

## ***“CAN MINORITIES DISCRIMINATE AGAINST MINORITIES?”***

In March of 2002 seven African American Del Taco employees sued the nation's second-largest Mexican food chain, claiming they were passed over for promotions in favor of Hispanic workers. The discrimination lawsuit filed in Superior Court alleged that the plaintiffs, who are former and current employees, were mistreated while they worked at Del Taco. They claim that they were verbally harassed by Hispanic employees and, in some cases, fired and replaced by illegal immigrants.

A reporter from *The Wall Street Journal* contacted me and asked if I thought that incidents of minorities discriminating against other minorities was common and I replied, “Certainly.” Discrimination is not limited to white people. Prejudice is about fear – fear of the unknown and fear of others who are different from ourselves.

A good example of how insensitive minorities can be to other minorities is last fall when L.A. Lakers basketball player Shaquille O'Neal said on a television sports program, "Tell [Houston Rockets'] Yao Ming, “Ching-chong-yang-wah-ah-soh.” While those on the program found the comment funny, no one stopped to think that if an Asian had used the "n-word" about an African American, there probably would have been no laughter.

Contrary to popular opinion, minorities are not one big happy family. Discrimination isn't just limited to how some Caucasians treat ethnic minorities. It's not unusual for minority groups to discriminate against other minority groups. They may even treat others from their own racial group unfairly or with disdain.

Asians do not necessarily get along with all other Asians. For instance, Japanese and Chinese do not particularly like each other for historical and cultural reasons. Koreans also do not like the Japanese for similar reasons.

In many prisons across the country, there are Black, Hispanic and Asian gangs who often clash. There are even Northern Hispanics who fight with Southern Hispanics. Why should the world outside prison walls be any different? Law enforcement officials will tell you that the neighborhoods they patrol have very similar problems.

In the workplace, it's common for minorities to band together with others from their own culture for support. When groups are uncomfortable with

each other it is not unusual for them to discriminate against one another. Minorities are human, just like anyone else.

There can also be cultural confusion when minorities do not understand the unique beliefs and practices of others. Witness the recent 10th anniversary of the riots in Los Angeles when African American residents burned down many of the stores owned by Korean shopkeepers. After the incident, it was learned that the African Americans felt disrespected because the Koreans wouldn't look them in the eye while the Koreans felt they were showing respect by averting their eyes.

Minorities have prejudices and need education about other cultures just like anyone else, especially in the business environment. Unfortunately, many do not feel they need cultural sensitivity training because they are minorities. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Many company managers wrongly assume that a minority cannot discriminate because he or she is a member of a minority. Again, everyone needs cultural awareness training regardless of their background. As a coach, I specialize in helping executives of all races deal with charges of gender inequality and racial discrimination.

Many situations conspire to increase distrust and suspicion between minorities in America by pitting one group against another. For example, when government allocations for minorities are set each year, the overall pie doesn't seem to get larger but the slices are allocated differently depending on who has complained the loudest or garnered the most political clout over the previous year. This obviously engenders animosity and division among minority groups.

Which racial groups are most likely to clash? As can be seen from the previous illustration, Asians and African Americans are polar opposites on the cultural scale. For instance, Blacks are comfortable with generous body language while Asians believe that exhibiting one's emotions in public creates disharmony. Blacks are very individually-oriented while Asians are group-oriented. Today, many community groups (including those in Southern California) are actively engaged in opening discussions about cultural differences to avoid future misunderstandings.

Bottom line: Discrimination is a disease that afflicts people regardless of race, creed, color, sexual orientation, age or gender. Education is the only cure for the fear that is at the root of prejudice.

Anyone is capable of discrimination if he or she does not understand those who are different. As a result, people live in isolation and we lose the benefit of others' experiences and ideas simply because they are not like us.

Differences are not wrong, just different. Once we learn this fact, the world will be a much better place for all of us. Company executives should invest in diversity training for all workers—to prevent potential disagreements and legal issues from arising.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Michael D. Lee, MBA, is a cultural expert and author who speaks on diversity around the country. He has written several books on marketing to people from diverse cultures. Michael is the first Asian American to earn the Certified Speaking Professional (CSP) designation in the history of the National Speakers Association. He is often called as an Expert Witness in court cases where culture is an issue. Michael can be reached by e-mail at [Michael@EthnoConnect.com](mailto:Michael@EthnoConnect.com) or by phone at (800) 41-SPEAK.