

# Do Unto Others...

BY MIKE SUTTON

For years I've been involved in management and as a result, have dealt with employee issues pertaining to sex, race and discrimination in the workplace. Regardless of whether these problems seemed serious or bordered on the absurd, I always tried to take them on with "due diligence" — the intent being to put myself into someone else's shoes to better understand the issue(s). Of course, as a white male, it's somewhat difficult to imagine being a woman or a member of a minority race, but I certainly try to see things from the perspective of others. In fact, I even deluded myself into thinking I'd been successful at it ... until the other day.

When I was growing up in East Texas in the '50s, I had a buzz cut that kept me cool and made hygiene a lot easier. It only took the coiffeur — named Bubba — about two minutes to shear me for four bits, or a half-bushel of my Uncle Bobby's tomatoes. I remember thinking at the time that going to Bubba was really lavish compared to my grandmother cutting my hair with a mixing bowl and scissors.

Times have definitely changed. Today, a lady named Ellana cuts my hair at the Cynia European Day Spa. It would easily take half a bale of Uncle Bobby's cotton (in 1950's dollars) to pay for Ellana's talents, if the folks at the European Day Spa were willing to "trade" for service, which I highly doubt. However, the other day, I got a lot more for my money than just being coifed. I got an education.

In the unisex age, you can find men in a lot of venues that were previously the exclusive domain of women, such as hair salons. Occasionally, you will even see a brave soul, who is clearly comfortable with his masculinity, getting a pedicure and/or a facial. And, for some time now, I've been frequenting places that cut both men's and women's hair. Cynia though, seems to have

a lot of women customers and, comparatively speaking, not many men, which was the cause of my recent enlightenment.

I arrived for my appointment with Ellana, let the receptionist know I was there and then stood in a corner trying to blend in with a couple of potted plants. Why? Because the waiting area was filled with women who looked as if they were all models waiting for a photo shoot to start.

There I was, in jeans and a polo shirt, looking like I'd just tumbled off an overloaded poultry truck.

After a few minutes, that seemed to drag by like a seminar on tax law definitions, I was told that Ellana was ready for me. I walked down a narrow hall, past more women who were getting their hair washed and finally got to the back of the spa. There, all of the chairs I could see, except the one I was about to get into, had women in them and were attended by women.

In that mere spit of time, I got a very brief lesson on what it's like to be an outsider. Although I had previously claimed to "understand" what someone else was feeling or going through, I now know that I hadn't had even a clue.

As I took my seat, I had a much better appreciation of what it must feel like to be a woman entering a "good-old-boy" network. Or, how a black person might feel in an all white environment. Or, how someone in a wheelchair feels requesting or using special equipment in society or the workplace.

I'd never really felt like an "outsider" in the same way that I did that day and, though I still can't claim a true understanding of what it's like to be part of a minority in any of the above situations, I'm a little closer than I was to start with.

This experience also caused me to think about what it must be like to be in that situation in the workplace. Not only do these

individuals have the pressure to perform their individual duties and assignments, but there's also the added strain of doing it in an arena in which their comfort level may not always be positive.

At any rate, not only did I get a great haircut, but I also got to reexamine, on a very small scale, many of the employee issues that had been presented to me in the past. Now, let me emphasize again that I'm not trying to imply that I've come even close to really knowing what it's like to be a woman or member of a minority group in any environment. After all, I only got 30 minutes of exposure to a little discomfort and then I got to leave — an option not available to women and minorities, particularly in the workplace.

I am, however, in a slightly better position to say "I can imagine how you feel," when talking to others. I also have a deeper appreciation for my grandmother's advice about dealing with people — "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

One final thought: Any number of social and workplace "diversity" situations exist today. If your sex, race or religion constitutes the majority — particularly if you are in a leadership role — think about what it might feel like to be an "outsider" the next time someone "different" joins your staff. 

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**Mike Sutton consults and speaks on management-related issues such as project management, personnel, vendor and customer relations, and technical support. He is president of Washington Systems Consulting, Inc. (WSC) and can be reached at [www.wscinc.com](http://www.wscinc.com) or (800) 825-5972.**

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