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# White Men and Diversity

## White Men and Diversity: An Oxymoron?

By Bill Proudman



**New Column In 2005**  
In 2005, MCCA® will add a column to each issue that will discuss how white men can more fully participate in the diversity process. These articles will be written by Bill Proudman, partner, White Men as Full Diversity Partners LLC (WMFDP). It is our hope that this series of articles will spark a meaningful dialogue about how diversity programs can fully tap the talents and contributions of all employees.

Bill Proudman is a founding partner of WMFDP. To learn more about WMFDP, log on to [www.wmfdp.com](http://www.wmfdp.com) or send an email to [Proudman@wmfdp.com](mailto:Proudman@wmfdp.com).

**TO:** Bill Proudman  
**FROM:** John Doe  
**SUBJ:** Diversity

I am wondering what this is about? Is it more of a source of telling white men what they are doing wrong with respects [sic] to inclusion? I am a white male that hasn't had the best time as far as being "privileged" as per advertised for white males. So I am confused on this topic or goal. Is this another vehicle to show me how I am bad for being born white? I know that inclusion and diversity is something that should be [sic]. So if you could answer my questions I would surely appreciate it, thanks.

**TO:** Bill Proudman  
**FROM:** Bob Smith  
**SUBJ:** Golden Rule

I am one white male that treats everyone as they treat me. Golden rule, plain and simple. I treat everyone as a human being rather than dividing them into



groups based on something other than their actions. I accept others' differences as long as they are courteous and kind. It matters not to me what race someone is, when I am confronted. What do matter [sic] are their actions toward me. I am a little tired of the "over sensitivity" I see and hear about. Let's face it, white males are on the bottom rung. We haven't changed our society, only reversed it.

Many white men have become angry, confused, or indifferent by diversity efforts in corporate America. The words above, from two emails I recently received, represent the views of many white men who, for differing reasons, have learned to view diversity as not about them or other white men. In many firms and companies today, the terms "diversity" and "white men" are often practiced as an oxymoron, offering something for everyone but white men.

This approach can create tension, misunderstanding, and backlash that can result in resentment, ineffective work partnerships, and an environment where diversity is disparaged, rather than celebrated. It also belies the main point of any diversity program, which is to recognize and respect the differences that each individual brings to the table. An effective diversity program that celebrates what every individual has to offer must, by design, include white men for the unique perspectives that they offer.

Fully understanding and valuing diversity in its varied dimensions can be complex and confusing. The intent of this article is not to be the defining voice in where we should go. Its purpose is to deepen the reader's curiosity to engage others in meaningful dialogue about how diversity can best build effective work partnerships that include white men.

## **The Role of Dominance**

In current diversity programs, the role of white men often goes unexamined. When the subject is race, what usually comes up are the experiences of people of color. When the issue of gender enters the picture, often the experiences of women are examined. Programs on sexual orientation almost always focus on what it means to be gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender. One unintentional result of this standard framing is that the diversity dimensions of heterosexual, white, and male go unexamined. This dynamic has several strong implications for people and organizations:

- Heterosexual white men don't think diversity is about them. Diversity is about "those people and their issues." The result is that many organizations struggle to engage white men in organizational diversity efforts.
- White men don't identify their self-interest in diversity. What do they have to gain? They often think diversity work is about white men losing and others winning (like the opening emails). They develop a negative attitude about diversity and remain suspicious of diversity initiatives.
- Since there is often no examination of what it means to be heterosexual, white, and male, there is relatively little insight into how their experience is different from that of women, people of color, and other groups. At the same time, white men often fear that they will be blamed for any problems that others have in succeeding at work. The result is often a resistance to hear, understand, or validate the experiences of others who are different, which leads women and people of color to feel misunderstood or invalidated.

## **What Results When White Men are Disengaged**

These factors lead to the absence of white men from the difficult and complex efforts to create and sustain inclusive work cultures. Sadly, this lack of participation leads to the creation of harmful stereotypes, such as:

- White men aren't diverse. They think, act, learn, and contribute in the same way.
- White men don't know anything about diversity. They often become totally dependent on white women and people of color for any diversity insight or learning.
- White men can't effectively lead or contribute to the organization's ongoing diversity efforts. This attitude results in many white men being less vocal or visible proponents of diversity change efforts.

These assumptions, if unquestioned, can make ongoing diversity efforts much harder than necessary. Similarly, focusing on every group other than white men can lead to a number of unintended consequences, ranging from tokenism to backlash. White women and people of color can feel that they are getting promoted based only on their gender or skin color, or fear that their colleagues may suspect as much. They often feel they have to work twice as hard to be seen as competent. This expenditure of energy takes away from both the individual and the organization's ability to enhance effectiveness.

White men can feel excluded from the process altogether, which contributes to their resistance and skepticism of ongoing diversity efforts. They may fear being labeled as "the problem," or as someone who "just doesn't get it," due to a careless phrase or action. The result is a paralysis on the issue of diversity, and fear toward contributing in any way.

Many leaders further collude in this dynamic by looking solely to white women, men and women of color, or openly gay and lesbian employees to disproportionately serve on the firm's diversity committee. How many corporate law departments or law firms have white men as chief diversity officers or as chair of a diversity committee? In our 10 years of diversity work in the U.S., we know of only a few instances where the chair of a diversity committee was a heterosexual white guy. We know of even fewer instances where a company's chief diversity officer is a white male.

Relying on women and minorities to continually educate white men is exhausting and contributes to a culture of blame and unequal responsibility for successful diversity programs. Paradoxically, it also can negatively impact the female or person of color diversity chair, because he/she is almost always suspected of being self-serving or self-seeking in their advocacy of diversity.

The net result: Everyone suffers, and so does the business. Understanding and utilizing diversity is about consciously creating a work culture that brings out the best in everyone. Lasting change to an organization's culture will not happen until leadership shows that embracing diversity and inclusiveness is everyone's business, and not just the responsibility of diversity committee members. Long-term sustained change in workplace behavior and inclusion practices will not take place without white men fully engaged alongside women and people of color. All must be equitable players in this endeavor.

### **Moving from Either/Or Thinking to And/Both**

Many companies espouse that diversity includes everyone and all the ways people differ. Yet, diversity is often practiced by focusing on everyone who isn't a white man. When diversity becomes only about hiring or promoting women and nonwhite males, it contributes to an either/or approach that can unintentionally place various segments of the workforce against each other. Viewing diversity as an either/or proposition contributes to some feeling they are losing if others are gaining. Diversity must be viewed as an "and/both" proposition—ensuring that valuing one perspective does not invalidate a different one. Leaders must learn to tolerate ambiguity better and know that diversity efforts will spur emotion.

## **Examine the Impact of White Male Culture**

White men in the United States work in organizational cultures that have been created by other white men. Therefore, the prevailing business culture looks "normal"-it's the way business has always been done.

When the topic of white male culture is raised, people can easily misinterpret the conversation as white male bashing or an assault on the dominant culture. As a result, the white male culture never gets examined and remains largely undistinguished from the culture at large.

The challenge with white male culture is not the individual qualities of the culture, but the fact that some assimilate far more easily into the culture than others. White women, people of color, and openly gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender individuals often have to be bi-cultural. They must learn to consciously be seen as competent in the white male heterosexual culture. What complicates the issues is that often times, white heterosexual men are not even aware that such assimilation is part of their colleagues' everyday work experience. This "not knowing" can create difficulties, strained work relationships, and charges of "He just doesn't get it."

White men never have to leave their culture; thus they are often unaware of the systemic advantages they receive—from being white and/or male—and how this impacts their partnerships at work with white women, people of color, and other white men. Systemic advantages are often the unspoken and invisible benefits that are received by a person because of their group membership (being white, male, heterosexual, and so forth). These advantages are made to look normal and available to any person who desires them. Systemic advantage is not so much what a person has, but it's more what a person doesn't have to think about on a daily basis. However, receiving systemic advantage does not entirely prevent white men from being the recipients of mistreatment and discrimination.

## **Diversity is Also About White Men**

In a world that is increasingly polarized and politically correct, it is critical that white men focus with other white men on their willingness to engage each other and others to create new and equitable organizational cultures that bring out the best in everyone. Their partnership journeys with women and people of color depend on their ongoing work to understand themselves and talk with other white men.

As white men realize that diversity is also about them, they gain more permission to be themselves. White men often times have the most to gain from an increasingly inclusive work culture, because they sometimes suffer the biggest repercussions if they deviate from that culture. Yet, it is often challenging for white men to identify how diversity benefits them personally.

The meaningful engagement of white men is not a short-term project. It is an ongoing and complex task that involves tenacity, courage, and a willingness to discuss what rarely ever gets discussed. It also is not about "fixing" white men. Additionally, women and people of color have their share of the work to do to reexamine their partnerships with white men at work.

## **Initial Steps to Re-engage White Men**

Here are a few key steps:

1. Ensure your diversity and inclusion efforts are defined and communicated to invite white men to be a part of the dialogue and the effort.

2. Don't allow white men be to used as the scapegoat for racial or gender inequity, or any other diversity dilemma. It's important to stop blaming this group for all inequities in the workplace. White men are not "broken" and don't need to be "fixed."
3. Expect white men to be capable and willing diversity partners. Ask them to rise to the occasion to become more visible champions and supporters of diversity efforts. Don't do the work for them.
4. Get white men to take on more direct diversity leadership positions to model that the diversity effort must not be left solely to white women and people of color. Examples include chairing diversity councils, bringing up diversity issues that impact business meetings and relationships, or hiring a heterosexual, white male for a diversity function-including the chief diversity officer position.
5. Get white women and people of color to more closely examine any negative reactions or questioning of motives directed to white men who take on more direct involvement. Help them focus on why they are reacting this way, rather than curtailing white men's leadership efforts toward diversity.
6. Have key senior white men publicly demonstrate their understanding of diversity.
7. Don't focus only on white men. While men have additional learning to do, white women, and women and men of color, also have work to do, such as examining how their learned assumptions about white males impact their partnerships with them at work.

Regardless of the progress, keep at it. It is important to know that the work is never complete. You'll have to become comfortable with the inexactness and messiness that issues of diversity can raise in the workplace. Therefore, it is important to know your goal. It may help to view discomfort and turbulence as your friend. The journey can be a wonderful ride full of new insight, resulting in sustained relationships and strengthened business results.

#### **White Men as Full Diversity Partners**

White Men as Full Diversity Partners LLC (WMFDP) is a culture-change consulting firm that is committed to shifting the way diversity is practiced by fully engaging white men as integral partners. WMFDP team with their clients, over the long term, to inspire organizational leadership to make a commitment to diversity and to operate with courage in helping their organizations experience difference as a vital asset.

The company assists by maximizing an organization's human resources and by helping individuals thrive in the presence of the turbulence and confusion that often accompanies diversity topics.

From the January/February 2005 issue of Diversity & The Bar®

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