I Think, Therefore I am; I Think I am, Therefore I am What I Think: What This Means for 21st Century Business

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, an increasing number of people are defining themselves in terms of mental, rather than physical, reality. This can lead to interpersonal conflict and legal issues that have already impacted the business world. This article examines some of the problems that have arisen from this dichotomy between what is physically and mentally “real” and suggests how businesses might handle potential problems of this type in the future.

In 2016 the AACSB (Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business), the organization which accredits business schools worldwide, sent out a survey to academicians. A portion of the survey asked for demographic information about the respondents, a normal procedure in many such questionnaires. However, the way the demographic information was phrased varied significantly. Rather than simply asking for the respondent’s gender, the survey inquired: “As what gender do you identify?” This was followed up with a question on the respondent’s race/ethnicity, again phrased in a non-traditional manner: “As what race or ethnicity do you identify?” Thus, the survey was asking the respondent to label themselves per what they thought they were, rather than what they physically were. Of course, depending on the person answering the survey, the response to these questions might well be the same whether asked in either manner (“What is your gender” or “As what gender do you identify?”). However, the AACSB survey is just one example of how, possibly for the first time in human history, people are being allowed to define themselves not in terms of physical reality but, rather, mental reality. Or, in other words, people can define themselves not by what they are but who they think they are.

An interesting example of this “Brave New Reality” was provided by Rachel Dolezal who, as President of the Spokane, Washington NAACP, who presented herself as a member of the black community until she was “outed” by her parents as being Caucasian, specifically German and Czech. This did not sit well with those individuals who believe that you are what you are, not what you think you are. Writing in Ebony, Britni Danielle observed: “Like some sort of cultural fungus, former NAACP Spokane, Wash. President-turned-outed-White-woman Rachel Dolezal just won’t go away. We just heard from the new mom when she hit the publicity trail to (again) talk about pretending to be a Black woman…making it clear she was still clinging to the notion that she was Black solely because she identifies as such. This, even though she isn’t Black at all. And by ‘not at all’ I mean not even one drop rule black.” (1)

An example of how the disconnect between physical and mental reality can have serious business consequences occurred at Big Box retailer Target when it decided to go with gender neutral bathrooms in its thousands of stores. In other words, if a man felt uncomfortable going in a men’s room and identified himself as a woman, he could feel free to use the female rest room. This policy was met with staunch
resistance by some Target customers who, like one Maryland woman, complained: “I don’t want men who think they are women in my bathrooms.” Petitions were circulated opposing Target’s new bathroom policy, and although the corporate CEO stood by the Company’s decision it was announced that Target would be spending $20 million to install single-use bathrooms in their stores. Also of interest: Target first announced their new bathroom policy on April 19. By May 12, their stock had dropped from $83.98 to $75.70 on May 12 (an approximate loss of 4.5 billion dollars in stock value).

What can one learn from circumstances where mental reality replaces physical reality as the criterion for “doing business?” Certainly, there will be turmoil and consequences as society struggles to define what is and what isn’t reality. If the pendulum swings in favor of individuals defining themselves by what they think they are, rather than what they biologically are, a human resource headache of major proportion could ensue. What of the person who thinks they are handicapped and demands special parking and office accommodations? Or the individual who thinks they are thirty but are physically 75. When a person can be whatever they think they are, the possibilities for the collision between reality and illusion are limitless.

The best way for businesses to be prepared for the issues that will arise from this clash of physical reality and mental reality is to anticipate the scenarios that could arise, and then have a policy in place that will best serve the needs of its shareholders, clients and employees.

REFERENCES

Stanton, G. Following Trans Bathroom Policy, Target’s Sales Tank. The Federalist, September 26, (2016).