

## Some uncomfortable truths

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Nextions

### Uneasiness over Ferguson will fester until we talk about it

In a *Washington Post* online piece in August, a columnist wrote: "You can understand if President Obama would rather talk about the fight against Islamic State militants in Iraq, where he has scored some victories, than talk about the unholy mess in Ferguson, Mo."

The piece, an exposition on how ISIS militants were responding to the protests in Ferguson, was a provocative take on an already provocative topic.

I sent this post to a few people to get their perspectives, and I was surprised to discover that many people responded by saying that it was easier for them to talk about the conflict with ISIS in their workplaces than it was to discuss Ferguson.

As people shared their perspectives with me about why ISIS was an easier topic to elicit a response than Ferguson, a few themes emerged:

- It's easier to talk about ISIS because ISIS is intentionally and deliberately killing people who they see as different from them.

But the deaths of unarmed black men by police officers are a result of unintentional mistakes and misunderstandings.

- It's easier to talk about ISIS because they are not us, and they are far away. Ferguson feels like it's about all of us, and it's happening at home on our soil, and that makes people uncomfortable.
- ISIS is a global threat that could lead to a world war, and that feels more urgent than police brutality in the U.S.

People also shared that while it was easier to talk about ISIS in the workplace, Ferguson (and other related stories) were more dominant in discussions with friends and with family. We are talking about ISIS at work but Ferguson at home. Why?

We are more comfortable talking about uncomfortable topics with people who are like us.



While the events involving ISIS are horrifically tragic, it's not as uncomfortable to talk about ISIS because the perpetrators of the tragedy are not connected to most of us in any way.

More of us feel connected to Ferguson than we do to ISIS, if for no other reason than Ferguson (and similar events) are happening in our country to people to whom we can relate and are done by people to whom we can also relate.

ISIS is them. Ferguson is us. When we talk about us, we want to talk to people who we feel are more like us than not.

The irony, then, is that the very thread of us-versus-them that leads to events like Ferguson is the same threat that makes Ferguson difficult to discuss in the workplace.

ISIS scares and horrifies us with the explicit brutalities they exhibit, but Ferguson frightens us with the implicit and often unaddressed tensions of racial difference that run through our own lives.

It is easier to talk about the former because there is not a lot we can do about it, and it is more difficult to talk about the latter because there may actually be something that we can (or should) do about it.

Yet, talking about Ferguson is exactly what we need to be doing in our workplaces, and inclusion efforts can be effective gateways to raise the topic with constructive integrity.

Our hesitation to talk about Ferguson at work is a product of the same reaction to differences that prevent us from building the relationships necessary to truly contribute to a more inclusive workplace.

As long as I see me as different enough from you to not talk about what is important to me personally, I am unable to respect and value the ways in which you are different from me.

Some of you may be thinking what a few people expressed to me in these conversations — that talking about Ferguson had more potential for legal liability than talking about ISIS. While I understand that perspective theoretically, I propose that our inability to talk about Ferguson is what leads to legal liability around racial and other forms of discrimination.

How can we possibly be expected to deal with differences adequately in the workplace when we cannot even really talk about the ways in which differences are influencing the most intense of current events around us?

A white female executive in a large corporation told me that she has specifically told her children to not talk about Ferguson at school even though it was a constant topic of discussion at home.

She reflected that her own personal hesitations in the workplace had translated into how she was raising her children — uncomfortable issues, especially around race, were only to be discussed with family and friends.

Sometimes, the lines we toe around what we perceive as propriety or comfort are the very lines that allow differences to keep us apart.

Perhaps the point of inclusion efforts is to help us smudge these lines a bit so that we don't wait to be comfortable enough to talk about tough issues, but we become comfortable because we can talk about such issues.