

Gosh Wally, why is everybody staring at me?

A Lesson in Diversity

Imagine if “Leave it to Beaver” were filmed today. Many of our perceptions of how life should be were strongly influenced if not outright developed by what we saw on television in the 1950’s and 1960’s. The stunning success of “Leave it to Beaver” was due, in part, because it presented a safe and comfortable view of “normalcy”. That idealistic view may have been a bit naïve, however, by today’s standards. It presented a clean, white, male dominated, homogenous society. While this may have been a majority position in the 1950’s, it really didn’t serve society well, as it predisposed several generations (and continues today) that America should be..... a clean, white, male dominated society.

Diversity in today’s workforce is a reality. Many would cite the changing demographics and the movement away from what made America great. Bi-lingual application forms. English as a second language training for the new workforce. Culture Clash. Disintegrating patriotism, loyalty, pride, and homogeneity. This position, largely driven by the myths that permeated our culture in the middle of the 20th century, is not and has not been accurate, for quite some time, in fact.

How would “Leave it to Beaver” be different if it were filmed today? Well, to begin with, the family unit would probably look the same, but would have been formed quite differently. Just look at Ward. Obviously much older than June, he would probably be on his second marriage. In fact, he would probably be on his second family. Wally and Beaver would be only two of his children. His others would be grown and living in another geographic area. June, always the fashion diva, would probably lose the string of pearls and dress for a business suit and briefcase. She would most likely be a working mother.

Wally, while still the caring older brother, would probably dress much differently than he did. Gone would be the straight legged slacks and pressed shirts, replaced with a baggy tee shirt and idiot pants. You do know what idiot pants are, don’t you? They’re the pants young men wear today that hang 9 inches below their waist. I call them idiot pants because they look like idiots wearing them. Mothers, embarrassed that their 15 year old sons are showing their underwear, buy them long tee shirts to cover what they can. It is still easy to tell they’re wearing idiot pants, though. Just look between their knees. If you see a zipper.... Idiot pants. Trust me, there’s nothing for the zipper to do down there.

Beaver would still be loveable, although would probably have different friends. In three years, only one black actor appeared, a maid. There was only one episode where an Hispanic family was portrayed, and they didn’t speak English. That was the extent of

diversity in the series. While minorities were just that....minorities... the images that we grew up on painted a slightly incongruous picture of reality. We assumed that to be normal, we had to be just like the Cleavers.

This has led, at least in part, to a number of myths about diversity. First of all, we assume that America used to be a largely homogenous society, and it has “changed” in the last 30 years. Let’s take a look at some of those myths and see how accurate they really are.

First, let’s look at the belief that *America has historically been an English speaking, anglo-saxon society*. This myth is driven by the belief that America was settled in 1620 by the Mayflower, and that originally, we were a nation of Pilgrims. Any history buff can point out the fallacy in this myth. While the “colonial” region of America may have been founded by the Pilgrims, much of America was already being colonized. St. Augustine, Florida, in fact, is the oldest city in America, founded in 1565. Forty two years before Jamestown. Fifty five years before Plymouth rock. Settled by the French, overtaken by the Spanish, not an English speaking Pilgrim in sight. Of course, that assumes that the nearly 2,000 separate Native American nations who inhabited North America were all savages that didn’t really have any claim to the country. Clearly, America is and always has been, a diverse nation. Walt Whitman sums it up:

Here is not merely a nation, but a teeming nation of nations.

Second, let’s deal with the position that *When my ancestors immigrated to America, they had to learn the language*. Very few Americans can trace their ancestry back to the Pilgrims, if we assume they are the origin of our modern day society. In fact, few Americans can trace their lineage back to England. We are a nation of immigrants. French, Irish, German, Polish, Slavic, Spanish, Russian, Greek, Armenian, you name the country, they came here. Of course, this isn’t even to mention the Africans who were brought here as slaves. By 1860, there were over 7 million blacks in slavery. While many did learn the language, most of the first generation immigrants did not speak English for a very long time, if at all. It was the children of immigrants who learned to speak the language, many teaching their parents.

Third, we have to tackle the belief that *European countries are mostly homogenous, we should be, too*. While that may have been true at one time, the Roman Empire made sure that most of Europe was a hodge podge of race, ethnicity, culture and peoples. In fact, homogeny was largely confined to Asian countries up until the middle of the 20th century. European countries have seen widespread cultural integration, and with the European Union making travel between countries not much different than our traveling between states, this trend will continue.

Next, let’s look the workforce. Many still cling to the belief that *the bulk of the workforce is white, male and English speaking*. I’m not sure this has ever really been the case, but it certainly hasn’t been the case in the last 40 years. Since the late 1960’s, women have outpaced men in growth and approach overtaking them entirely, in the next 30 years. In fact, in the next 10 years, only 15% of the population entering the workforce

will be white male. The remaining 85% will make the workforce more diverse than it already is. The point is simple, America has always been diverse. We speak of diversity as if it were a new dynamic, a change, or something that we've not had to deal with in the past. This simply isn't true. Diversity has always been a part of our fabric. What is making headlines is our apparent rejection of that diversity, or resistance in breaking those perceptions Ward, June, Wally and the Beaver instilled so many years ago into our psyche.

Another myth that bears exposing is that *It was simpler in the "good old days"*. Never has a society had as many conveniences as today. Inventions in the last 40 years have outpaced any other period in history. The industrial revolution brought about sweeping changes in the lifestyle and expectations of the working class. The technological revolution blew it apart, completely. Yet, we yearn for yesterday. We long for those good old days of our youth, when you could walk the streets without fear, neighbors knew neighbors and life was simple. The unfortunate reality is that this phenomena has been going on for generations. Benjamin Franklin, in the mid 1700's, wrote of the "good old days" in his *Poor Richard's Almanac*. It seems that it is more human nature than a decline in society that causes us to yearn for those days of yore. In fact, it is simply a desire to return to youth, rather than the time. The times of our youth, regardless of the era, were typically safe, because our parents made it that way, stress free, because the responsibilities of adulthood had not yet reached us. Carefree, simple, fun. In fact, the only time the past was ever *worse* than today is when we're describing it to our children as we attempt to convince them how good *they* have it. Oh, and by the way, we're just renewing that cycle. Forty years from now, our kids will remember how good we told them they had it, and will long for that time, again.

The bottom line is, today is what it is. It is the culmination of the sum of our history, not a changing demographic. It is the totality of our history, not the making of it, today. Diversity can be defined as *Recognizing and valuing differences in our employees and using those differences to make the organization more efficient and effective*. The differences have long been there. I guess what makes diversity such a hot topic is the difficulty in valuing those differences and using them to make our organizations strong. The interesting thing about the above definition is not that it is unique in its terminology, rather, its origin. That definition comes from one of the most homogenous institutions in America, the United States Military Academy at West Point. I guess if our military academies can embrace the culture of diversity and the valuing of differences, so can we.