

Stat Watch



DAILY STAT

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HOW INCENTIVES CAN DEMOTIVATE EMPLOYEES

When a commercial laundry implemented a program aimed at reducing workers' tardiness, it ended up decreasing productivity by 1.4% and costing the company nearly \$1,500 a month, according to a study conducted by **Ian Larkin**, of Harvard Business School, and **Lamar Pierce** and **Timothy Gubler**, of Olin Business School. By entering employees with perfect attendance in drawings for gift cards, the researchers say, the laundry may have squelched already-punctual workers' intrinsic motivation to behave well and encouraged other employees to game the system.



DIVERSITY by Michael I. Norton and Evan P. Apfelbaum

The Costs of Racial “Color Blindness”

It's a natural tendency, proven time and again in research: When you see a new person, one of the first things you notice is his or her race. In business life, however, we typically pretend we *don't* notice—a behavior that's called “color blindness”—because we want to reduce our odds of exhibiting prejudice or engaging in discrimination, or of seeming to do either.

Our research, conducted with our colleague Sam Sommers, of Tufts University, shows that there are drawbacks to the color-blind approach. In a series of experiments, we found that when people avoided referring to race in situations that cried out for a mention of it, other people perceived them as *more* racially biased than if they'd brought the subject up.

We asked 30 white adult participants to play the role of the questioner in a version of the child's game Guess Who? Each was paired with a partner (some partners were white, some black) who was assigned a target face from a sheet containing photos of 32 faces. The participants were told to ask their partners yes or no questions (“Does the person have a mustache?” “Does the person have blue eyes?”) to try to identify the target face, aiming to do so with as



GUESS WHO?

The task: Participants in a study were instructed to identify the face their partners had in mind by asking their partners as few yes-or-no questions as possible.

The best strategy: Because half of the people pictured are black and half are white, asking about race would immediately cut the pool in half.

The problem: People are hesitant to talk about race. The features below were typically asked about earlier than race was.

1. Does the person have brown eyes?
2. Does the person have short hair?
3. Is the person wearing earrings?
4. Does the person have bushy eyebrows?
5. Does the person have dimples?
6. Are the person's teeth visible?

few questions as possible. Half the faces on each sheet were white, and half were black. Obviously, one of the fastest ways to zero in on the target would be to ask about race—the answer would eliminate half the field. But the questioners tended to shy away from that strategy, particularly when their partners were black: For example,

just 57% of those who played with a white partner, and 21% of those who played with a black partner, used the word “black” or “African-American” in a question. And the people who did looked uncomfortable and anxious.

After the exercise, we asked a different group (all white) to evaluate the questioners' performance. The results were striking: These outside observers tended to perceive questioners who had ignored race as being more biased than those who had asked about it.

In another experiment, we asked white participants of various ages to play the game, again taking the role of questioner. We observed that avoiding race as an identifier appears to be a learned behavior: Although many participants under 10 asked about race, those over 10 generally didn't.

Rather than avoiding race, smart companies deal with it head-on—and they recognize that “embracing diversity” means recognizing *all* races, including the majority one, to avoid showing preference or creating a backlash. For example, Time Warner's annual diversity summit isn't just for people of color (or women)—it's populated by white males, too. Talking about race can feel awkward, but over time more companies will discover that doing so is usually better than pretending it doesn't exist. ♡

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