

DRAMATIZING DIVERSITY

BY EDNA CHUN



There is a new method for deepening the understanding of diversity and hastening progress to change the culture of the workplace. It involves the unique power of improvisational theater. Organizational and behavioral barriers to diversity have proven exceptionally difficult to overcome since they reflect the internalization of social attitudes, stereotypes and perceptions deeply ingrained within our psyches and replayed within institutional settings. What other medium is so profoundly experiential as improvisational theater? It possesses the unique capacity to touch the individual from an emotional and psychological perspective and to transcend even the most deeply ingrained institutional stereotypes and perceptions.

Many forms of traditional diversity training actually increase resistance and create further polarization. For example, a purely didactic approach may be the least effective means of changing minds and creating new mindsets. When organizational rhetoric centers around the occasional, obligatory diversity speaker or workshop, even greater backlash or resistance to change may develop. This reaction to diversity operates like a form of reverse psychology; focusing attention on diversity may create silent but powerful opposition.

Instead, drama offers the potential for engagement and change. It allows the audience members to identify with the protagonist, suspend disbelief and draw their own conclusions. Theater is a safe medium; the potential for threat is neutralized by the distance provided from reality. It allows the potential for "what if" discussion of alternative scenarios and behaviors. Audience members can begin to talk about their own experiences in a deep and genuine way, simply because the medium of drama objectifies patterns of behavior.

The journey that participants experience may be one of the few ways to jolt consciousness and create awareness of how individual actions can contribute to discriminatory practices. This process is nothing less than a journey of transformation that will only take place when the individual is genuinely moved. Such training is not based upon a simple appeal to reason or ethics. A breakthrough must be made as individuals begin to experience new ways of seeing, feeling, thinking and understanding within a limited timeframe.

What is the basis for this approach to rethinking diversity training in our

organizations? As indicated earlier, new mental mindsets are needed to change behavior and actions. An individual's espoused values are not necessarily the operational values that drive behavior.

Revealing research (Picca and Feagin, 2007) based on the diaries of 626 White college students identifies the phenomena of frontstage and backstage racism.¹ The frontstage aspect represents how majority group members describe their racial views in public, multi-racial settings. In the front stage, the veils of innocence and colorblindness conceal backstage commentary and action, while in the backstage, racialized performances occur among Whites in settings that are all-White and comfortable for the participants.

Since these social realities are difficult to discuss and confront, improvisational theater provides a natural medium that can highlight such disparities and discrepancies in attitudes and beliefs that underly discriminatory practices. Theater depersonalizes experience and raises it to a different level where it becomes more visible, allowing individual reflection and identification with the protagonists.

The process of engagement in using improvisational theater to change views on diversity is analogous to a "head fake" (Pausch & Zaslow, 2008).² A "head fake" is when those engaged in the experience think they are learning one thing, and instead learn another. The audience is drawn in by the medium of theater and willingly participates in the voyage of what is ultimately self-discovery and self-disclosure.

For all intents and purposes, two types of individuals attend diversity training: the convinced and the unconvinced. The unconvinced are the "silent minority," but one can easily read their body language and gauge their level of passive resistance. Occasionally, a bold resister will rise from the audience to challenge the assumptions or research of the presenter.

None of this type of reaction occurs when improvisational theater is used. Ironically and surprisingly, those passive resisters will offer their wisdom

and give genuine insight into the inner workings of their minds. Trainers will be bowled over. The deeply personal is now expressed; prejudices are discussed; and topics such as "threat" and "marginalization" come to the fore.

How is it done? A sample 75 to 90-minute program includes miniature lectures that present key concepts interspersed with three or four theater skits. After each skit, the audience discusses what it has seen and the facilitator leads the audience with questions such as, "What could the protagonist have done differently?" Individual scenes can be replayed in different ways to illustrate divergent approaches. The use of monologue by the actors allows the individual actor to reflect on his or her inner journey throughout the course of the skits. Audience members can be called on to participate in certain segments, heightening the sense of spontaneity and involvement. The participants from the audience naturally emerge from the experience with a more personal and deepened sense of the issues at hand.

At a recent national conference, we collaborated with our colleagues, Marie Amey-Taylor and Eric Brunner, of Temple University in presenting the themes of our book, *Are the Walls Really Down? Behavioral and Organizational Barriers to Diversity*³ through the medium of Inter-Action Theater. Inter-Action Theater is an improvisational theater group that facilitates dialogue about similarities and differences through improvisational skits. We presented four skits and each illustrated a specific barrier or theme from our book: micro-incursions, failure to empower and include indecision-making, self-fulfilling prophecy, and reciprocal empowerment.

In the effort to transform workplace culture to be more receptive to diversity, improvisational theater offers an opportunity for deepened awareness as an impetus for individual and collective action. This active learning process engages participants and helps identify behaviors that hinder progress on the journey to inclusion.

1 Picca, L.H., & Feagin, J. (2007). Two-faced racism: Whites in the Backstage and Frontstage. New York: Routledge.

2 Pausch, R., & Zaslow, J. (2008). The last lecture. New York: Hyperion.

3 Evans, A., & Chun, E. (2007) Are the walls really down? Behavioral and organizational barriers to faculty and staff diversity (Jossey Bass, 2007).