

RACE, AGE & GENDER IN THE WORKPLACE

HOW THE CLINTON, MCCAIN AND OBAMA CANDIDACIES CAN REFRAME CONVERSATIONS IN THE WORKPLACE



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY » “Older people are bigots and don’t understand the values of youth. Women are dirty fighters, emotional and irresponsible. Blacks stick together and side with each other because they’re lazy and feel entitled.” – survey respondent

Many would like to believe that Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama are proof that if a woman or African American can be a viable candidate for the most important job in the country, there must be a level playing field in workplaces across the United States. Unfortunately, instead of being indicative of a post civil rights era, reactions to their historic candidacies prove that biases and stereotypes continue to exist. Nowhere is this proof more apparent than in conversations about race, age and gender.

Whether companies encourage or prohibit conversations about race, age, gender and other demographics, they occur in workplaces every day - more so after the 2008 presidential primaries. The Race, Age and Gender in the Workplace Survey, a national study conducted by the Level Playing Field Institute in August 2008, shows that: **25.8% of employees have heard more conversations about race, 20.5% have heard more conversations about gender, 18.2% have heard more conversations about age** since Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton and John McCain’s candidacies.

In addition to the increase in conversations about issues often considered taboo in the workplace, the Race, Age and Gender in the Workplace Survey shows that these conversations have a profound impact on workplace relations – both positive and negative. For example: People of color were almost two times more likely than Caucasians to say that recent conversations in their workplace have helped them understand the perspective of other races, the other gender and other generations. On the other hand, people of color were three times more likely than Caucasians to agree that recent conversations in their workplace have been hurtful to racial minorities, and over two times more likely than Caucasians to say that recent conversations in their workplace have been hurtful to the other gender. Given that such conversations are occurring with or without employers’ permission, and that the conversations can be beneficial or detrimental, it is critical for companies to foster conversations which will bring about increased understanding, awareness and productivity.

Other key findings from the Race, Age and Gender in the Workplace Survey include:

o When asked how important certain demographics were in getting ahead at one's company, the most significant differences were determined by respondents' race, even when the demographics that were being asked about were gender, age and sexual orientation.

o When asked how important certain criteria ('fitting in,' 'merit/performance,' 'team player,' and 'who you know') were in getting ahead at one's company, there was no difference by respondents' age and sexual orientation as to the importance of any of the criteria. However, people of color and women were more likely than their Caucasian and male counterparts to say that 'who you know' was very important in getting ahead.

o When asked what respondents would say if their employer asked for one suggestion to help different groups get along better in the workplace, 24% of respondents stated that employers should treat people fairly based on performance and merit.

However, groups disagree as to who is now getting preferential treatment. Caucasian respondents, particularly heterosexual men, said that 'minorities' receive favoritism due to enhanced sensitivity to protected classes and to meet quotas.

Meanwhile, people of color, and to a lesser degree women and LGBT respondents, said that Caucasians received preferential treatment and/or that people of color, women and LGBT are disadvantaged, due solely to any one of their demographic characteristics. In addition, 11% responded that employers should create opportunities for teamwork so that employees could get to know their co-workers. Diversity training and open communication were cited by 9% of respondents. The key conclusion to be drawn from the Race, Age and Gender in the Workplace Survey is that the 2008 presidential contenders have increased conversations about race, age, gender and sexual orientation, irrespective of whether they are prohibited by company policy or not. This presents a rare opportunity for employers to offer guidance on how to have meaningful conversations about demographic differences. Whether one believes such issues are 'personal,' and thus not appropriate for workplaces, is irrelevant when you consider that one's biases about race, age and gender impact the decisions we make at work everyday. Despite our best efforts, our biases impact whom we hire, whom we develop and whom we promote. In an increasingly global economy where a diverse workforce is a business imperative, companies can ill afford to ignore that conversations around these issues can be effective in improving workplace relations among all employees.

To receive more information about the Race, Age and Gender in the Workplace Survey or the Level Playing Field Institute (www.lpfi.org), please call (415) 946-3030 or email info@lpfi.org

“Employers should encourage open and candid conversations without fear of retaliation. We need assurances to be reinforced via leadership commitments and behavior rather than lip service.”

– African American male

“Whenever Barack Obama's name comes up people have to point out that he's black - same with Hillary and female.”

– Latino male

“One of the white ladies I work with said, “The Native Americans had their whole land taken from them and they have no anger toward us; why is it that Black people are mad with whites still? Can't they get over it like the Native Americans?””

– African American female