

2 1995 PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

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**ON MINORITY RIGHTS AND  
MAJORITY ACCOMMODATIONS**

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An Indian, a Jew, and Newt Gingrich are driving in the countryside one evening and have engine trouble. They seek help in a nearby farmhouse. The farmer assures them that nothing can be done until the following morning but offers to let them spend the night. Unfortunately, there are only two spare beds inside the house, but the third person is welcome to sleep in the barn. The Jew goes off to sleep in the barn. A few minutes later there's a knock on the door, and it's the Jew. He says that there's a pig in the barn, and because of his religion, he's uncomfortable sleeping there. The Indian offers to go. A few minutes later there's a knock on the door, and it's the Indian. He says that there's a cow in the barn, and for religious reasons he would prefer not to sleep there. Newt Gingrich offers to go. A few minutes later there's a knock on the door . . . and it's the pig and the cow.

Have you ever heard a child say, "This movie is boring," when what he means is "this movie bores me." Similarly, he may complain, "It's hot in here," when what he means is "I'm hot in here." Self-centered adults also think and talk the same way, imagining they're describing properties of some objective reality, when in fact they are actually describing their subjective reactions to that reality.

This may be annoying, but far worse is when people not only think and speak that way, but demand that YOU do something about the objective reality simply because THEY don't like it.

Here are two examples—think about how you would respond.

1. As you are about to speak before a class or some other audience, someone comes up to you and says, "I'm an auditory learner, and I don't respond well to visual stimuli. Therefore, I would appreciate your not using any slides or overheads during your talk today."
2. You're teaching a course, and during a break one of your students informs you, "I'm going to have to be late for class next Monday. Would you mind starting class 45 minutes later than usual so I won't miss anything?"

How would you respond? Probably unenthusiastically, even with indignation? Perhaps you'd point out that the person is suggesting that

everyone else in the audience should enjoy a degraded learning experience just so one person would benefit.

Okay so far? How about a third example.

3. During a break in class, a student lets you know that he does not live in the United States and that English is not his first language. Therefore, you should please speak *much* slower and, oh, by the way, you should of course stop using American political, sports, and entertainment examples.

What would you do?

What should you do?

Although many people would say that what you should do in this case is accommodate the foreign student, I hope you can see that what this student is asking is identical in effect to the first two cases—that for the benefit of a single individual, everyone else should have a degraded learning experience.

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Let me now relate some real examples from the Academy of Management's own experience.

My first example involves the Academy's choice to go outside the United States. Although most people clearly supported the idea of taking the Academy outside U.S. borders, and notwithstanding the unanimous support by the site-selection committee (and although globalization of the Academy had been a strong priority and was the conference theme not long before), expressed concerns by a relative handful of Academy members almost scuttled Vancouver as an acceptable conference location.

Here's a second Academy example. Some years ago, an official request was made for the Academy to provide management training, program design, and course-related materials to academicians from the (now former) Soviet Union. The request was discussed at some length by our Board of Governors. A majority were in favor of the request, not only in order to help the Soviets, but also because it would be a marvelous experience for participating Academy members. A minority felt, however, that participation would violate the Academy's constitutional commitment to political neutrality. The argument was then made that *denying* the request to the Soviets would be political, because we would support such a request from any number of nations "friendly" to the United States. However, the rejoinder to this argument ultimately prevailed, namely, that helping the Soviet Union would appear to involve the Academy in politics, whereas rejecting it would not, and the request was declined. Incidentally, similar concerns have consistently prevented the Academy from becoming involved in Congressional hearings on labor, employment, and other issues for which we have unique expertise.

Here's a third example. Several years ago, the Organizational Behavior Division sponsored a Monday evening dance in Miami that was well attended and, by all accounts, well received. Subsequently, I organized an Academy-wide dance when I was program chair for the Atlanta convention. This time, though the Academy received numerous positive responses, a few people said that because they didn't dance—whether for religious or personal reasons—the Academy *shouldn't have a dance*. (How different is that from the child's assertion "this movie is boring?" or "it's hot in here"?) And, by the way, though hundreds of people attended the dance and thoroughly enjoyed themselves, the Academy hasn't had one since then . . . . Let me add one pertinent fact before moving on, namely, that a number of other Academy events were scheduled in opposition to the dance, as well as numerous other things to do in the city of Atlanta that evening. So, this was hardly a case of forcing Academy members to either attend the dance or go to bed early.

Now, let me say why I don't think this issue is really about Soviets, dances, or foreign students. I think the issue is much more important. It's about the Academy's concern in particular, and society's concern in general, with being "politically correct." It is also about striking the right balance between minority and majority rights, and between minority rights and majority accommodations.

A good case can be made that although America's creators sought to protect and guarantee the *pursuit* of happiness, numerous Americans have become convinced that what they are entitled to is the happiness itself, and therefore anything that gives them displeasure should simply be—stopped. A growing percentage of lawsuits in America are also based on the assumption that happiness, not merely its pursuit, is everybody's birthright, and therefore if something bad happens, the victim is entitled to compensation. Thus, for example, if a particular medical procedure is known to cause adverse side effects 1% of the time, then one person in a hundred will be afflicted, and that person is likely to bring suit on grounds that (a) he didn't like the result and (b) because the procedure usually turns out well, it must be someone's fault that he doesn't like the result. We have become a nation of fault finders to the point where we have an epidemic of blame and irresponsibility. Few people seem to take responsibility for their actions. Instead, they frequently become "method actors," rummaging through their repertoire of behaviors for the right one, so as to appear socially acceptable. Whatever else this does, it changes our notion of how to apportion responsibility for our actions: There is always someone else to blame. So, the Republicans blame the Democrats, the Democrats blame the Japanese, the blacks blame the whites, the whites blame affirmative action, Susan Smith and the Menendez brothers blame their parents, and EVERYBODY blames the government.

The implications of this problem are nontrivial and quite insidious. It has been argued, for example, that the reason so few innovative laws are passed and high-quality programs approved in state and federal gov-

ernment is that it takes an oversized coalition in favor of something to effect change but only a small group in opposition to stop change. University committees, too, have been described as often so concerned about offending some minority point of view that almost no new course or program can be adopted. This has occasionally been referred to as the tyranny of the minority.

In America today, the trend is increasingly toward politically correct (PC) behavior, whereby people act in socially acceptable ways primarily because not to do so threatens to be disrespectful of some vocal minority. "Dissing" has become a national pastime and the subject of gang warfare and terrible violence. Thus, no one takes a position at the edge. That would be too risky. Yet most of our challenges in the organizational sciences are neither at the center nor the mainstream of our profession. They are at the edge, where most of the deviants or nonpolitically correct lurk. Call it the extreme or irreverent, but revolutionary changes rarely percolate at the center—they burst from around the edges. Change has no constituency, and particularly at the center there is no incentive to change. So, few dare to offer ideas that offend the mainstream, which seems to be becoming more narrow and less exciting.

This situation is likely to become much worse as the United States and the Academy of Management continue to globalize. In a way, the Academy of Management may be regarded as a microcosm of the United States. America is fond of describing itself as a great melting pot, and there is a romantic self-conception about its historical ability to attract and absorb immigrants from very diverse backgrounds. The Academy too, with its 10,000 members, seems well equipped to attract new members. In fact, however, both have been far better at attraction than absorption. The extreme sensitivity of each demographic subgroup to sleights, real or imagined, by everybody else, coupled with the extreme *insensitivity* by everyone else toward each subgroup, has led to an increasingly volatile state of affairs. This volatility has led to a new wave of proposed isolationism within the United States, composed of people who despair of solving this problem after diverse people arrive and therefore seek to prevent them from arriving in the first place. This is the blame factor at work. (It's not my fault that THEY don't fit in.) Those of you who travel regularly outside your home country have probably experienced this planet's huge variety of customs, norms, traditions, and laws. As more and more people from different countries interact with Academy members and become members of the Academy, it is almost inevitable that everything we do—organizing a dance, aiding the Russians, or giving a luncheon speech on why we shouldn't be so easily offended—will be offensive to someone. If not the event itself, then the day of the week it's held or the trappings that accompany the event are all but guaranteed to offend one party or another.

Is this state of affairs desirable? Of course not! Should we respond to it by resisting diversity within the Academy or by allowing the threat of

displeasing a small minority to dissuade us from trying anything new? Of course not. I believe that we must have, and do have, leaders and followers brave enough to wade through the PC rhetoric and seek out changes that come from the edges—changes that often challenge what is considered politically correct.

In closing, I would like to propose a few guidelines that might be useful:

1. If the purpose of a remark or an anecdote is to offend a subgroup or to blame a subgroup, don't say it.
2. If the remark is derogatory to an alleged quality or attribute of a subgroup (e.g., a remark about "woman drivers"), don't say it.
3. However, if the remark simply refers to subgroups without evaluative comment, or is a factual remark that simply recognizes that differences among subgroups do exist, such a remark should not be considered politically incorrect.

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Think back to the joke with which I began this talk.

How many of you winced when I began the joke using the words "Indian" and "Jew," fearing the joke would be offensive? How many of you were offended, even though the joke contained absolutely no content derogatory to either Jews or Indians? And how many of you are aware that this joke, which was a staple in the public-speaking circuit for many years (Prince Charles, Richard Nixon, and various other people were mentioned in place of Speaker Gingrich), has all but disappeared from the public domain, a victim of the trend toward political correctness?

Some balance is required.

It is essential that we not let the fear of offending a particular subgroup paralyze us into inaction. As a society of professionals, whose very essence is based on debate and the pursuit and dissemination of knowledge, we can ill afford to succumb to politically correct method acting for fear of stepping out of line. Political correctness can lead only to increased volatility, isolationism, and racism. A balance is required. Today, I believe that we've allowed the pendulum to swing too far in one direction. Isn't it time we stood up and said so? Only then can we hope to strike the critical balance between minority rights and majority rights, and between minority rights and majority accommodations.

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