

Socially Acceptable Discrimination

What do these four statements have in common?

- “I don’t think we’re ready for a black president.”
- “Women need to accept their place and stop trying to act like men in the workplace.”
- “I’m sorry I didn’t realize that you were Jewish, we try to hire team members from within our own.”
- “Introverts can’t be leaders. Leaders need to be charismatic, decisive, take-charge kinds of people.”

Your answer? “Ignorance. Bigotry”? These statements (at least the first three) trigger appropriate feelings of anger in most informed civilized people. Obviously, the first three statements are clear examples of unacceptable and illegal discrimination and reflect the most ignorant examples of stereotyping.

We have made some progress in regard to the first three statements. On July 26, 1948, President Truman signed Executive Order 9981, which states, “It is hereby declared to be the policy of the President that there shall be equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the armed services without regard to race, color, religion, or national origin.” Since that time we have expanded the definition of discrimination in the workplace to include the prohibition of discrimination on the basis of age, disability, gender, genetic information, national origin, pregnancy, race, religion, and sexual orientation under the current EEOC guidelines.

While the first three statements immediately trigger an internal sense of inappropriateness, the last often goes unnoticed. It is commonplace to hear people in the business

world reinforce the stereotype that introverts can't lead. Introverts are passed over for promotions on the basis of this perceived personality deficit. Their silence and apparent unwillingness to more actively participate in on the spot brainstorming activities is viewed by their extroverted colleagues as passivity or inability. Overt statements are made at the expense of the introverted in our midst. "He can't lead. He's way too risk averse." "She can't be named the CEO. She's not aggressive enough to run this company."

Though human history and contemporary examples of successful introverted leaders abound, the stereotyping and discrimination persist. Discriminating against introverts on the basis of their dissimilarity from the American model of charismatic aggressive leadership is one of the last remaining bastions of ignorance. Thankfully, the work of many introverts having the moral courage to bring balance to this conversation is changing the landscape, though far too slowly.

Pay attention to the conversation around you in your work environment. What kinds of discriminatory statements against introverts are made in passing? How do others respond to those kinds of statements? How can you speak knowledge into the ignorance that exists? Just as it has been in the cause for gender equality, racial parity and religious tolerance, so the fight will be in this arena named introversion. Stereotyping and discrimination, in all forms, fails to see the wonder of the diversity all around us. Slowly but surely, we can bring truth to bear, to shine light of a deeper understanding of what it means to be human, extroverted or introverted, into the darkness around us.

Discriminating on the basis of introversion, sadly, is legal. Ethical standards that see inherent value in each human being, however, supersede merely meeting the legal definition of justice. "All people [including introverts] are endowed with certain inalienable rights," declares the document that declared our independence from unfair oppression. It's time to

declare an end to this remaining form of unjust, yet socially acceptable, discrimination.