

Civil Discourse

By Julius Rhodes, SPHR

THIS IS DESIGNED TO PROVOKE YOU, BUT NOT IN A NEGATIVE SENSE. I want you to think deeper and start a dialogue with others that addresses the concept of civil discourse in our society and at work.

Where once we were actively taught to mind our manners, today it seems more and more like manners don't mind. As I see it, civil discourse and civility will always have a place in society. Difficulties will arise, and it's at these times when our way of existing is threatened that we, individually and collectively, must escalate our intent to be known as among the best of us by our actions.

Biases

How many of you will admit you have biases? If we are being truthful with ourselves, we should all be willing to admit we do. And guess what? There is nothing wrong with having biases. Every decision we make is built on a bias for something or against something else.

Biases are essential if we hope to be able to function and execute our daily responsibilities. What makes biases a danger point is when people believe the biases they have are the ones everyone should have and that their beliefs or biases are the only ones of value. There is a term—ethnocentrism—that means I think my beliefs are better than your beliefs because they are mine. The converse can also be said: A person might believe your beliefs are better than his or hers because they are yours. Each of these systems is equally flawed and dangerous, as they take away from an individual's ability to behave in a free and rationale manner.

Handling the Truth

In the movie "A Few Good Men" (one of my all-time favorites), Lieutenant Daniel Kaffee (played by Tom Cruise) implores Colonel Nathan R. Jessup after a few tense moments of verbal sparring, "I want the truth." Jessup responds (and you all know this), "You can't handle the truth!"

I like to say that as it relates to biases, there is no such thing as truth—at least, it's extremely difficult to find. Why? There are several layers to the truth. There is my truth, then there is your truth; there is the truth as others see it, the spin that is added to truth, and finally the truth as it really

is after all the other levels have been distilled away. So as you can see, finding the truth can be a laborious but necessary endeavor.

Given all of this, what are some of the steps or what is a process we can use to engage in civil discourse or civility in our workplaces? I'm glad you asked:

- Remember, if you believe you are the smartest person in the room, you're probably in the wrong room. As social creatures we crave interaction, affiliation, and acceptance. One sure way to defeat the need for this interaction and put people off is to believe you are better than them.
- Accept others as your psychological equals. What this means is that you approach situations with an open mind but not so open that you allow your brains to fall out. We have to be willing to provide the opportunity to learn from anyone at any point in time regardless of his or her station in life.
- Accept people where they are versus where you want them to be. You can't change anyone and if you're being honest with yourself, often the most difficult person to attempt to change is yourself.
- Always remember to treat people as if they matter, because they do.
- Be authentic. People know when you're faking it, and nothing of value can come from actions that are not authentic.

I hope I've provided you with not only something to think about but something to share. I'd like to hear your views on this matter, perhaps at forum.parking-mobility.org. Let the dialogue begin. 



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