclusion and respect, but higher levels of productivity. Authentic tolerance can likewise contribute to organizational effectiveness by examining differences in opinion that are not suppressed by a need to conform or fear to participate. As Berstene (2004, p. 9) noted, “…. where everyone agreed on everything there would be no change.”

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