



Yellow Paper Series

The “Recession + Obama + Trump” Effect:

A 10-Year Take on Talking About Differences

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The “Recession + Obama + Trump” Effect: A 10-Year Take on Talking About Differences

RESEARCH QUESTION:

Do people feel that it is easier or harder to talk about differences than it was 10 years ago?

INTRODUCTION & METHODOLOGY:

Over the past few years, we have been hearing varying narratives on whether people feel that it has become easier or harder to talk about differences in the workplace today. Given that the foundation of creating inclusive workplaces is the ability to talk about differences, we ran a quick “temperature check” survey in February – March of 2016 to capture people’s general perceptions of how it feels to talk about differences today, in comparison to how it felt 10 years ago in 2006. It’s important to note that we did not design this “pulse survey” to assess whether it was *actually* easier or harder for people to talk about differences in their workplace(s) but whether people *felt* that it was easier or harder to talk about differences in their workplace(s). Because talking about differences is a necessary precursor to interacting, working and leading across differences, we want to assist workplaces in increasing comfort around and action towards this type of dialogue.

This survey was sent out to 1800 randomly selected individuals in organizations that were clients of Nextions anytime between 2006 and 2016; the workplaces included professional service firms, corporations, educational institutions, membership organizations, not-for-profit organizations and government entities. Although it would have been useful to ensure solid samples from this vast variety of workplaces, we prioritized keeping the survey design simple to ensure for significant representation of the differences we asked about in the survey.





FINDINGS & DISCUSSION:

Do people feel that it is easier or harder to talk about differences than it was 10 years ago?

The short answer is that the overwhelming majority of people, regardless of their demographic background, reported that that it was harder for them to talk about race/ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation differences in the workplace, than it was 10 years ago.

The longer answer is that while the majority agreed that it was harder to talk about differences, there were interesting patterns that emerged in how different groups of people answered the different questions differently.

Race/Ethnicity

67% of all racial/ethnic minority/multiracial individuals reported that it was harder to talk about race/ethnicity in their workplace(s) today than it was 10 years ago, compared to 53% of whites. Less than 10% in either group reported that it was easier to talk about race/ethnicity in their workplace(s).

52% of all narrative responses referenced either Barack Obama or Donald Trump in their reflections on why it's harder to talk about race/ethnicity today. President Obama was mentioned from the perspective of his election: causing conflict around the question of whether race/ethnicity remained an issue in the United States if an African American could become President. Donald Trump was mentioned with regard to his statements about Mexicans, Muslims, women etc., and how those statements have made it easier for others who hold those views to express them. The bookend experiences of the 2007-2008 election cycle and the 2015-2016 election cycles seem to anchor tensions about being "politically correct" vs. "saying it like it is," neither of which contributed to candid and productive dialogue on race/ethnicity.

38% of all narrative responses referenced the spate of "police shootings of black men" and resulting movements like "Black Lives Matter" that have made it harder to talk about race/ethnicity. While some respondents discussed difficulties because of the emotional nature of the subjects, others discussed the tension they felt in their workplaces because some people seemed intent on avoiding the topics even if others were comfortable discussing the topics.





Gender

60% of all women reported that it was harder to talk about gender in their workplace(s) today than it was 10 years ago, compared to 53% of men. More men (22%) than women (9%) reported that it was easier to talk about gender in their workplace(s). More Baby Boomers (21%) than Gen Y (3%) reported that it was easier to talk about gender in their workplace(s).

Many respondents commented on the amount of research available today on gender issues in the workplace, compared with 10 years ago (referencing *Lean In* by Sheryl Sandberg, several YouTube videos, Harvard Business School studies, and other such resources), but that the conversations were actually harder to have.

There was significant discussion on the generational differences present in discussing gender (often brought up in the context of Hillary Clinton and the elections of 2008 and 2016), and what it meant to focus on gender equity in the workplace today.

Sexual Orientation

53% of all LGBT respondents reported that it was harder to talk about sexual orientation in their workplace(s) today than it was 10 years ago compared to 58% of their heterosexual counterparts. About 25% of both groups said that it was easier to talk about sexual orientation today than it was 10 years ago. The topic of transgender issues was raised by many as being a political pressure point that distracted from other dialogues on LGBT issues.

Diversity & Inclusion

82% of racial/ethnic minorities and 64% of women reported that diversity was worse today than ten years ago in comparison to 52% of whites and 49% of men. Similarly, 79% of racial/ethnic minorities and 63% of women reported that inclusion was worse today than ten years ago in comparison to 48% of whites and 44% of men.

Many minorities and women reported that the fallout from the recession and the increased focus on budgets and unpredictable markets along with unconscious bias were the primary catalysts for the decrease in diversity and inclusion. Most minorities and women did report hearing more offensive and hurtful comments today than they did 10 years ago, but they attributed more of these comments to implicit bias than explicit bias.





Discussion

Overall, people reported a decline in their comfort levels around conversations focused on differences, in contrast to a stall in their comfort levels. We received a lot of comparative comments which suggest that sociocultural events and changes in the last ten years have decreased constructive conversations even though overall chatter on these topics has increased.

People also reported a higher level of comfort “talking” about these issues through social media which may be causing their comfort levels around in-person in the workplace to decline. The social media chatter, in many instances, seemed to exacerbate the tensions instead of leading to constructive change, but it was easier to engage in than personal conversations.

Although we didn’t ask about this directly, reading the comments from the survey made it clear that there is a strong connection between being able to talk about our differences sincerely and candidly and the overall perception of inclusion in the workplace. In other words, people need to talk about these issues in order to feel included, but we are less likely than 10 years ago to have the conversations we need to have in order to create inclusive workplaces even though we are more focused on creating inclusive workplaces than we were 10 years ago.

NEXT ACTIONS:

While we have created the space for training and programming, there seems to be shortage of safe and structured spaces where people can actually talk to each other. People are seeking these opportunities to talk, but they do want their conversations structured in such a way that vulnerability is comfortable. We’ve analyzed our own work and researched other best practices to recommend some next actions on how to create more opportunities for people to talk to one another other in a way that leads to a more inclusive workplace.

Please feel free to use what sounds good or tweak our suggestions below to make it more workable for you and your team.

- Acknowledge the awkwardness and discomfort. In starting these conversations, proactively acknowledge that it will feel like using muscles that have fallen asleep. It will take a while for them to be strong and used to the exercise of discussing differences.
- Discuss the productive middle ground between the unproductive extremes of “political correctness” and “saying it like it is.” The extremes are about avoiding and/or creating conflict. The middle ground is about understanding that differences may be difficult to discuss, but they are not conflicts to be resolved.



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- Smaller groups (5-7 people) who convene to talk about differences in a structured setting seem to work best. Convening several groups as part of a larger process seems to offer safety that naturally forming groups or isolated incidents of group dialogue do not offer. For example, if several groups are created in a department, and told to have 2-3 dialogues on differences over the next month, individuals feel the safety of the departmental structure. Since other people in the department will be discussing these issues as well, the conversation is expected and thus become safer.
 - Flexible structure seems to work well. A written guide for the discussion, with the direction that the group does not have to stick to the guide, provides both structure and flexibility to operate outside of the structure.
 - Using movies, books, essays, poems and other such artistic expressions around differences in identity seems to lead to more honest and productive conversations than using current events and/or politics. As a general rule, political conversations are not good entrees into good conversations on differences.
 - Facilitating small group discussions seems to be leading to great individual conversations but facilitating individual conversations does not seem to work as well unless individuals already have strong trusting relationships in place. Focus on group dialogues more than one-on-one dialogues.

If you have other suggestions, please feel free to share them with us, and we will compile them and share with everyone else. Let us know what is working for you!





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