

## Lightening up diversity

“What’s something you value about yourself?”

This was the opening question to an informal night of conversation among professionals gathered around the theme, ‘Humanizing diversity in the workplace,’ hosted by ti Communication USA on July 31<sup>st</sup> in Portland, Oregon.

“My curiosity.”

“I’m introspective.”

“Questioning things, stirring things up.”

“I’m past my use-by date.”

The last one, naturally, caught us all by surprise. “I’ve passed my expiration date,” our participant reiterated. What did this mean? And why was it valuable?

For one thing, he was older, on the cusp of retirement, or at least semi-retirement. He had a lifetime of experiences and plenty of opinions to share. He could be candid and frank. He could speak honestly and truthfully, without fear of retribution or reprisal.

With that, we laughed about occasions where we disclosed well-meaning but ‘inappropriate’ things. With our international backgrounds, we all knew what it was like to be in new and unfamiliar settings. We had all been gauche foreigners fumbling our way through clumsy encounters, speaking our truths candidly and frankly, if inappropriately, to our hosts. But rarely were we punished outright for our unintentional sins and ignorance. We relished the grace and forgiveness people the world over had given to us.

Is the workplace that much different? Maybe we are all gauche foreigners at some point, like when we join a new organization or have trouble fitting in even after working somewhere a long time. We come together – individuals with countless perspectives, backgrounds, personalities, life experiences, worldviews – and we have to merge and make sense of each other and work as a collective unit, a team, an organizational whole. We either fit in to the dominant culture or work together to change it.

Real diversity runs deep and beyond our appearances, the identities we choose or inherit, and the box categories we check off on surveys and application forms. Perhaps we can give each other more grace at work, this kindness and forgiveness, when we say and do the wrong things, even hurtful things. The key is to be able to talk and exchange, knowing we all have much to learn from each other, because all our life experiences are important and valid. That’s one way we can humanize our differences – and hold ourselves lightly, with a refreshing kindness.

Treating our workplaces as the U.N. is an imperfect metaphor, but if it helps us in treating our colleagues with compassion and forgiveness, it’s a good metaphor. When we recognize our

inner and outer diversities, we especially need those things. Let's give ourselves that grace.