ICARUS

July 12, 2020

Courageous Conversations: Moving From Awareness to Action

It's no secret that this year has been full of tremendous news stories. From the impact of the #Black Lives Matter movement and the controversy over the Confederate monuments to the Supreme Court's decision on DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) to the seemingly eternal 2020 presidential election campaign, there has been a ton to talk about.

In my forthcoming book, *Beyond Inclusion: The Search for Civility, Compassion, and Common Sense*, I point out when it comes to the workplace, opposing opinions on high-profile and deeply personal issues are raising tensions which can increase conflicts and lower productivity. Given the stakes, human resource and diversity professionals should keep in mind that although their methods to quell potential conflicts have to be more than compliant with the law, the solution must be more about building a culture of openness where courageous conversations are welcomed.

This is not to say that rules regarding civil and respectful communication are wrong. Although companies should not be workplace referees, telling employees what they can and can't talk about, HR is within their legal rights to create set some limits to ensure collaboration and teamwork. For example, it makes good business sense for companies to prohibit hate speech, symbols, and offensive signs.

Although businesses are private entities and can make their own internal policy decisions on how to address sensitive issues, it's also important to note that the current climate requires companies to create a climate and safe space for employees to talk about how issues are impacting them. In this regard, the company would be smart to "walk the walk" when it comes to creating a work environment that values diversity, equity, and inclusion. I think employees expect companies to be proactive in facilitating courageous conversation between employees and their managers on topics such as #Me Too, #Black Lives Matter, LGTBQ, religious, immigration, and other sensitive issues.

Rules and regulations can be helpful for some companies. But when it comes to dealing with politically and socially sensitive issues at work, it's not just about being compliant. I believe that organizations should be taking a strategic look at their overall values in terms of how they want to treat people. Similarly, leaders at the very top need to be making decisions about what those values mean.

Knowing and understanding a company's culture and values can go a long way in promoting civility and courageous conversations at work. If employees are taught about mutual respect toward one another—regardless of where they stand on particular issues—problems and conflict will be more limited.

This means company leaders have to be committed to reinforcing the values of dignity, respect, and inclusion daily. For example, during regular staff meetings, a manager could say, *" Remember we're all on the same team even when we have different perspectives"* or *"I need every person on the team to feel that he or she can speak up if we disagree."* If managers did that that it would go a long way to creating an inclusive and safe environment where all employees were valued, respected, and treated equitably.

Companies should take steps to help their managers be more comfortable, confident, and competent in having a courageous conversation by providing the training. For the training to be most effective, it should include real-world scenarios showing situations that could conceivably happen. Senior leaders should be required to attend Courageous Conversation training and model the behaviors for the organization. It would also help them to recognize issues that are important when they come up at work.

Courageous Conversation training should be approached as a series of boxes to check and topics to hit on. A lot of companies present learning in such a way that they're not thinking about the learner, they are thinking about what they're going to cover. To achieve the desired outcomes, Chief Diversity Officers should focus on what will be personally applicable to the learner and their job, keeping the messages simple enough to be remembered, and routinely reinforcing the training messaging.

Courageous Conversation training provides company leaders with an excellent opportunity to share their messages about diversity, equity, inclusion, racial inequity, and social justice. But is it advantageous for company leaders to encourage employees to talk among themselves about subjects previously considered taboo at work?

Although some companies get concerned to fear their employees talk about sensitive issues such as race, politics, or religion at work, the truth is that employees are people, and they will talk about what's important to them. The issue is that employees tend to have these sorts of discussions "only" with co-workers of similar backgrounds and viewpoints, which ultimately tends to serve as a roadblock to fostering understanding and respect for a diversity of people and views across the organization. I think that the organization for the company must facilitate these conversations on these issues across groups. These conversations could be facilitated constructively and productively, and they could be linked to efforts to not only make the workplace more inclusive because people would better understand differences.

These discussions could incorporate the perspectives and expertise of diversity professionals, employee resource groups, external subject matter experts, and, of course, company leaders.

I believe companies should double down on their efforts and be proactive by equipping their leaders to engage employees in this courageous conversation. Again, it would be beneficial to train leaders in becoming aware of both their own biases and how to get comfortable talking to employees about sensitive issues.