

Ask the White Guy: Can a White Man Speak With Authority on Diversity?

BY LUKE VISCONTI

Q Upon returning to my office, reenergized by the DiversityInc event, I shared the information you addressed during your talk when you spoke about DiversityInc and mentioned your Ask the White Guy feature. When mentioning your feature to a group of white female colleagues, one responded by saying, What does he (a white guy) have to do with diversity? How does he create something like DiversityInc and how could he possibly speak with authority about diversity?

A I created DiversityInc as a consequence of having my consciousness raised by a friend, Tony Cato—at the time, a fellow Naval Aviator. He helped me start the thought process that led me to where I am today. He didn't have an agenda; we were simply swapping stories as we worked together, a consequence of his volunteering to help me when I was assigned to be the Minority Officer Recruiter in Naval Recruiting District New Jersey. Tony is not a go-along-to-get-along guy; he's tough, disciplined and very smart. He told me stories of being denied fair treatment because he's Black. It took me a while to understand how profound those stories are, but it did sink in eventually. I learned to share his indignation at poor treatment meted out as a result of discrimination—and the damage it does to our country.

White men are a part of diversity and there is a great deal of diversity among white men. I recently spoke to a group of 900 police and fire chiefs in Oregon—97 percent white men. I made the point that they might not think they have diversity as they sit around the firehouse or police station and see nothing but white men. But some of those white men grew up in single-parent households, some grew up in large families, some went to college on athletic scholarships, some worked their way through—and some didn't go at all. Some have a gay brother, some are gay themselves (and perhaps closeted). I told the chiefs that they could utilize the diversity they already have to gain new perspective on problems and in doing so would better fulfill their missions: to save lives. My point is that it is not skin color, gender or orientation that makes one

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“good at” managing diversity, but mindset.

This mindset for majority-culture people requires an epiphany or an evolution in thinking that brings one to understand the extent of the discrimination around all of us that is perpetrated mostly by the majority culture.

Anyone can become “authoritative” about diversity. Nobody comes to the table that way. How you get there, in my opinion, starts with understanding history. I've gained a lot of perspective by reading books like Beverly Tatum's *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria*, Iris Chang's *The Chinese in America*, Isabel Wilkerson's *The Warmth of Other Suns*, Douglas Blackmon's *Slavery By Another Name*, Ira Katznelson's *When Affirmative Action Was White* and Taylor Branch's trilogy on the civil-rights era.



Luke Visconti's Ask the White Guy column is a top draw on DiversityInc.com. Visconti, the founder and CEO of DiversityInc, is a nationally recognized leader in diversity management. In his popular column, readers who ask Visconti tough questions about race/culture, religion, gender, sexual orientation, disability and age can expect smart, direct and disarmingly frank answers.

I will note that people who are not in the majority culture must deal with the majority culture as they try to retain their own identity, but those in the majority culture do not really have to deal with anything BUT the majority culture (doesn't make it right, but this is the reality). In this country, the majority culture is defined as white, male, heterosexual, Christian and not having an ADA-defined disability. But just because a person in the majority culture starts out with a much wider “blind spot” than people not in the majority culture doesn't mean it's impossible for white men to become open advocates for diversity and inclusion. It also doesn't mean that a Black woman (for example) comes with an automatic Ph.D. in diversity management (it's just a lot easier for the Black woman to see the problem in the first place). We must all come to the realization that, as a reader put it nicely, “I am not different from you, I am different like you.”