

Size—The Other Diversity

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Until a few years ago, I was determined that the primary focus of my diversity work would concentrate in traditional areas of social justice such as race, class and gender. Like other diversity practitioners, my initial belief was that I could make the greatest impact by advocating on behalf of traditionally underrepresented identity groups such as people of color, women and persons with disabilities. However, while certainly advocacy on behalf of the aforementioned is extremely important, I found myself compelled to join a select alliance of diversity professionals who were contributing to an important body of relatively new research and scholarship in the area of size and body image acceptance, particularly within the workplace.

Admittedly, intentional workplace conversations about body image can be extremely difficult. In fact, research has shown that most employers, male and female, believe that employee performance is directly related to appearance. That is, most operate around the premise that employees who meet traditional standards of beauty and grace are more qualified than those who do not meet such standards. In fact, recent research findings reflect that women of size or those considered overweight earn at least 12 percent less than their equally qualified more thin female counterparts. Thus, rather than intelligence, training and skills, traditional standards of attractiveness continue to be validated in the workplace. Interestingly, most women consider their own appearance and the appearance of other females as the most reliable measure of success. Unfortunately, it is workplace discrimination itself that is feeding this body image frenzy and is leading to such behaviors as organized dieting and appearance-based hiring and firing practices. Although these ideals may seem petty to some, in her groundbreaking book, *Women Afraid to Eat: Breaking Free in Today's Weight Obsessed World*, Frances M. Berg states that "having the right figure is important for women in getting and keeping a good job in most of the business world" (Berg, 2000).

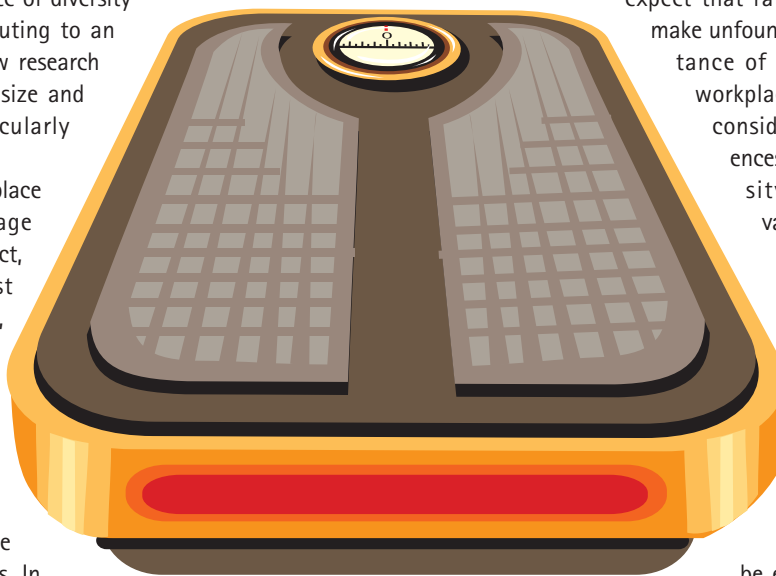
Where obesity in the workplace is concerned, there is overwhelming indication that society harbors a deep resentment of employees of size—

much of which can be directly linked to hiring, termination and promoting practices. The unfortunate result has been the marginalization of many extremely talented and competent individuals who, due solely to their appearance, are virtually overlooked for positions and roles that will give them opportunities to function as full participants within the organization.

Interestingly, 65 percent of the American population is considered either obese or overweight. Given these alarming statistics, one would expect that rather than stigmatize, alienate or make unfounded assumptions about the importance of including people of size in the workplace, it would be more realistic to consider a full range of ideas, experiences, and identities, including a diversity of body images, as equally valuable. However, the truth of the matter is that, on a daily basis, people are affected by size discrimination in subtle and not so subtle ways.

While there is a well documented history of all forms of workplace discrimination, for many "fat" persons employed in a size hostile workplace the unfortunate choice is to be either employed or unemployed or comfortable or uncomfortable...no alternatives. The good news is that more and more employers are beginning to transform their work environments from size hostile to size friendly. Many are becoming keenly aware that the workplace is not a vacuum but rather reflects mainstream society. Therefore, employing, mentoring and advancing people of size are becoming standard and routine practice. For example, while it is certainly acceptable for companies to offer strategic initiatives to encourage employee health, rather than viewing health as simply weight loss and weight reduction, companies are now embracing plans that reflect health at every size. In fact, the following simple questionnaire can illustrate how simple yet sensitive these important matters can be handled.

- Does your organization sponsor or support weight loss contests between departments?
- Are employee shirts or attire purchased in four primary sizes (s, m, l, or xl)?



- Do you require or encourage employees to wear pedometers?
- Do you have chairs with arms in all workstations, boardrooms, general meeting rooms, and guest seating areas?
- Are the majority of your employees that have high exposure to customers, of small stature and weight?

If you answered yes to any of the above questions, perhaps it's time that your organization begins the process of learning more about size acceptance and health at every size. However, keep in mind that this mini-inventory is not intended to be a full evaluation of the experiences of the employees within your care. It is a good starting point where one can begin to generate new and healthier practices within an organization.

There is perhaps nothing more personally and professionally rewarding than knowing that others and I contribute to furthering equality within the workplace. There is still much work to do, but the exciting news is that clinical studies and very recent research has proven that it is not obesity itself that is negatively affecting profits and success within the workplace, but rather America's obsession with obesity that is the problem. Professor of law Paul Campos, nationally recognized expert on America's war on fat states in his recent book, *The Obesity Myth: Why America's Obsession with Weight is Hazardous to Your Health*, "...even so there is no reason why there shouldn't be tens of millions of healthy, happy people of more than average weight in America, as there no doubt would be in a culture that maintained a rational attitude toward the fact that people will always come in all shapes and sizes, whether they live healthy lives or not" (Campos, 2004).

A Case Study on the Topic:

While awareness that size discrimination exists, this article in no way intends to encourage stereotypes or generalizations about all people of size. Like other forms of discrimination, there are always exceptions or those who do not identify with issues that pertain to an identity group to which they may belong. Before deciding to take a stroll around the workplace to find people of size to survey about their personal workplace experiences and opinions, please consider the following: Most people who suffer from negative body image and poor self-esteem are not necessarily visible to the naked eye. In fact, vast majorities of people, of all sizes, have to some degree negative body image issues. It is almost impossible to determine exactly who is likely to feel targeted. Society is increasingly becoming fat phobic so most people are either experiencing an ongoing battle with their weight or working overtime to maintain incredibly high and unrealistic standards of body image.

In today's world, it is not uncommon for a 125 pound, 5'9" woman, who by all appearances is physically fit, to feel just as inadequate and as self-conscious about her body as would a 325 pound, 5'9" woman. Interestingly, both can suffer from low self-esteem and low self-worth because media messages consistently convey to women that they are to aggressively pursue thinness at any cost. If not, they risk facing rejection and alienation for their failure to remain or to become thin, worthy and "attractive". Unfortunately, the workplace offers no relief for these expectations and is therefore no exception. For many, body-bashing techniques are deeply internalized from childhood and carried into adulthood, including into the workplace. To further illustrate this point, please take a sneak peak into the life of *Felice (not her real name):

In order to get an early start on her day, Felice awakes at 5:00 a.m.

She realizes that there won't be many people in the gym at that hour who will witness her working out, so she stumbles down to the apartment's weight room for an hour-long workout routine. Although in her view working out hasn't made much impact on her long-held goal to lose weight, she continues to hammer away because she is convinced that others are well aware that she is crippled by struggles with her weight. While showering, she uses cellulite rub and extra hot water in an attempt to melt away a few pounds, a weight-loss tip that she found in a weight-loss magazine.

Later, Felice sits down for a light breakfast. She's been thinking about breakfast all night—there are only a few choices because if she eats the "bad food" she'll beat herself up about it all day long. It takes Felice at least 20 minutes to decide that she really wants the bagel and cream cheese. However, she knows the brutal consequences of straying from her diet. She eventually decides to have one very small bowl of raisin bran and a banana. On her way out of the kitchen she notices day old, chocolate chip muffins on the counter. "Just one won't hurt," she thinks to herself so she eats the muffin while deciding what to wear to work. Afterwards, she murmurs to herself, "I feel fat" while searching through mountains of clothes to find something to wear that will appear slimming. She is scheduled to make a presentation to her sales team so she wants to come across as polished and professional.

Felice changes clothes at least eight times, creating mountain number three on the chair beside her bed. After all, it is Wednesday and her daily ritual of searching for clothes that cover is routine. She finally decides to wear black pants with a black jacket to cover her hips and a black blouse to create the desperately desired slimming effect—the choice was easy. Felice has purchased over 50 percent of her wardrobe in black specifically for that reason.

Off to work, Felice wants to be very early so that she doesn't have to walk past the crowd that often gathers at the coffee pot. To her astonishment, her morning walk through usually includes comments about her pretty face and how well dressed and poised she usually is. Felice sits at her desk and begins the day's work. She is considered an excellent employee and is hoping to be the selected candidate for the next promotion. Lunchtime is coming up shortly. Felice has been thinking about food all day because, although by lunchtime she is ravenous, she never wants anyone to see what she's eating for fear that they will comment on her selection. She knows the unspoken workplace rules though... if she simply chooses a salad with light dressing and bottled water, everyone will continue to admire her and she'll continue to be well liked.

However, the truth of the matter is that Felice hates salads. Although she eats them merely to soothe the nagging sense of self-consciousness, today she prefers to have stir-fry but determines that it contains too many calories. So, as per usual, she opts for the salad. Felice's stress level rises particularly at the noon hour because it marks what she knows is a strange pressure to adhere to workplace eating norms. However, once back from lunch, the anxiety almost disappears and is easily forgotten until, of course, the next day when the eating ritual is mysteriously resurrected. At the end of the day she focuses her attention on finishing tasks, going home, having a private dinner, and relaxing.

Just before leaving work and during her last break, Felice and other women in the office, including her employer, gather for some friendly chatting. They excitedly discuss a new diet that promises 10 pounds of weight loss in the first week. The group decides to diet together and, after

a few minutes of enthusiastic collaboration, they are organized and relentless. Internally though, Felice feels a bit overwhelmed. While a workplace weight-loss support group is somewhat appealing, she admits that she longs to be able to work in an environment where women are not so fixated on building relationships around appearance rather than on performing work-related tasks. Felice participates though because she knows that they will be checking so, like others, she succumbs to the seemingly harmless workplace "fat phobic" culture.

Later, Barbara, Felice's co-worker, pulls out a scale so that everyone can officially log his or her "kick off" weight. Felice dreads the weigh in so much that she creatively comes up with an urgent matter that needs to be resolved so that she can disappear before being weighed. Eventually, she arrives home and plops down on the couch and begins to contemplate dinner. However, Felice knows that, until she loses the weight, her colleagues and employers will always feel the right to invite her to compete for a more fit body rather than to compete for promotions, advancements and performance commendations. She is constantly preoccupied with the thought that her body image issues will never be fully resolved. Surely there are many who may identify with some or more of Felice's workplace experiences.

In 1996, Marilyn Loden, a leading authority on leveraging diversity in the workplace, introduced "the diversity wheel" that emphasized the varied dimensions of diversity such as age, race, ethnic heritage, gender, mental and physical abilities/qualities, and sexual orientation. While Loden's excellent scholarship in this area is to be commended, I am willing to make a passionate argument that, without exception, size is an additional dimension that also must be included. In fact, size and body image affects every single element of the human existence including how we perceive others and ourselves. It is these perceptions, whether valid or invalid, that determines how we interact as human beings,

including how we treat children and adults at every age. A sample of how this additional dimension might look is below:

I am certain that continued research and awareness in the area of size and body image will lead to a revolution in the overall human experience. Rather than our continued obsession with fat and fitness, perhaps new attitudes that reflect inclusion and acceptance will lead to our ability to further integrate the full diversity of human kind. Until that time though, we should continue to be aware that, no matter what size or shape, all employees desire to be treated respectfully, and will work and perform at a much higher level when the environment is one that affirms rather than ostracizes certain members.

Friends, we have a great responsibility to continue to seek all avenues towards social justice and equality. I personally invite you to join me and our colleagues, of all sizes around the nation, who are successfully finding dynamic and innovative ways to continue to crusades for social justice and political size acceptance. To learn more, feel free to visit the Size Matters Web site at www.sizematterstoo.com.

Model 1. Size—The Other Diversity. Source: Euell Consulting Group LLC 2004

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