

# A Personal Account of Diversity Lessons



## From the School Yard to the Workplace

By J.R. Hipple



“It’s funny how all of the pictures in your house are of black people and all the ones in my house are white.”

I made this observation at the age of 15 after visiting the home of high school classmate Joe Lusane, my first African-American friend. This was the first time I’d been invited into a non-white’s home, and I remember being warmly welcomed by Aunt Louise, Joe’s guardian after the death of both his parents at an early age. I also can clearly see the framed photographs on the wall of his extended family and friends, without a white face in the crowd. It was a revealing moment, making me acutely aware of the bookshelf full of photographs of white people that Joe looked at the dozens of times he had been to my home.

My friendship with Joe and other experiences with race relationships at a younger age ended up having a life-long impact on my work as a consultant dealing with the interconnected issues of leadership, corporate culture and diversity. The following is a personal account of some of the lessons I learned growing up with Joe and how those lessons apply to my work today.

### Lesson #1 from Joe — Education as a Common Ground

Joe and I met when the private, nearly all-white, 400-student high school

I attended launched a diversity initiative in 1970, enrolling more than 20 African-American students from surrounding public school districts. The contrasting images of the photographs in our homes as two teenage boys became a symbol of how separate our lives were when we met. Yet the education we shared in-and-out-of-the classroom indelibly shaped both of our attitudes about the meaningfulness and importance of racial diversity in the classroom, the workplace, the community and at home.

I was one of a handful of students asked to greet Joe and other newcomers when they arrived for their first day of class. When recounting this story to Joe a couple of years ago, I told him how much I admired the courage that it must have taken for him to walk across a long grassy area at the school and meet his new classmates.

Joe shrugged off any notion of heroics with a simple response: “Courage? I was good in math, and I wanted to get a better education.” He summed up an attitude that was shared by most of our relatively privileged schoolmates, along with the motivation and hope that crosses racial, ethnic, gender and income boundaries. Education was his key to moving out and up from the Skeels-McElrath neighborhood in Northeast Ohio, one of the poorest communities in America at the time. (He also showed his kindness by over-

looking what, in hindsight, could be perceived as a patronizing observation by me. Clearly, my diversity education remains an ongoing process.)

In the work that I do in cultural change and communications, it is clear to me that diversity programs fill an important education gap as organizations manage changing workforce demographics. Diversity education is merely an addition to the education and training curriculum provided for many new employees on basic knowledge and skills. The diversity initiatives I’m involved with provide important awareness and skills that many people lack when it comes to working with others outside their racial or ethnic group. Despite the progress in race relations in our country, there is little in the education, training or experience that prepares many employees, including younger employees beginning their working lives, for interacting with diverse groups (which brings us back to the framed photographs at the top of this story).

I recently attended a meeting with a group of diversity managers, and one of the top executives in the room voiced her frustration over not obtaining meaningful internal support for the work of her department. She especially was upset by the lack of “management buy-in” from the CEO and other senior managers. Her disillusionment was shared by the group.

While I admired her for pushing for fundamental behavioral change by the leaders in her organization, I encouraged her to celebrate the sometimes small, incremental results. Diversity work in many organizations remains an act of teaching and re-teaching the fundamentals of how to get along with those who aren't exactly like you—and leaders need to be reminded about how this benefits employees and the work environment.

### Lesson #2 from Joe — Teamwork

Both education and sports have the power to bring people of diverse backgrounds together, and it was a passion for basketball that helped Joe and I become fast friends. I was a slightly above average player, but Joe was a graceful, 6'6" competitor, who quickly demonstrated the skills that would earn him multiple all-conference honors, statewide recognition and a college scholarship. Once the season began, coach Alan Darner taught us to focus on fundamental skills, an all-for-one attitude and caring about your teammates. Those principles led our team to a school record for wins, including breaking the two-year unbeaten streak of one of our cross-county rivals.

It was through adversity, however, that we developed a greater understanding and respect for our African-American teammates. During an away game, Joe faced a barrage of racist name calling from the grandstands and blatantly bad calls by the officials. The mild-mannered Joe had seen and heard enough, and his loud protests against the referee and the player who had been taunting him led to his disqualification from the game. It also resulted in the team's eventual loss and a sheriff's escort for the bus out of town. Growing up in small-town, white America, it was the first time that most of us had been direct witnesses to and felt the effects of racial hatred. In retrospect, our team unfortunately lacked the courage to walk off the court and fully support Joe.

Our worldview changed that year, with a greater appreciation for the difficulties facing minorities and a sad but valuable awareness about ra-

cial bias. Through our shared experiences, meaningful, more trusting relationships were developed between students with different backgrounds. That was possible due to both the school administrators who created the diversity program and to the African-American students who, as Joe emphasized, were interested in "getting a better education."

What are you doing in your workplace to build shared understanding and trust between diverse employees? In my experience, this requires four elements: 1.) genuine leadership from the top, 2.) management processes and accountability, 3.) a communications architecture, and 4.) specific, measurable objectives around a desired culture state, which includes diversity. Some of the most meaningful work our firm does is in the area of values-based leadership, where leadership and the entire workforce participate in a process to create companywide shared values. Two of the most common responses from the groups we work with are the need for respect and collaboration or teamwork.

I've encountered few organizations that are as intentional about aligning employees with corporate strategy and cultural goals as Georgia Power, a client of my firm. Under the leadership of Frank McCloskey, vice president-diversity and a fellow INSIGHT Into Diversity Editorial Board member, and Dr. Shelton Goode, diversity action manager, the diversity department plays an integral role in cultural change strategies designed to achieve business goals through a more a supportive, trusting and inclusive workplace. The company requires all managers—including executives—to participate in a management development curriculum that includes leadership, supervisory skills and diversity training. These education initiatives recognize the importance of embracing similarities and differences internally first as a key to meeting the changing needs of customers and other external stakeholders.

### Lesson #3 from Joe — The Power of Shared Experiences

During a dinner with Joe and his wife

Joyce just prior to Christmas in 2008, we reminisced about our basketball experiences. The closure of our small school left us to transfer for our senior year to the public high school, where the first game of the basketball season was played against perennial powerhouse Canton McKinley High School. I was the high scorer for our team that night, and I recounted how the McKinley players, an all African-American team, called me every name in the book to get me rattled. We both laughed when Joe added: "Do you remember what they said to me?" I remembered because we experienced it together.

While most of the time we devote ourselves to discussing what separates us, the shared experiences of being on a team—whether at work, on a class project or in athletics—allow us to focus on the similar goals, attitudes and values that bind us together. Perhaps this reason and this reason alone is what makes participating on diverse teams so important to our lives. Those shared experiences are enriching, and vital to building understanding, respect and inclusiveness in all aspects of business and community.

Fortunately, Joe and I were able to relive many of our shared experiences before he passed away on September 21, 2009, after a long and courageous fight with cancer. Our one-on-one connection changed my life, just as the one-on-one relationships in companies change the lives of employees. The simple lessons Joe helped me learn on the schoolyard seem to me to be fundamental to developing shared understanding, respect and caring that is so needed in the workplace. ●

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