

## D&I Training: What Works and What Doesn't

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The following is based on an article by Dr. Jane Bozarth. She did a thorough review of the current research and articles (a study of data) to find out what works and what doesn't regarding diversity and inclusion (D&I) training. Her measure of the effectiveness of D&I training was simple: Did the training efforts increase minority and women participation in the company?

I also want to take this topic a bit further and talk about creating a sense of belonging, which is a vital ingredient for diversity, equity, and inclusion and our efforts concerning industry image and workforce development.

### THE GOOD NEWS

D&I training can help. With a focus on training your folks on D&I, you can raise some awareness and get them talking about this topic.

### THE BAD NEWS

It mostly doesn't work. A study of 800 companies, according to Dr. Bozarth, "actually saw declines in the numbers of some demographic groups - African American women and Asian American men and women - and no improvement among white women and other minorities." (measured by increase in representation)

### The Issues with Training and What to do Instead

#### AWARENESS ALONE WILL NOT CHANGE BEHAVIOR!

Most D&I training is centered in raising awareness. This is a



good first step, but long-term, will do little in promoting more diversity and inclusion in the workplace. We say this all the time in our leadership development training. Awareness alone will not change behavior. Information will not change behavior. I saw one article that talked about inserting anti-bias clauses into contracts. You could certainly do that, but it will likely not change people's behavior.

#### What to do instead:

For your D&I training to be successful, you need instruction, interventions, behavior modeling, realistic practice, and other application methods.

Here is a simple behavioral model we have created with specific behavioral guidelines. If everyone is taught this model and leaders exhibit this model and behavior, your folks will be much more likely to shift perspectives and behaviors over time.

- » Assume positive intent!
- » Speak up when something is said or done that makes you uncomfortable. Allow the feelings to come out. Honor them. Explore them. Express them.
- » The person you bring this up to agrees not to defend or justify (You took it wrong. You're too sensitive. I didn't mean it that way.), but simply to apologize and vow to not say or do that thing in the future.
- » The person apologizing can ask more questions with curiosity and learning in mind to be able to understand the other person and ask how to approach this subject if it ever comes up again. Explore the feelings. Forgive yourself and others.
- » Everyone approaches this exercise without judgment and without assigning ulterior motives. They both agree not to take anything personally. Everyone moves on having learned more about others and connect with them in a positive way without any labels placed on either side. Let go and move on.
- » This is easier to say and much harder to do! Get comfortable being uncomfortable.

### MANDATORY VS. VOLUNTARY

Mandatory (seen as punishment or remedial), according to Dr. Bozarth, “may activate, rather than reduce bias.”

#### What to do instead:

Don't make it mandatory and never use it as a punishment. Encourage attendance with certificates, CEUs, make it part of existing training, tie it into promotions and upper positions.

### STEREOTYPE DISCREDITING MAY NOT WORK

Disproving their own perspective may suppress rather than convert.

#### What to do instead:

Everyone should be able to tell their story. Don't negate anyone's experience. We relate to each other through story. It is the most ancient form of connection and establishes and promotes culture. If we can tell our stories and everyone can listen with curiosity and without judgment, perhaps this will help us to understand each other better.

Some examples:

“I don't trust black people.” During one of our trainings, one of

the white men said to me, “I don't trust black people.” I could have discredited him, told him he was wrong, and given him examples of trustworthy black people. Instead, I asked him to tell me more about his experience so that I could fully understand his position. This led to a deeper discussion and a slight shift in the way he viewed this situation.

“I don't see color.” When I hear this during training, it is often a middle-aged, white male. I always thank them for the comment and tell them that I appreciate what they are attempting to do, which is to reduce the differences due to race. But this statement can do more harm than good. We need to see color and realize that a person of color's experience might be different than our own, especially a white male. Think of being pulled over by a policeman. This starts the dialogue instead of shutting it down. We can explore privilege and how to help level the playing field.

“People from the south are racist.” It's good to discuss this, especially if you have representatives from this group. As a white, southern male, I think there is a tendency to stereotype. I was raised in a racist environment and can tell some stories about that experience and how I have moved beyond that environment. In fact, it has helped me to more be in tune with my own biases and stereotypes.

### MORE ON STORYTELLING

#### Origin Story Exercise:

Divide into small groups. Have everyone tell their origin story about the first time they encountered folks who were different than them. Here is my origin story:

I grew up in the deep south where Jim Crow was still firmly in place in the '60s and segregation was the norm. I remember accidentally walking into a “colored only” waiting room for my doctor's appointment. In Jonesboro, Georgia, in 1968, I was 9-years-old and on the first integrated little league football team in Jonesboro, the Clayton County Eagles. (I'm number one in the second row.)



Coach Furlong followed Dr. Martin Luther King and his concepts of nonviolence. Although most all-white teams treated us with respect, there were a few who reacted violently. Our coach taught us to react with love to the other teams when they called us racial epithets and other vile names and played dirty. What an amazing lesson for a 9-year-old.

Later in life, I graduated from Fairhope High School in Fairhope, Alabama, and was one of two white players on the team (I'm number 22).



I was a starter on the Fairhope Pirates. On a sports team, the best players played regardless of skin color. It was a true meritocracy. This shaped my worldview on folks who were outwardly different than me. We connected through sports.

### REINFORCING SOCIAL GROUP CATEGORIZATIONS

According to Dr. Bozarth, diversity training may “reinforce social group categorizations and may enhance prejudices.” Coverage of differences may reinforce dissimilarities and put folks into their perspective groups.

#### What to do instead:

Recognize the differences, then focus on what connects us and makes us human.

It's all about the balance of similarities and differences! One approach that might work well is to recognize bias and differences, have everyone tell their stories and experiences, recognize those different experiences, then focus on all the things that connect us as humans.

Some examples of connection:

- » Music (and for the deaf, something visual). For every leadership course, we have folks choose their favorite

piece of music and create a group or project playlist. Music transcends culture and differences and connects us. And most of the time, there is an emotional component to a music choice, which further connects.

- » Food (learn about other cultures). Every culture and every family have celebrations around food. Have everyone bring their favorite family or cultural dish in for a potluck. Have everyone explain the origin of the dish and how it became a family tradition. Also, be mindful of any pre-meal prayers. I was at an industry event and someone said a Christian prayer before the evening meal. That is a very nice thing to do, but it made me think about who was in the audience. What about the Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Atheists, and Agnostics in the room? They must have felt excluded. What if we gave these various groups opportunities to share their pre-meal ritual with the group? Even something as simple as a pre-meal ritual, like a prayer or showing gratitude can be a source of connection and doesn't have to be exclusive.
- » Holidays (learn about other cultures). Have everyone explain how they celebrate their holidays. Fall and Winter have a myriad of celebrations (Christmas, Hanukah, Kwanza, Diwali, Chinese New Year, and many others) and learning about them can teach us to appreciate those difference and celebrate the common themes. You could even rotate decorations and rituals in the office or on your project.
- » Movement/Dance (from the book, *Intrinsic Inclusion*). When we move together, something happens in our brains that creates a connection. What if we offered movement as a way to connect? It doesn't have to be dance, although line dancing or the electric slide is something that most could get into, especially with some encouragement. Moving together creates a connection in our brains. Any type of movement will do. We do an exercise called “Mirror” where everyone pairs up. There is a leader and a follower. The follower must emulate the leader's movements. Then you switch roles. This simple exercise not only explores how to lead and follow, but it can create strong connections.

#### Other Ideas:

- » **Make it ongoing:** According to Dr. Bozarth, for D&I initiatives to be successful, they must be “... targeted to both awareness and skills development and conducted over a significant period of time.” Always include post training



work that includes behavioral coaching and follow-up sessions.

- » **Have learners create content:** Always/Never exercise (courtesy thiagi.com). Divide into small groups. Brainstorm the completion of these statements: inclusive managers always... and inclusive managers never...  
Once each group has come up with 10 for each, give your list to another table and have that table come up with the top two or three for each. Have each table discuss their top two or three and how you can implement and reinforce those into the workplace.
- » **Belonging Exercise:** Divide into small groups. Have everyone tell a story about when they felt excluded. Then have everyone tell a story about when they felt included. Talk about the themes that came out of each of these experiences. One extension of this exercise is to look at your company website and social media and ask the women and people of color whether they feel like they belong at the company. I remember reading an industry magazine where the cover was on diversity, but when you opened the magazine one of the first things you saw was a historical photo of an event that showed a large group of white men. Images matter. Make sure your media reflects what you want to convey, which is an inclusive, welcoming place.
- » **Robust Evaluation:** According to Dr. Bozarth, companies should "... go beyond self-reporting and conduct research" to measure if behaviors are changing. You can also track women and minority participation.
- » **Don't call it diversity training:** According to Dr. Bozarth, we should focus on "communication skills, improving work relationships, effective hiring (and retention) practices, managing others, working effectively on teams, discussion planning techniques, working effectively with others, and understanding self and others." Think about collaborative project delivery methods and concepts like Lean. The two tenants of Lean are Respect for People and Continual Improvement. This initiative on diversity and inclusion could be a true lean initiative to increase respect for people.
- » **Improve the individual:** Think of this initiative as improving the human. Focus on personal mastery of communication, conflict resolution, cultural competence, high performing teams, and relationships. These are all worthwhile efforts

that will improve business results and support and enhance any efforts toward better diversity, inclusion, equity, and belonging.

- » **Embed into larger initiatives:** Any initiatives should be permanent and part of organizational strategy. Work culture and environment should support diversity training. Create the business case for D&I and make it a business initiative.
- » **Implicit association test:** The [implicit association test](#) is a powerful way to check in with your own biases and start a discussion.

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## Lessons Learned From My Experiences

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### A TALE OF TWO GROUPS

I worked with a company on a D&I Initiative. There were two different groups separated by several weeks. This was in an online format using Zoom. The first group was a cohesive group and they had some of the difficult D&I discussions already. The exercise we were doing was called "Is it teasing or bullying?" The construction world traditionally has a lot of hazing and teasing. We wanted to know where that line was. We gave the participants scenarios and had them discuss whether it was teasing or bullying. One of the scenarios was "A white employee teases a black employee for being chronically late." This created a great discussion where one of the black participants explained CPT or Colored People Time, a cultural stereotype where black people tend to be late. We decided, as we did for all these scenarios, that "it depends". It depends on the relationship, the level of trust, and the context of the teasing. We also had some deeper discussions about this culture of teasing and whether construction needs to change that culture in the future.

The second week, we did the same content, but this second group didn't know each other as well and there wasn't the same level of trust. We had the same discussion on the scenario of the white employee teasing the black employee. One of the black participants felt triggered and was very upset by this exercise. I felt terrible. Lesson learned. The session came to a screeching halt and participants were uncomfortable. Be sure the participants know that these discussions can be quite difficult for some and encourage them to take care of themselves during the process. Unfortunately, this incident happened before we had a chance to cover our Rules of Engagement.

## RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

To lay down the ground rules, we have created these rules of engagement.

1. Listen actively. Respect others when they are talking.
2. Speak from your own experience instead of generalizing (“I” instead of “they,” “we,” and “you”).
3. Do not be afraid to respectfully challenge one another by asking questions but refrain from personal attacks - focus on ideas.
4. Participate to the fullest of your ability. Community growth depends on the inclusion of every individual voice. For participants with privilege, check in with yourself to make sure your silence is not perpetuating the status quo.
5. Instead of invalidating somebody else’s story with your own spin on their experience, share your own story and experience.
6. The goal is not to agree - it is to gain a deeper understanding.
7. Be conscious of body language and nonverbal responses. They can be as disrespectful as words.
8. Share the air. Notice if your voice is dominating the space, if so, step back, allow other voices, particularly those from more marginalized communities to speak.
9. Challenge yourself by choice. If there are topics that are triggering that come up, that you would like more privacy with, or that you just aren’t sure about, be sure to “pass” when it’s your turn to share. Growth and resilience comes from being challenged to grow, but you don’t want to be in the “danger zone” of oversharing and going beyond your own personal boundaries.

## ONLINE VERSUS LIVE: KNOW YOUR PARTICIPANTS, CHECK IN OFTEN

For this type of training, for facilitators and the participants, live is much better than online. When you have 40 participants and you can only see a tiny head in a Zoom call, it’s very hard to read reactions and it is impossible to read the energy in a virtual room. If you must do this online, check in often with anonymous surveys and ask people how they are doing. If you see problems in the survey responses, stop and address them immediately.

Be a change agent: This is a change initiative! Treat it as such. You can’t just put out a brochure and change your website and be done. This must be strategic and ongoing with measurement and follow-up.


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## In Closing

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My philosophy has always been that the lack of women and people of color in our industry is a symptom of a larger issue, which is that our industry has trouble embracing change. Any change. We resisted safety way back when, and now it’s just the way we do business. Then we resisted the environmental movement, LEED, and sustainability and we continue to make inroads into sustainable solutions for projects. Now there is a tendency by some in the industry to resist diversity, equity, and inclusion. Despite this resistance, we are making some progress on that front as well.

It’s time we embrace all diversity: diversity of thought, diversity of ideas, diversity of project approaches, and diversity of project execution. We must embrace lean, collaborative project delivery methods, prefabrication, modularization, and technology. We must create a future for construction that is inclusive, where we create a sense of belonging so strong that people are drawn to the industry and want to be a part of it. As I said in my book, *The People Profit Connection*, first published in 2007, “Consider the power of communication and teamwork so widespread that project teams love to come to work each morning, where relationships are so strong and concern for others is so pervasive that people look out for each other and working safely is as natural as breathing. Imagine a diverse workplace that draws millions of young men, women, and minorities because they want to be a part of this wonderful business. Imagine an industry where people reach their maximum level of performance mentally, spiritually, physically, and emotionally, thrive during their career and retire full of health and vigor. imagine an industry where we all work together to build something, to create something from nothing. That is the industry I want to be a part of, that is waiting to be.”

Best of luck with your D&I endeavors. If you need any resources, please let me know. 



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## About the Author

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Brent Darnell is the owner and president of [Brent Darnell International](#) and a mechanical engineer and a graduate of Georgia Tech. He is a leading authority on emotional intelligence and a pioneer in its use in the construction industry to improve social competence and leadership skill among managers and executives. He is an adjunct professor at Auburn and Penn State universities and author of the well-received book, *The People-Profit Connection* and the Tough Guy series. His programs, books, and online courses, including [CMAA's Leadership Library](#), are helping to transform the industry.

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