

# Practical Diversity: Absolutely Necessary for Peace

**Dawn D. Bennett-Alexander**

---

**Abstract:** We often think of peace as a big overarching thing that is in the hands of governments and officials. The author posits that true peace is actually an individual act and will only be achieved when we lay claim to our power. How we do so is the focus of her article as well as her life's work.

**Keywords:** peace, practical diversity, diversity, Civil Rights Act of 1964, Diversity, Equity, Inclusion & Belonging, employment discrimination

## Preface

I am a bibliophile and have books on my many shelves stretching as far back as my childhood (I am 70). Upon occasion I randomly pluck from a shelf one that is about something I am curious about and I put it out on a table or counter where I can easily access it at my leisure from time to time. Having retired from teaching a few months earlier in February 2021, I now have time for things I had been too busy to get to before. The other day I chose the book “Invitation to the Theater.” Being a consumer of TV, movies, plays and the like, and even having acted in them in high school, and having recently been the focus of a video commissioned by my University to go along with its announcement of a new faculty award for Diversity & Inclusion (D&I) created to honor my work and named for me and being fascinated with the process, I had an interest in the seeing the theory behind what I consumed and even participated in. I carried it out to my gazebo with me one beautiful morning and after eating my breakfast, I picked it up to browse through it. As I read through the introduction, I came across this sentence: “*The new theater was to be socially “relevant,” opposing war, imperialism, racism, pollution and police brutality.*” I turned to the front of the book to see the year of publication. 1971.

It is now 2021.

It had been 50 years and the sentence could have been written today about each and every issue listed. Fifty years later and it could have been written today. That is sad.

I include this preface, and the way I chose to write it (as it actually occurred) for at least two reasons. One is to show how issues of peace thread themselves throughout every aspect of our lives and pop up in the most unlikely places. This was a textbook about the theater, but by the beginning of the second page of the introduction we are dealing with the issue of opposing war and imperialism, among other things. The other reason I did so is because I wanted to note how 50 years had passed and we are still grappling with these exact same issues.

The inevitable question is “why?” What can we do to change that equation so that 50 years from now we will not be facing the same societal ills we face today? Why can’t we find peace? No doubt there will still be societal ills, but do they really have to be precisely the same ones we are now experiencing? What can we do to reach solutions and move on to other issues no doubt just as important, needing our attention? Haven’t we learned anything in 50 years? Isn’t there anything we can do to move forward?

I have a suggestion I would like to share.

## **Introduction**

Peace is not just a big overarching concept that lives only in the control of those in government, those in power. At its most basic, it resides totally within the control, hearts and minds of individuals. After all, that is who makes up the governing body. They are just individual people. The rules, regulations, orders, laws, all stem from human beings. I am convinced that when we truly connect with that concept, we will understand its dramatic and life-altering impact and the difference we can make as individuals, even in something as big a concept as peace.

In the summer of 2020, I was invited to present the keynote address at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association. Since I had to submit the name of the presentation well before the event itself, I named it “Practical Diversity: The Only Alternative Left.” Of course, it was much too bold a statement and as such was only a working title provided for the organization’s planning purposes. However, the more I worked on my presentation, the more I realized the title was actually the truth. I kept the title. I thought about this once again when I was invited to submit this article on the issue of diversity and peace.

While the presentation for the APA was about the impact of diversity in the psychology industry, the truth is, as odd as it may seem for both, it applies equally well with diversity issues and peace. In order to have peace, we have to do what is advocated in practical diversity. It really is a necessary ingredient. I have watched it work with thousands of people in the past 40 years and I stand in that truth.

## **Background**

Because my prescription of what I came to call “practical diversity” seems so simplistic--naive, even-- I need to provide background to assure you of its credibility and efficacy. I am a lawyer, academic, author, consultant, and speaker whose area of expertise is Employment Law. That is what I left the practice of law to teach, although it did not actually exist at the time. I created the course at the request of the university and that led to co-authoring the textbook that established the discipline in colleges of business at universities across the US and remains the leading text nearly thirty years later.<sup>1</sup> Practical diversity is an outgrowth of Employment Law. Employment Law is primarily based on Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Title VII),<sup>2</sup> which is the U.S. law that took the U.S. from its 246 years of slavery (1619-1865), then 99 years of Jim Crow<sup>3</sup> practice of racial segregation (1865-1964), to (at least on paper) equality (1965, the effective date of the 1964 law, until now and we’re still a work in progress). It teaches business students, future business owners and managers, how avoid unnecessary violations of Title VII and other protective legislation by discriminating against employees on the basis of race, color, religion, gender (including pregnancy, sexual harassment and LGBTQ status), national origin, age, disabilities or genetic information.

Less than a year after moving from the practice of law to the teaching of Employment Law, I began conducting Employment Law seminars offered to the greater community by the Continuing Education division<sup>4</sup> of my university.<sup>5</sup> These seminars were born out of the desperation of it dawning on me that unlike my job as a lawyer, my job as an academic did not pay in the summer when the university was not in session. The seminars proved to be a boon for the university and attendees alike. As one of the most sought-after offerings, it was always full.

Title VII became law in 1964, effective in 1965, but by 1983 when the seminars began, managers were only vaguely aware of its existence and had little idea of what it required or what actions led to liability, and thus, how to prevent it. Violations can result in expensive legal fees and damage awards that can run into millions of dollars as well as embarrassing publicity. Employers from all over the region sent their managers and supervisors to learn about the law and how to avoid violating it.

The more I taught the highly interactive seminars and heard attendees share their workplace experiences and underlying motivations for their actions, the more I could see why their actions resulted in potential violations of the law. I realized that the real missing piece was not them not knowing the law, as much as it was the thoughts in their heads that led them to treat employees in ways that might result in liability. Those underlying thoughts and assumptions about people different from themselves frequently translated into acts that could violate the law. I realized that in order to provide them with the tools they needed to avoid liability, I needed to have them explore what was in their heads by looking at the messages that they had received

growing up about various groups and how they may be using those messages without realizing it in making workplace decisions that might prove problematic.

In order to provide the most welcoming environment for discussing a subject matter that some find sensitive, I decided that rather than go into a session with a prepared agenda of what I would cover, I would come in and ask attendees what questions and issues they had in the workplace that would be covered by the law. I listed the issues they provided on the board. One by one we would go through their issues and thoroughly discuss each during the day's session. By the end of the day, everything I would have put on my agenda had been addressed, but it was done totally by way of addressing the questions employees came into the session with that I had written on the board. Rather than it looking like I had an agenda, the discussion came solely from ideas they provided. As we discussed their issues, we explored why they made the decision they did until we finally reached their underlying assumptions that led to their actions. They were generally totally unaware of this motivation and were appalled that it was even there. They immediately realized their error and because it was never their intent in the first place to discriminate, they quickly saw how to make better decisions. It was a win-win. For instance, a white gentleman about to retire realized he had never connected the fact that his racially segregated town did not even permit Blacks to live there, with how he had mistreated them in the workplace for his entire worklife (his conclusion, not mine). He was stunned--and very sorry--when he realized it.

Since this approach meant my sessions were highly interactive, to a casual observer, our discussions often, may have seemed like they went far afield. What began as a question about a female secretary coming in perfumed and being propositioned by male co-workers, would turn into a discussion about the ideas men hold about women wearing perfume. It surprised every woman in the room when it seemed to be universally understood by the men that if a woman wore perfume, she was doing so in order to be asked to be propositioned by men. I could see by the looks on the women's faces that they were appalled at this notion. Often, especially with the more highly placed women, they tried to stifle their true feelings and remain quiet, but during the break, they would accost me in the bathroom, furious at the things the men had said.

Allowing this free-flow of discussion was never random. It may have seemed fun and engaging, but it was pure learning. I quickly came to realize that while I was a lawyer teaching Employment Law, violating the law was often not about intending to do so. After listening to, and interacting with, the first several hundred attendees, I realized that what was driving the decisions that ended up being problematic and could end up in the organization being sued for large sums of money was not not being aware of the law as much as it was not knowing that the ideas and attitudes they held about issues included in the law were problematic. The male approaching the female and nuzzling her perfumed neck did not think he was being offensive. In fact, quite the opposite. He thought he was being complimentary. So, when the opportunity

presented itself, he reacted the same way he ordinarily would. What attendees came to see was how problematic this could be in a workplace. They also saw how much they had in their heads that only they controlled, that they were not even aware of and once discovered, could quickly be changed. What appeared to be fun, wide-ranging discussions, were actually insightful and comprehensive exchanges of information that allowed employees to examine the ideas in their heads against what the law required and make whatever adjustments were necessary if they were to avoid liability for violation of Title VII.

In avoiding violations of the law by examining how they made decisions that resulted in those violations, they came to a new understanding of how their own personal actions impacted others and what they needed to change in order to have their actions more closely align with what they thought they were doing. For instance, one supervisor, in lauding a new hire who had interned for a year before being offered the job, praised her very highly. He went on and on about how good her performance had been. As the crowning comment, he said to her triumphantly, positive it would show her how much they valued her performance, “You were so good that if you had been a man, I would have paid you 50% more!!” As appalling (and illegal) as this is, I have no doubt that he had no idea that 1) what he had said and done was totally illegal under Title VII, and 2) what he said reflected the fact that he did not value female employees as highly as male employees, and by extension, did not value women as highly as men.

These interactions in Employment Law seminars taught me an entirely new approach to tackling Title VII issues. It proved to be an incredibly insightful basis for examining the way decisions are made in the workplace using a totally different approach that I had never thought about before. I thought it was enough to teach them the law. I had to deal with how they interpreted it based on what was in their individual experience and how that was manifested in the workplace.

As society’s landscape moved from reactive, litigation avoidance-based Employment Law in colleges and universities to the more proactive concept of diversity and inclusion in workplaces and other organizations all over the country, what I had learned from thousands of seminar attendees and Employment Law students became the foundation of my approach to diversity and inclusion issues. Eventually, this would coalesce into Practical Diversity and the idea of taking the concepts of diversity, inclusion, equity and belonging from theory in someone’s head or manifested in a mission statement by an organization, to actual change in how these concepts are practiced when dealing with real people. The theory is useless without the practice. The words sound nice on paper or in an advertisement, but unless people experience what it means in practice by acting it, it is useless. In order to practice it, it is imperative to explore what ideas you are not aware of that are in your head that create the actions you engage in that may not be what you thought they were.<sup>6</sup> Intent versus impact is very real. Nuzzling a

female employee's perfumed neck at work may be intended as a compliment, but the negative impact on her is very real. It is that way with so many of our actions in the world when we don't know or understand who we are dealing with and only rely on messages we have received about them.

Because the workplace is a microcosm of society, it was not a leap to extend the concept of what it is we do to make decisions in the workplace to what it is we do when dealing with others in general. After all, most people use the same ideas they hold about dealing with others in the workplace that they do outside of it. It was not a stretch to see how much of an impact it would make to have what is learned about these issues in the context of the workplace, used outside of the workplace to create a better, more intentional and considerate, less discriminatory society. The societal change from reactive litigation avoidance through Employment Law courses to the broader, underlying proactive concept of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging (DEIB) also meant all sorts of other organizations now understood their organizations should reflect acceptance, equity and inclusion for all as a matter of basic respect. Organizations from athletic groups to religious communities, medical practices to law firms, colleges and universities (student, faculty and staff) to elementary school Parent Teacher Organizations, and others, have seen the value of diversity and inclusion and want training in the DEIB concepts.

It was important to go into this background from the outset because I want readers to understand that my approach is not something I dreamed up and pushed on the public. It is also not a train that I jumped on when I saw that it had become popular. It is what I learned over many years from thousands of employees, supervisors, managers, students and others. Because it is so simple and seemingly simplistic, it can even seem like it would be crazy for a lawyer to bring it up, no less advocate for it. But, it was borne out of what took place in many, many, many sessions I did over the years and has been fine-tuned to address the issues that I saw arising from it.

## **Practical Diversity**

Practical Diversity is what I call the approach I created to have seminar attendees learn to actualize treating others in the workplace (and by extension, the world) better once we realize we have been operating with, often negative, ideas we did not even realize we held. When done correctly, people are startled to learn what they are operating with in their heads but were unaware of. If they are people of good will who did not mean to transgress, they quickly change it. They are much less likely to run into legal trouble in the US for violating the protective laws, or anywhere in the world in dealing with those who we perceive as different from them. Differences often based on stereotyping messages they received growing up that they were not aware of. These differences can run the gamut from one's affect in the personal interaction when

buying a cup of coffee, to the decision to make adverse legislation or even to go to war against a certain group.

In a session, I will list any number of categories for the group to discuss. They generally include gender, race, religion, disabilities, age, sexual orientation, gender identity, ethnicity, socio-economic status, educational status, appearance, including hair, teeth, clothing, glasses, facial hair on men, tattoos, piercings, etc. I ask what messages attendees have received growing up about the category. They begin to think about it for the first time in their lives in a conscious way and are flabbergasted by what they discover. When discussing gender, one highly placed executive was practically overcome at realizing for the first time what his mother had accomplished as a single, working mother raising two sons. He said it gave him a totally new appreciation and respect for working women.

Whites often talk about the negative messages they received growing up about other races---messages they had not consciously thought about until our exercise. One particularly impactful insight came from an older gentleman who had grown up in a rural area known for its extremely negative history with Blacks, yet he said he had received no messages about race growing up. When I asked if he was sure, he said that he was sure he had not received any messages about race because the town he lived in did not permit Blacks to live there. When the audience broke out into laughter at his statement, he quickly realized how powerful a message that, alone, had been. He laughed along with the others at the absurdity of his statement and quickly sobered. He said to the group, "I am about to retire and I feel *awful*. I know that I have hurt so many Black people in my time at work and it was all because of something that ***I did not know was in my head!***"

That sort of quick, blinding insight happens all of the time in practical diversity sessions. The self-reflection, connecting with messages we were unaware of that drive our actions, and immediate remediation is not at all unusual. Years later attendees will tell me the exercise is still with them and they are still using what they learned.

### **Peace begins with the individual**

That is really what practical diversity is all about. It is about discovering and examining our messages we have received growing up about everything that impacts our decisions and where necessary, changing the only thing we have control over--our actions. That is, examining ourselves and our approach to others we perceive as not like us, thinking about how we treat them if it is not in a positive way, why we do so, determining whether it is intentional, realizing and understanding how it results in these these thorny issues leading to lack of peace with others, taking a hard look at where we have work to do, and doing it.

There is only so much the government can do through its policies. In the end, the work of achieving peace, like that of achieving an equitable workplace, must come through individual effort. Those who feel at peace rarely create havoc and unpeaceful conditions for others. The government absolutely has a huge role to play when it comes to peace, but without doing the individual work, it will be meaningless. That is where practical diversity comes in. Keep in mind that the government did what it could to address workplace discrimination when it passed Title VII, yet nearly 20 years later when I began doing Employment Law sessions, people were still operating pretty much as they always had in their workplace interactions.

Even governmental policy is individual responsibility in that someone comes up with an idea about others that treats them differently and ideas may be adopted as policy that are actually crafted into law. It did not happen on its own. An individual or group of individuals did it. It was based on the thoughts in their head about the group to whom the policy is directed. Change that individual's thought and you change the policy that resulted from that thought.

### **No Cost; Total Control; Immediate**

The greatest thing about practical diversity is that it is the one thing we can do that it costs nothing and is totally within our own control. It can begin immediately. It is amazing that it isn't so simple, but yet so effective for those of good will.

Understanding practical diversity begins with understanding that many of the behaviors we may engage in that make people feel like outsiders, leading to conflict, leading to lack of peace may 1) be totally unintentional on the part of the actor, 2) arise from ideas we hold in our heads without even really thinking about them ---much like the men thinking women wear perfume in order to be approached, so they approach them, and 3) may be totally at odds with the way we think we treat people. Think back to the man nuzzling the neck of the perfumed employee. He does not intend to offend her. In fact, he thinks what he is doing is a compliment. It arises from the thought in his head, likely due to societal acculturation, that when women wear perfume it is to attract men, so he operates on that idea by approaching her in that manner, despite the fact that it is the workplace and an inappropriate thing to do. While this is based on a true situation and some may have come to the realization that they can no longer operate this way, (thank goodness!) the important takeaway is how such things work. What is in our heads without us realizing it can translate into actions we don't intend.

This is important to know because nothing magic happens once we step over the workplace door. Everything we have learned and had acculturated in us goes with us. It does not suddenly disappear from our heads when we walk through the door. It has been built up since we were born. It is a part of us. We carry it with us and we operate with it in our heads, often without ever giving it a thought.



Severely restrictive laws have been passed greatly diminishing the lives of entire groups of people, wars have been fought, monuments and great world treasures destroyed, all because of ideas that individuals have held in their heads about others, often without even having a real reason to do so other than doing what has been done. Often those enlisted to wage such destruction have done so without ever even giving the slightest thought about looking past what is being said and thinking for themselves about what their own experience shows them. Did individual Germans seriously believe they experienced from Jews such horrendous treatment in their everyday encounters with them that 6 million of them needed to be sent to gas chambers? Such that it was perfectly acceptable to allow into power and follow without question someone who believed such things? It all began with the thought in an individual's head. The end result was over 10 million Jews, Roma, disabled, non-Aryans, perceived homosexuals, and others killed. This is an idea of treating others differently carried to its harshest result. Ostracism, isolation, imprisonment and eventually death and war.

But in our everyday lives, we experience and enact against others, micro--and sometimes not so micro--versions of this every day. The clerk at the counter who judgmentally disdains the customer's tattoo or piercing and therefore gives them cursory, unfriendly service, the female who does not receive the credit she deserves for an idea she proposed, even the husband who fusses at his wife for some failing because his perception of what a wife should do is based not on the woman he married, but instead, some idea he holds in his head and is applying to his wife (whose mother was totally different) his perceptions about what his mother did as a wife.

After a discussion of practical diversity and an exercise in discovering ideas attendees held about various things that they were not aware of that impacted their decisions, an attendee stated that he was from Africa and had grown up in a town where those born with disabilities were taken to the forest and left to the vagaries of nature. They were deemed unwanted, evil spirits to be banished. Today in the US he was in charge of disabilities for an agency and had never connected this profound, but routine, message he had received as a young child growing up, with the job he held today. He realized in our session how much the messages he had received growing up impacted his job. He was supposed to help the disabled, but never connected why it was he did not feel to do so---for his job! He asked how he could rid himself of these ideas.

Practical diversity allows people to explore messages they have received without realizing it, seeing whether those messages may be causing them to do things they did not realize they were doing, and if so, to do what they need to do to change it. It is entirely personal and fitted to the individual. Only the individual knows what is in his or her head, what their messages have been, how those messages have been impacting the decisions they made and actions they took, and what it is they need to change. It does not prescribe what specific actions an individual must take to rid him/herself of messages that are deemed problematic. I could not tell him what to do to rid

himself of such a deep-seated cultural idea he had about the very group he was responsible for other than some general suggestions.

But the work of discovering what our messages are, how they may unintentionally be the basis for actions we do not intend to be negative, damaging, oppressive or otherwise not in keeping with our values, is extraordinarily helpful in changing behavior. And, of course, it is the foundation for peace at a very basic level.

### **But what about...?**

One of the things that is important to state is that practical diversity has definite limitations. It is intended to be used by people of good will who may be unknowingly engaging in behaviors that lead to lack of peace in some way but do not realize it and do not want to do so. It is manifested in discriminating against others unlike themselves, avoiding making friends with others not like themselves, creating unnecessary and unwarranted division between themselves and those who may be different from them in some way, up to and including breaching the peace in some truly active way such as instigating war. Practical diversity is *not* intended, and will likely have little impact upon, those who are determined to dislike those unlike themselves and refuse to act in a peaceful way.

I do not believe this is the majority of people in the world, regardless of where in the world we are. I believe that most people want to live lives of peace and harmony with virtually everyone. Even those of our friends who like to “stir things up,” don’t generally intend to create wholesale chaos. Most people want peace. They want to be seen, heard, respected, welcomed, valued, believed, cared about, loved. If we begin at this place, there is much to gain by engaging in practical diversity. If, on the other hand, someone---and there are those who do---want strife, misery, lack of peace, they will not be interested in engaging in practical diversity. Thankfully, I believe there are more of those of us of good will than there are those intent on creating havoc rather than peace.

### **Conclusion**

Peace begins in our own hearts and moves out from there. When we are clear about what is in our heads that leads us to do the things we do regarding others, it is easier to govern ourselves accordingly if we realize our actions are not consistent with our values. We do that by examining the messages we have received about various groups, ideas, etc. If peace is a value, we will rid ourselves of ideas that underlie our actions that do not lead to peace with others. We will not automatically think of it as “being weak,” or “giving in.” In reality, it is quite the opposite. We are living our *own* values, not responding to those of others. The truth is, ultimately we can only control ourselves. What others do is not up to us. However, others watch what we

do and take cues from us. If we radiate peace, others will be impacted. It may not be immediate, but we are human, so influence happens.

I understand that this concept may sound naive. I would think so too---- if I had not seen what has happened with thousands of people over decades of doing this work. Learning what is in your head that you didn't realize was there and doing what you can to change your actions accordingly is the only real thing we have left that is in our total control, that can lead to peace. If a reasonable number of us simply do the work of figuring out what ideas we have about various groups and other factors relating to how we treat others, we would have much more likelihood of peace. This is totally within the control of each us. Undertaking the work ourselves and making the needed adjustments is much preferable to a leader imposing violence, threats, punishment or financial incentives (rare) to impose their will.

This also sounds naive in the sense that it seems impossible to get everyone on the same page about it. I am not sure that everyone has always agreed about anything in existence, so that is not surprising. Recent events surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic have shown us that that we cannot even agree on what we otherwise would have seemed to have settled long ago and taken for granted: that the wearing of face masks helps lessen the spread of viruses---which do not care whether you believe in them or not. So, it is not likely that there would be agreement about the practical diversity approach. That should not stop us. Again, we can only control ourselves.

However, I stand in my truth. I have seen the difference it makes in people's lives.

Also, what is the alternative? All this asks us to do for our part in peace is to examine ourselves for things that may underlie ways in which we may unintentionally not be contributing to peace and do what we can to fix it. What is the alternative? Someone in power forcing us into peace? Is this really what we want?

It is said that the definition of "crazy" is doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result. If we can read a 50-year-old account of what separates us from peace so much that we must oppose it and still be opposing those very same things 50 years later, something is wrong. We are doing the same things over and over and expecting a different result. Why not try practical diversity? Again, it is free and you need no tools or the participation of anyone else in order to do it. You can begin immediately. Discover what messages you may have taken in without even realizing it, about things that may separate you from peace and once you realize them, do what it is you need to do to correct it.

After all, there is an age-old adage that says, "Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me." Practical diversity simply helps us do that.

**Dawn D. Bennett-Alexander** is an emerita associate professor of Employment Law and Legal Studies at the University of Georgia's Terry College of Business in the US and founder of Practical Diversity LLC, consulting on issues of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion & Belonging. A lawyer, academic and consultant whose specialty is employment discrimination, diversity and Inclusion, she has been dealing with diversity issues since 1982 and co-authors the leading Employment Law textbook in the US that created the discipline. Recipient of over 60 awards and recognitions, upon her retirement in February 2021, in honor of her work in Diversity & Inclusion, the University of Georgia established the endowed Dawn D. Bennett-Alexander Inclusive Community Award presented annually to a faculty member exhibiting a significant commitment to Diversity and Inclusion inside and outside the classroom. The mother of 3 daughters and two grandchildren, she dedicates all of her work to them and her Ancestors. Her life motto and the thought that guides all of her work to have society accept those it may think of as different in some way: It's ALL about LOVE...