



Warning signs on the road to destruction

by Steve Hanamura

I was one of 30 or 40 performers preparing to do an Easter drama at our church. The director was helping us as we practiced the crucifixion scene where we were to kill Jesus. To do that, we had to become an angry crowd.

We were all in place and began to shout, "Crucify him! Crucify him! Crucify him!"

"Louder," the director shouted, "louder." Then she stopped us and said, "Do it again, only this time get more hostile. Say it like you mean it. I want you to chant in unison." She also directed a few individuals to holler, "Barabas," "Kill that man!" and "He doesn't deserve to live!"

We began again. "Crucify him! Crucify him! Crucify him!" All the while, the director continued to encourage us to become more and more hostile. We became so authentic that a five-year-old boy who had come to practice with his mom crouched down behind one of the pews in sheer terror.

What I discovered was that the more we got into it, the more it felt real. "Wow," I thought to myself, "I am really scared - scared of my own reactions." I felt as though I was almost losing control of myself. I could definitely have the capability to hate and to kill.

There were moments during that scene when I did want to kill Jesus. As the people who were playing the soldiers carried Jesus out of the building on the cross, I was shocked at how quickly I could generate such feelings.

Long before the tragedy of September 11, I had been thinking about how hate manifests itself both in our places of work as well as in our communities. It shows up in different forms in our

communities, such as school shootings, the Oklahoma City bombing, or race rioting.

Acts of hate may surface in the workplace in more subtle ways, such as sabotaging workplace initiatives, withholding information and misusing data. What motivates these acts?

I have been thinking about possible root causes for such behaviors. I believe the root causes are: exclusion, lack of acknowledgment, not being treated as a person of value, and no control over matters that affect them personally.

Although I am not an expert on terrorism, there are some patterns that are related to diversity that we as practitioners, leaders and managers can learn from to help us do our jobs better. The events of September 11 have motivated me to put these thoughts on paper.

Many people are asking how or why anyone could do what we saw on September 11. What I learned during the church rehearsal is that all of us, if pushed into a corner, are capable of committing acts of hate. This led me to examine some of the dynamics that might contribute to how and why someone may eventually respond in such despicable ways.

In our work with both youth in the schools and men and women in the workplace we have observed that when certain emotions are left untended, they can result in hateful behavior.

There are a series of emotions that individuals may go through before conducting acts of violence. I call them the Seven Steps to Hate:

Irritation - When something happens or someone makes a comment

that irritates us, we tend to brush it aside or disregard it. The likelihood of the recurrence of the situation is not very high so we are able to let go of it and dismiss it.

Frustration - Persistent irritations lead to frustration. It becomes more difficult to dismiss the irritant (now a frustration). The frustration can become magnified by other factors in life. At this point it is a good idea to address the frustration before it develops and grows into the next level of disturbance: anger.

Anger - Unresolved frustrations can lead to anger. In this phase individuals hope and expect that behaviors will change thereby making it possible for the feelings of anger to diminish. Anger is exhibited in several different ways:

- Withdrawal - Shutting down and going within self
- Passive-aggressive - Emotions held inside while actions express discontent (i.e. pot shots, sarcastic remarks, withholding important information)
- Outbursts - Vocal expression (often loud) of displeasure, sometimes venting, sometimes demanding.

Rage - Rage is driven by the individual's perceived loss of control. The individual's coping strategies are worn thin and no longer function normally. Verbal outbursts and property or personal damage can occur.

Agitation - If things do not change to the person's satisfaction, feelings of agitation may set in. The individual experiences difficulty in handling life's events and circumstances. There is a low level of tolerance for conflict. They may or may not have moved into

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resignation. They are confused and upset. During this time the individual may not sleep or eat very well, which only exacerbates the problem. Individuals may become edgy and snap at others for seemingly any and every little thing. At a deep level it appears they still care.

(It should be noted that the emotions of agitation and rage might come in a different sequence depending on the person and the nature of the circumstances that are causing these difficulties. If someone commits acts of violence and also has some mental challenges, their reasons for agitation are somewhat different than the person who is in rage or anger due to events or situations that bother them.)

Numbness – At this point the individual becomes numb to the society's or group's values, and therefore begins not to care about issues of right or wrong. However, it is possible they are not numb to their own feelings of being damaged or violated. They begin to develop strategies to get back at others. They become calculative in their thoughts and begin making short and/or long term plans to seek revenge on the perceived perpetrator of injustice. This stage may explain the state of mind of some youth. Once, some police officers asked me, "How can we break through working with youth who have no conscience? They don't care about property and rights of others. They just like to destroy."

Hate – When the numbness goes away, hate evidences itself through acts of violence towards others. It may result in injury and/or killing of people. It is important to remember that initially not all acts of hate result in physical killing.

It can show up as poisonous behaviors within a community or work group that result in destructive relationships or the inability to accomplish goals. What is important is that this last stage is clearly one of destruction.

What we can do

When we are in a position of leadership, change management, diversity, or management, it is important to develop an understanding of how and why people eventually reach the point of destruction. I think we can narrow it down to four possible reasons why some people go down this road:

- The need to be included
- The need to be heard and understood
- The need to be validated for what they do, who they are, and what they believe
- The need to address issues of power and control on matters that affect them personally, or as a group.

First, we cannot ignore the warning signs that lead to hate. We must pay attention to the emotional patterns much earlier in the process. And we must educate and guide leaders to recognize and not ignore the signs as well. Recognition must be followed by action.

Second, work on your ability to listen to what others are telling you. One fatal mistake most of us make is that we try to "understand" what the person is telling us before we "act" upon it. What people need first is not our understanding, but a listening ear. We must validate that what they are saying to us is true for them, even if we don't get it.

An example of this is when well-meaning Caucasians will say something

like, "I don't see race or color, I just see people." Then a person of color says, "But color and race is a part of who I am." Instead of validating what the person of color just said about how race and color are important, we tend to defend our own positions, which consequently creates a communications gap between the two groups.

The person of color feels invalidated; she may shut down and/or go away. The Caucasian individual is puzzled and doesn't know what to make of the situation, and may also back away.

Third, what we as leaders and diversity practitioners can do is work from a position of finding and creating commonness while still acknowledging that people are different.

Commonness simply means going through things or experiences or finding similar ways that motivate or unite us. Examples of commonness may include the need to be successful, the desire for freedom of choice, having feelings of love, sorrow, anger, etc.

Problems begin to surface when people from different cultures fail to connect or communicate with each other. If people feel validated, included, and safe, you may be amazed at their ability to set points of disagreement aside and work collaboratively with others.

Fourth, to maintain a common focus we must be "Difference Makers":

- Be a door opener; help someone reach a level that they have never gotten to before.
- Believe in others when they do not

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believe in themselves.

- Speak up when you see injustices occur. Today, we must speak up to alleviate hateful responses to innocent bystanders like Moslems or Arab Americans.
- Treat individuals as though they are significant and people of value.
- Help them succeed.
- Keep them safe.

The work we have before us must be taken out of our boardrooms and into our communities at large. It all starts by taking the first step – being responsive to what others experience emotionally. People do not have to go down the road to destruction; we must care that they don't.

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