



## The case for diversity and political correctness

**F**orty-three years ago, a male business executive needed an assistant—a secretary, to use that era’s terminology. So he placed an advertisement, interviewed the appropriate applicants (all female), and hired the woman he

“wanted.” Did he hire the woman because she was the most qualified or because she was the best looking? You can guess, but there is no way to know for sure: The executive, who was my father, passed away two years ago, and the woman, who is my mother, won’t say. What she will say is that I owe my very existence to the absence of political correctness in my parents’ youth. Could my parents’ relationship happen today? Not easily.

A few weeks ago, I sat on a team composed of other company executives. Our goal was to “build a business case for diversity.” In my mind, that phrase was ’90s-speak for “let’s create policies that will make our company politically correct.” It sounded like code words that meant we would be developing affirmative-action policies. As a member of the fraternity of insensitive, middle-aged, white guys, I felt an obligation to participate. But let me be very clear: Despite my cavalier use of the “middle-aged-white-guy” label, my interest in participating was not to protect my “turf” from women, blacks, Asians, Hispanics, gays, the disabled, or any other minorities or special-interest groups. (I have a color-, race-, sexual-preference-, and disability-blind philosophy that may fail some political-correctness tests but passes most people’s scrutiny.) My aim was to make sure that we did the right

thing without putting the business at a disadvantage.

In an interesting coincidence, after the first day of the two-day meeting, a staff member sent an e-mail message to everyone in my company encouraging us all to buy stamps that the US Post Office is issuing to promote breast-cancer research. Eight cents from every stamp sold goes to help find a cure. No one could oppose such a noble cause, yet four recipients replied to everyone in the company that they did not want to be sent such mes-

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sages in the future. Who knows how many others replied directly to the sender or, like me, ignored the message because, even though I thought it was an inappropriate use of a company resource, I couldn’t spare the time to respond. Because we have a company policy against sending broadcast e-mails for any purpose, the sender was officially reprimanded. Score one for common sense and against political correctness.

So what happened at the diversity meeting? Among the questions

we discussed were whether it is appropriate for an executive to ask his or her assistant to do personal errands and whether it is appropriate to tell off-color jokes to colleagues. (You may ask your assistant to do personal errands if it is part of the assistant’s job description, and you may tell off-color jokes if the folks who’ll be listening to the joke give you permission first.) Although I suspect we didn’t entirely accomplish the company’s objectives, the meeting was a valuable forum. At its conclusion, I was still a middle-aged white guy, though, but perhaps I am a bit less insensitive. At the outset, I knew of the advantages of a diverse workforce: Ideas, creative tension, and unusual perspectives result from putting together a diverse group of people to solve a problem. I also knew, and have always believed in, the importance of hiring the most qualified

