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Review: Ouch! That Stereotype Hurts: Communicating Respectfully in a Diverse World / Interactive Workshop Program
By Leslie C. Aguilar

Reviewed By Mike Streeter, Executive Director Workforce Diversity Network

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A little over a year ago, the Workforce Diversity Network featured Leslie Aguilar's book, "Ouch! That Stereotype Hurts" in the bookshelf section of our Web site along with an article she wrote on the same topic.

Since then it has been among the most popular items on the site in terms of both visitors and number of times the information has been downloaded. Clearly, it is a topic of great interest to our members and readers, and when we became aware that, to complement the book, Leslie had developed an interactive workshop along with a 12-minute, skill-building video/DVD, we wanted to learn more about it.



Leslie is a speaker, author and workshop facilitator in the areas of diversity, cultural competence, communication and service success in a diverse world. She founded International Training and Development, LLC in 1992 and works with leading organizations throughout the country to help them tap the strength of their diverse workforces and provide exceptional service for multicultural and international customers. In our discussion we explored a number of topics ranging from how best to deploy the "Ouch" workshop in an organization, to what forms of barriers or resistance the workshop might encounter.

WDN: What advice would you give to prepare an organization that is considering using Ouch! as part of its diversity and inclusion initiative?

Leslie: Give management the skills to speak up against bias and stereotypes and then hold them accountable for doing so. Most employees will not protest bias in the workplace if they feel that management condones it.

WDN: Is pre-work advisable to prepare the organization and if so, what are some examples?

Leslie: Most organizations that utilize Ouch! video and workshops have



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- Conference Proceedings
- Expert Forum
- Recommended Reading
- Reviews
- Web Resources



"I'm very proud that 'Ouch! That Stereotype Hurts' has been the first book selected for the Bookshelf. I'm happy to be able to bring this resource to the many members and online readers of Workforce Diversity Network and am very pleased with the positive response." -- Leslie Aguilar

already established some understanding of what diversity is, why it is important and the organization's commitment to diversity and inclusion. If this is the first diversity-related training offered, it's important to preface the content with why respect is important within the organization.

WDN: In what types of organizations has Ouch! been used?

Leslie: In all types – associations, government entities, large and small organizations across many industries, and in universities and high schools.

WDN: Do you have experience using Ouch! in other countries or cultures?

Leslie: Personally, I do not, although the video-based training is being used in Canada, the UK, Australia, Singapore, and Central and South America. I believe the concepts are universal --- as people we are biased and sometimes act out our biases through the things we say, and that this has a negative impact on others. And, targets or bystanders often sit by silently and do not respond, even if they would like to. Finally, there are effective ways to speak up against stereotypes and biased language. While the concepts are universal, the examples of stereotypes and bias compiled in the video are current U.S. American examples, gathered through interviews across the country. So, if used outside of the U.S., there should be some discussion of "what does this sound like in our culture / location?" Also, some techniques for speaking up are very direct, others more indirect. Preferred communication techniques vary across cultures, both here and outside of this country. That's why it's important to have a variety of ways to speak up, so that you are comfortable doing so in a broad range of circumstances.

WDN: Do you have any observations regarding the most effective way to implement Ouch! within an organization, e.g., as a stand-alone workshop or part of a larger process?

Leslie: Ouch! works well either as a stand-alone skills training module or integrated into a larger program. However, as with all training, the skills learned will be applied back in the workplace more consistently only if leadership supports them.

WDN: Is it best delivered to senior levels first before deploying it throughout an organization, or doesn't it really matter?

Leslie: What matters is that senior level leaders model the skills and support their employees in creating an inclusive environment. Some organizations choose to include leaders with their teams during the training, while others provide separate leadership training. You know that if leaders do not model these skills, the first question employees will ask is: "Have our leaders gone through this training?"

WDN: How do you know that Ouch! is achieving its intended objectives? Are there follow up processes and measures to assess the effectiveness of the training?

Leslie: It's up to each organization that uses Ouch! to utilize their internal processes and measures to assess the effectiveness of the training, just like they do with other training content. Anecdotally we know that it is working. Participants tell us that they are applying the skills in the workplace and addressing situations in which they previously would have remained silent.

WDN: Do you feel that Ouch! is a program that can be used in an organization without the benefit of special expertise in the subject? In other words, can untrained facilitators deploy it effectively?

Leslie: Yes, definitely. There is an extensive Leader's Guide that gives detailed outlines and scripts for presenting the concepts. It's important that presenters have good communication skills and know how to facilitate a non-blaming conversation. Most important is that the facilitators model respect for others, both in the training room and out. This is what lends credibility.

WDN: When you present the program, have you observed any differences in how it is received based on:

- the type of organization?
- the level of the audience, e.g., management versus front line

employees?
- the race, gender, ethnicity or generation of the audience?

Leslie: That's an interesting and difficult question. I have not noticed significant differences by industry or organization type or size. There are definitely differences in organizational cultures, however. In some organizations, the idea of challenging stereotypes or bias is brand new. In others, it is already part of the organizational culture. As regards level, sometimes those in leadership forget how risky it feels to some entry-level employees to speak up if the person stereotyping or saying biased things is in management.

As regards race, gender, ethnicity or generation – I believe that stereotypes and biases impact all of us. At some time or other we are the sender, the recipient or a bystander. What differs by gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, body size, religion, or other dimensions of diversity is the number of times we are exposed to negative stereotypes about our own group. Because of widely-held societal biases, some individuals have to confront negative stereotypes every day while for others it's less frequent. So the cumulative impact of these negative statements over a lifetime is much more severe for some groups than others.

Those who have been more frequently targeted by negative stereotypes are often more keenly aware of them, and sometimes more experienced speaking up against them. I am hoping that with each generation there will be more willingness to speak out against bias and stereotypes --- but of course, we can't wait for generations – we need to do our work now.

WDN: In all of the work that you have done so far with the Ouch! workshops, what have been the most significant barriers to gaining understanding and acceptance from participants?

Leslie: I haven't felt much resistance to the concepts as a whole because I present the concepts under the umbrella of "Inclusive Communication" -- a different way to look at how your communication does or doesn't get through to others – how it affects others. Most of us want to be better communicators. Where there is more resistance is in our willingness to speak up against stereotypes or bias. Individuals identify these reasons for sitting silent, even if they would prefer to speak up: fear of social or career repercussions, discomfort, lack of skills, or a feeling their voice won't matter. This is why we practice various techniques for speaking up during the workshops, to build both skills and comfort.

And, there will be individuals who continue to intentionally perpetuate stereotypes or biased behaviors at work or in society. That's another reason why speaking up against bias and stereotypes is so important. In Daniel Goleman's "Emotional Intelligence" he says:
"The simple act of naming a bias as such or objecting to it on the spot establishes a social atmosphere that discourages it: saying nothing serves to condone it."

WDN: You stress the importance of completing a bias check on written communication and I must admit, I've never done that. In your experience, is it becoming more commonplace?

Leslie: Yes, I believe it is. Twelve years ago when I first began asking workshop attendees if they conducted a bias check on their written communications, it was rare that someone would respond "Yes." Today, usually at least a tenth, sometimes more, of training participants indicate that they consciously check for bias in written communication.

WDN: Another concept that you present in your book that I found really interesting is the "gift of feedback." Could you say more about that?

Leslie: Sometimes we're afraid to give feedback to others on the negative impact of their words because we fear embarrassing the person. I believe feedback is a kindness we give to the offending person and to ourselves. When we say to someone, "Hey, I know you mean well, but when you say that, it hurts," we open the door to a good conversation. The person may not have intended harm and may sincerely want to explain or apologize, so

feedback gives that person a second chance. And you have a chance to release any tension that is building. The relationship between the two of you can be strengthened. That's a gift. It's definitely more productive than walking away angered, or being upset with yourself for not saying anything, or saying to others: "I can't believe what Lynn said."

WDN: To me, one of the most impressive things about the "Ouch" program is its simplicity. It deals with what is often a highly charged and emotional subject in clear, straightforward language that all of us can understand and makes the case that we all greatly benefit, both individuals and organizations, from a bias-free workplace.

It is filled with practical examples of how stereotypes are perpetuated along with guidelines for stereotype-free communication, gender inclusive language and naming or describing people. It includes techniques and interactive exercises to build skills for speaking up against stereotypes as well as a process for recovering when we occasionally put our "foot in our mouth". The full program includes the book, video, Leader's and Participant's Guides and a PowerPoint presentation.

Biases and stereotypes are among the biggest barriers to creating an inclusive workplace. The "Ouch! That Stereotype Hurts" program is one of the most effective tools we've seen that organizations can use against them.

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▲ [back to top](#)