



Discrimination and Americans' Dreams

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When Martin Luther King Jr. stood on the steps of the Lincoln memorial in 1963 delivering the address we know as the "I have a dream" speech, he was part of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Today, nearly forty years after the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, a new study shows that while attitudes around discrimination have indeed shifted, fairness in the workplace remains a goal rather than a reality. A broad cross-section of U.S. employees still lack the freedom for which Dr. King lived and died.

Last year, over two thousand employees and four hundred employers from all states and sectors were asked their thoughts on discrimination and fairness at work. The findings should give the civil rights movement some cause for cheer – both employers and employees ranked 'an environment without discrimination' as a top-tier workplace value. But, beneath the surface, there are fewer causes for celebration. Unfortunately, a preference against discrimination isn't the same as a hope for diversity. In fact U.S. employees felt that diversity was the least important workplace value, even less important than one's firm having a good public image. The mismatch in values reveals that the key connection has not been made - that diversity in the workplace is what ensures or conversely, reflects, a lack of 'discrimination'.

When it comes to advancement within a company, more than three-quarters of employees believed that, as long as they worked hard, they would get as far ahead in their firm as their skills and talents would take them. But if one drilled into perceptions of what it took to get ahead, the answers were murky – murky enough to question the optimism reflected in employees faith in the "American Dream". Employees reported that 'being a team player' was the most important metric for success in the workplace. Forty years after Dr. King's speech, 'being a team player' can be a code phrase to exclude those who are different. And in a more direct reflection of such exclusion and its impact, minority employees, as well as all female employees, felt that the biggest barrier to fairness in the workplace was that "only certain people were part of the important social groups". So, though the blatant, illegal forms of employment discrimination may be ever present in employees minds, subtler cultures of bias continue to suffuse our workplaces. Nearly three out of four employees reported experiences on the job within the past year that affected them negatively, including yelling, bullying, and public humiliation. Out of eleven inappropriate behaviors, stereotyping was selected most often as the offending

behavior. Over half of employees of color, and 40% of whites, experienced stereotyping in the past year. Other experiences of inappropriate behavior included being socially excluded; unwanted racial, ethnic, religious, cultural jokes and remarks; and unwanted sexual teasing and pressure for dates. In each case, racial minorities reported experiencing these behaviors significantly more than whites, but over one in five whites experienced these behaviors as well.

And, what about the seemingly inoffensive metric of 'being a team player'? When asked which group was most likely to 'fit in' today's U.S. corporation, respondents felt that 'a black person' and 'a Hispanic person' came behind the following list (most likely to fit in first): a white person, a man, a woman, a Republican, a Democrat. And, today's world has new demons, new categories of people who lie firmly outside 'the team'. Respondents reported that the LEAST likely to fit into today's American workplace, by a massive margin, are the categories 'Muslim' and 'homosexual'. At least ten percent of American workers felt that Muslims and homosexuals would never fit into their workplace.

Dr. King's struggle is one that was addressed, to some extent, by the law. But although the Civil Rights Act was an important victory, and tougher anti-discrimination laws remain necessary, laws will never be enough. The law is too blunt an instrument to address the subtleties of behavior, perception and inflection. Today, there's a myth of equality and fairness in the U.S. workplace that just doesn't match reality. If the American dream is to be more than an illusion, if it is to be as powerful as Dr. King intended it to be, then we need to look to enact civil rights much closer to home, in our own attitudes and behaviors, at work and elsewhere. How else will we live in a nation where our children "will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character"?

The survey, HOW FAIR, is published by the San Francisco-based Level Playing Field Institute (LPFI) and the University of Connecticut, and was conducted in 2003. Freeda Kapor Klein, Ph.D., founder of LPFI, and Maninder Kahlon, Ph.D.
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