



3. THREE

Concern of Actually Speaking About Culture, Race, Religion, etc. for Fear This Will Be Seen as Bigoted

There are many workplace challenges facing Canadians. From observations while working in the field of workplace and community human rights over many years, Stephen Hammond has chosen what he considers the top 10. This video transcript is intended to start a dialogue. If you feel it may help your workplace or your association, please use it. Print out the text, have a discussion, and try to come to resolutions that can be helpful to your group. The best way to deal with workplace challenges is to talk about them in a respectful way. If you would like to access the video that goes with the transcript, it can be purchased at HumanRightsTrainingStore.com

Canada is home to people from all over the world. We come from different cultures, and religions (or none at all) and we have various colours of skin. Instead of being afraid to discuss these differences, find sensible ways when and how these differences can be addressed.

Here is some home work for you. When someone is talking about another person's ethnicity, let's say "Chinese" or "Aboriginal" or "Black" see if this person lowers her voice ever so slightly. You may also find this is being done when the word "Gay" or "Lesbian" is used. Strangely enough, you won't usually find a person lowering his voice when he says "Scottish" or "Dutch" (although if you do, let me know).

This is something I discovered years ago and every once in a while I have a little fun with it. When a person does that, I lower my voice and ask why she did that. "Is it part of some secret society?" I don't do it to humiliate anyone and so far no one has told me they feel any humiliation. But it usually leads to a great conversation about what they mean when they lower their voice.

We're afraid of using words to describe people – and yet the people we are talking about, they know full well that this describes them. If a person is Chinese, or Chinese-Canadian, or of

THREE

Chinese descent, this is not a surprise to them. They are well aware that they have all or some aspects of Chinese in them.

So why lower the voice? My guess is, the words are being used in a way that is not flattering, or may be seen as bigoted. Perhaps we're worried that if we make reference to a person being Jewish, another person overhearing might take it out of context and think, "why is that person speaking about Jewish people?"

If in fact you are saying less than flattering things about a person and you attribute it to a characteristic about them (their heritage, religion, colour of skin, etc.) then you're likely feeding into stereotypes and if that is the case, I understand why you'd want to lower your voice. You don't want to get caught. I think we know the lesson here – stop making stereotypical statements about people. But that's not my point here.

For those other times, we are often afraid that we aren't allowed to speak about these things. As language evolves, as we get more comfortable with a multicultural Canada, as we try to bridge the gap between various people, I understand that there will be sensitivities. Sometimes someone will take our comments out of context or an über sensitive person won't tolerate any comment of any kind. But most of the time, we should not feel uncomfortable to talk about aspects of a person's life, if it's relevant.

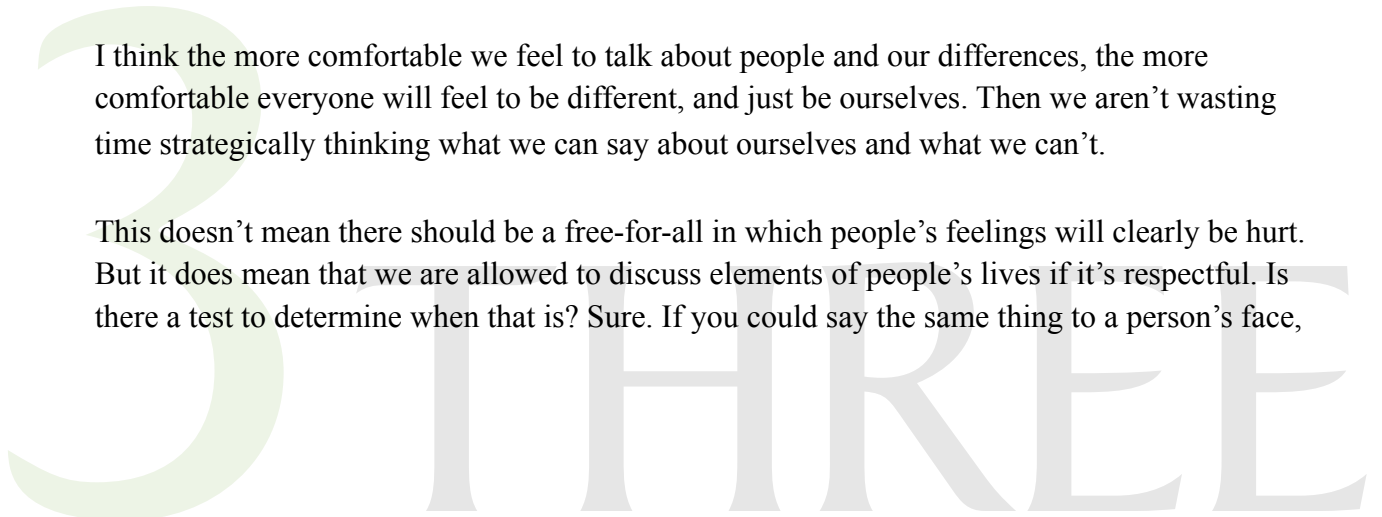
"Yusuf is Muslim and he's always wanted to make the pilgrimage to Mecca. I think he's hoping to go next year."

"Susan was telling me that she finds it interesting to be 4th generation Canadian and Chinese. She feels completely Canadian and yet people often ask her where she was born."

"On the weekend I was at Tom's wedding. It was my first gay wedding and I loved some of the differences from other weddings I've been to."

I think the more comfortable we feel to talk about people and our differences, the more comfortable everyone will feel to be different, and just be ourselves. Then we aren't wasting time strategically thinking what we can say about ourselves and what we can't.

This doesn't mean there should be a free-for-all in which people's feelings will clearly be hurt. But it does mean that we are allowed to discuss elements of people's lives if it's respectful. Is there a test to determine when that is? Sure. If you could say the same thing to a person's face,



then it's respectful. There's a balance, as there is with most things in life, and most of us are capable of figuring that out.

So the next time you find yourself lowering your voice to say something, if you're not in a theatre while the movie's on, then you may ask yourself why you're doing it.

What do you think?

For more information contact:

Stephen Hammond

501-1049 Chilco Street Vancouver, British Columbia V6G 2R7

Phone: 866-685-8338 or 604-685-8338 Fax: 604-685-9338

Email: Stephen@StephenHammond.ca

Web: www.stephenhammond.ca

Blog: www.humanrightseachday.com

eStore: www.humanrightstrainingstore.com

Twitter: <http://twitter.com/rightstoday>

