

## Clueless Majorities

A white male senior manager and a black female middle manager traveled to the Baltimore area to lead an all-hands meeting and hear employee concerns. Throughout the meeting, several employees referred to “Chocolate City.” The white manager had no idea what they were talking about. (For all he knew, the city could have been Hershey, Pennsylvania, nearby home of the chocolate maker.) The black female knew exactly what the group was citing (Washington, D.C., with its majority black population).

The white manager’s unfamiliarity with this term makes sense: if you are not a member of a particular group, you will be less familiar with its lingo, concerns, and way of seeing things. For example, I never knew what people with disabilities faced until my father ended up in a wheelchair on an oxygen tank. Double doors at hotels were a nightmare!

There are obvious downsides to cultural cluelessness: not knowing the needs of your customers, employees, or students. Or worse: turning off those groups unintentionally.

If you don’t know and use the knowledge that majorities are often clueless, you lose the benefits that can accrue to your organization. You can turn knowledge of this clueless pattern into better cross-cultural relationships, sales, even strategies for inclusion of students or community members. Here’s how.

Knowing that majorities are often blind to the needs of minority cultures, the first thing to do is to accept it. Don't try to fake that you understand someone else's experience that is different from yours. It's painfully embarrassing when you are exposed, and diverse employees trust you less. Be who you are culturally—even if it's clueless.

Know, also, that you simply will not be aware at times. Many heterosexuals put a picture of a loved one on a desk without thinking. Most are unaware that doing the same could be a daring act for a gay person, and that many gays, lesbians, and bisexuals put much emotional energy into whether to do so in their workplaces. If you're not gay, that problem is not likely to be on your radar screen.

Culturally effective leaders acknowledge that sometimes they will be unaware. In doing so publicly, they become much more accessible to diverse employees who need their manager to see the effect of cultural difference on their world. Looking externally, the same leader can use the knowledge of Clueless Majorities to ask, "Which cultural groups are we not talking to or seeking for business? Which groups are missing from our community meeting?"

Alternatively, you might simply begin observing the majority and minority groups in your group on any important cultural dimension (religion, race, age, gender, national origin, language) to see if there are any dynamics you have been missing. Do the majorities

give more input? Are you attributing performance weaknesses to individuals whose actions may have more to do with their being a member of an isolated group on your team?

I asked the lone black man in a group of all white women at a hospital what he thought of a just completed training session I conducted. He said it was fine, then added, "You know, I didn't feel I could be totally honest." He was outnumbered, and reluctant to put even more focus on himself because, I guessed, his colleagues "just wouldn't understand."

My own awareness of his quietness was because I knew the pattern of Clueless Majorities. I would wager that the women either didn't notice it, or, if they did, didn't have the skill or courage to recognize the pattern and invite his input.

► ***Everyone can be clueless with culture.  
Use that knowledge to be more alert.***