

Commentary: I got kicked out of diversity training



My diversity workshop training didn't turn out the way I anticipated. (mediaphotos / Getty Images)

By **Joanne Cleaver**

DECEMBER 15, 2017, 11:40 AM

It's not a good sign when you discover that everybody in a diversity workshop thinks the same way. I signed up for a one-month online workshop advertised as skill-building for white women who want to be “allies and advocates” for women of color. It's a hot topic right now, framed as “intersectionality” — the idea that feminism needs to redefine itself around the experiences of women of color and whose experience is different from that of white, middle- and upper-class women. But as a middle-aged WASP woman, I'm not sure how to stand with and for women of color without speaking for them.

It's a conundrum.

So I joined this workshop in hopes that it would be a place to ask some tough questions and get insightful answers. I figured out some advocacy techniques — no thanks to the African-American workshop leader on

that score — and also got a quick view of how feminist advocates are their own worst enemies.

Things went south even before the workshop actually started, setting a poisonous tone. As the group got organized online, one member shared a screen grab from her Facebook feed, in which a stream of self-appointed diversity advocates pounced on a young woman who had shared her happiness about graduating from medical school.

Almost immediately, someone minimized her accomplishment by attributing much of it to “white privilege.” The new doctor struck back, pointing out that she’d climbed out of foster care and had worked her way through college.

But to the diversity Puritans, she had no right to celebrate what they labeled an ill-gotten accomplishment achieved in no small part by her white skin. Their glee in condemning her was exceeded only by their mutual congratulations for being so brave to bully her.

Inevitably, the entire mess went viral, sparking an opportunity for most of the workshop participants to pile on.

And the workshop leader was the worst of all, egging on members of the forming group to charge “privilege” toward every accomplishment of every white woman. She was bullying and encouraging bullying, and I said so.

Things went downhill from there.

It turned out that this expert’s credentials existed only in her imagination (though she constantly cited her experience as a licensed mental health worker in Nebraska. (Side note to corporate America: You’re going to be besieged by erstwhile diversity and sexual harassment consultants of all races. Please vet them before hiring them.)

She told us that no woman of color could ever trust any white woman. She told us that every white woman owed every woman of color reparations — and then asked for donations through PayPal. (And yes, some women in the group were quickly guilt-tripped into donating money.)

Every question from a group member was denigrated as an avoidance tactic. She shared a video clip of an on-site training in which she shamed and ridiculed a participant for eight minutes — no mention as to whether the participant gave consent for her “whipping” to be paraded in front of some 50 people. She whipped up derechos of blame. I stood up to it and was erased from the group. (A couple other women did the same and were tossed out too.)

Despite her inflammatory approach, the workshop leader was right about one thing: The responsibility is on

those of us who've benefited most from American culture (that's us college-educated white women) to take a step back and let other women set the agenda for once. Maybe for a good while.

Alone once again in my quest to be an advocate, I realized that the most important thing missing from that "training" is the one thing that will transform intersectionality from an idea to action: similar experiences that build empathy. What works is finding our personal intersections with enough common experience to build trust.

I'm not black, Latina, Asian or Native American, and I don't know what it's like to move through life initially defined by the color of my skin. But I know what it's like for people to judge me based on my appearance. I know it's not the same, but it's a start.

My parents encouraged me to go to college and helped me a bit financially, but I also know what it's like to work a grimy, minimum-wage job slinging fast food at a third-rate amusement park. It's not the same as being completely responsible for putting myself through college, but it's a start. I'm not gay or transgender, and I don't know what it's like to be denied permission to have a lifelong relationship with the one person in this whole wide world who wholly loves me for who I am. But I know what it's like to think I belong, only to be betrayed by people I thought accepted me. It's not the same, but it's a start.

Intersections clear when each person edging forward waits for someone else to go first. You might be accustomed to being first in line, but you also know how it feels when someone waves you in front of them.

Doing so for others now is not the same as knowing what it feels like to know that your grandparents were never first. But it's a start. And without a start, we go nowhere.

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