

Diversity Competency: Using Privilege as a Life Skill

Deborah L. Plummer, PhD

One way of understanding the concept of privilege as it is used in diversity management is by doing the Diversity Petal Exercise. Here is how the exercise works:

Using the inner petals of the flower diagram found closest to the inner circle that is labeled ME, write in your characteristic of that particular dimension of diversity. For example, in race, I would write Black American, for gender, Female...continuing through writing in all of the dimensions until the inner petals display your characteristics of each diversity dimension.

Once the inner petals are completed, with members of your Diversity Council, take a few minutes to come to quick consensus on what the “power” characteristic of each of the dimensions would be. By “power” characteristic, I mean what characteristic would afford you ease of expression, opportunities, and rights simply because you belong to that group. In other words, life is much easier to navigate because you share that group identity and being discriminated against because of this characteristic is not of concern.

Once your group reaches consensus for the characteristic, write that characteristic in the outer petal. Do this same process for each petal until you have a characteristic for each of the outer petals. Your flower should now have the inner petals completed with your characteristics and the outer petals completed with those characteristics that could be described as “power” characteristics.

In the petals where you there is a match between your characteristic and the “power” characteristic, place a check. Generally, when I do this exercise with groups, I will end up with six checks. There’s a match for me in every dimension except race and gender. As a Black woman, I do not share the group identity of a White Male (typically White and Male are named as the “power” dimension for race and gender). However, my characteristics usually match the “power” characteristics for age, mental/physical ability, sexual orientation, class, education and religion. Each check that you have on your petal represents the dimension of diversity where you experience privilege.

What is privilege? Privilege is unearned rights, rewards, benefits, access, opportunities, and advantages that are received simply because of your group identity and without regard to achievement. For example, in the mental/physical ability dimension, I experience privilege as a physically able-bodied individual who can manage my day without concern for accessibility. I can go through my day unaware of doorways, hallways, cracks on sidewalks, chair placement, and any number of channels that would be obstacles if I were wheelchair bound or had a physical disability.

How does privilege work? Privilege is often experienced as unconscious. It is similar to when one drives to the same destination every day taking the same route. The route becomes so familiar that we become unaware of every stop and turn. We often get to our destination with little or no memory of the journey. Just as fish in water do not have the need to understand the concept of wetness, when we experience privilege stemming from a group identity, we do not

understand what it is like to be someone of the group without privilege, and we don't experience a need to understand.

When we use privilege as a life skill, we are aware of our privilege and we have a need to understand what it is like for others who do not share that privilege. We understand that by doing so we become more culturally competent and effective in our ability to navigate our global society. Using privilege as a life skill is analogous to understanding that there are two sides to a dollar bill and knowing more than just that there is another side to the dollar bill but knowing and understanding what is on the other side.

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