

# Composing Relationships

## Communication in Everyday Life

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*Allen, 2006*

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## Communicating Race at WeighCo

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**Stereotypes**  
**Power dynamics**  
**Ideology**  
**Linguistic dominance**

**W**eighCo<sup>1</sup> is a scale manufacturing company on the outskirts of Denver, Colorado. Founded in 1954, the company employs 150 people. Tom Jackson, the former president of WeighCo, often boasted about the diversity of the company because 50% of the employees are people of color. However, 95% of those employees are production workers, and none of them hold an executive position. Furthermore, many employees at WeighCo routinely deal with racial dynamics that top-level management rarely addresses, partly because most top management do not know these dynamics exist. To gain a sense of how race matters at WeighCo, let's eavesdrop on several informal interactions between employees.<sup>2</sup>

James (Jim) McMillow (president of WeighCo, European American, 57 years old) walks across the plant floor on his way to meet with Ed Janowski (director of plant operations, European American, 53). Jim was hired about a

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<sup>1</sup> A hypothetical organization.

<sup>2</sup> These examples are based on my personal experiences, anecdotal data (from research participants, training participants, friends and acquaintances), and published research.

month ago, after Tom, the former president, resigned. Jim is eager to discuss diversity initiatives with Ed, who has talked with Jim about some of his concerns about racial issues at the plant.

As Jim hurries past the workstations, Son Tran (production worker, Vietnamese American, 48), who has worked on the line for seventeen years, shakes his head.

"He just like Tom," Son says to his coworker, Flora (Flo) Jameson (production worker, African American, 37). "He walk right by us."

"I know," replies Flora. "Folks like us are invisible to folks like them."

Jim almost bumps into Mervin Johnson (Unit II lead manager, African American, 48) as Mervin walks out of Ed's office. Jim exclaims, "How about those Nuggets<sup>3</sup>? They may actually get to the playoffs this year." Mervin barely smiles as Jim walks away. Mervin feels frustrated because Jim always talks about sports when he sees him outside of formal meetings. Although Mervin enjoys sports, he also has other interests. Mervin resolves to initiate a different topic the next time he and Jim engage in small talk.

Edna Roberts (executive secretary to the president, European American, 58) walks over to Carmen Rodriguez's (clerk typist, Mexican American, 27) desk and hands her a flyer that has arrived in interoffice mail. The flyer is in Spanish, and Edna can't read it.

"What does this say, Carmen?"

"I don't know," replies Carmen. "I don't speak much Spanish."

Edna says, "But aren't you from Mexico?"

"No," Carmen answers. "My family is third-generation Colorado. My grandparents discouraged my parents from speaking Spanish because it wasn't desirable in most workplaces."

Shaneeka Miller (administrative assistant, Human Resources, African American, 31) spots Wanda Jones (assistant personnel director, African American, 40).

"Hey," Shaneeka asks, "what happened to those braids you were sporting at the party on Saturday? That style was tight!"

"Well," Wanda explains, "I have a meeting with vendors today, and Tom [the previous president] asked me not to look so 'ethnic' when we have major meetings. Plus, I get tired of how some of them respond to my hair. One time when I wore braids, Edna actually touched them and said, 'they look like a mop.'"

"Hmph," snorts Shaneeka. "I wish somebody would roll up on me like that. I'd get them straight! I'm wearing my hair any way I want to. My hairstyle ain't got nothing to do with my job performance. If anybody says anything, I'm going straight to Human Resources. Girl, this is 2005, and we don't have to put up with that mess!"

Ted Watson (director of human resources, European American, 41) says to Rachel Valdez (data entry clerk, Mexican American, 32), "I'm meeting with a citizens group from the west side, and I'm confused by all the labels: Chicano, Latino, Mexican American, Hispanic. What should I call them?"

<sup>3</sup> Denver's professional basketball team.

Rachel sighs because she gets tired of White people expecting her to educate them about racial matters. But she knows Ted sincerely wants to be sensitive and informed. "Ted," she answers, "there is no right or wrong label. Different individuals and different groups have different preferences."

Arthur Stanton (Unit I lead manager, European American, 41) and Anthony Walker (Unit III lead manager, European American, 46) peruse the bulletin board in the break room.

"Did you see this opening for plant manager for the second shift?" asks Anthony.

"Yep," Arthur answers. "But I won't bother applying. They'll probably pick someone with a degree from some high-class school. My little Associate's degree from Metro State doesn't count around here."

"Right," says Anthony. "Or they'll pull the Affirmative Action thing and hire some minority."

"Oh, yeah," replies Arthur, "we definitely could experience reverse racism with this new president. I heard he has a diversity agenda."

As Arthur (Unit I lead manager, European American, 41) and Mervin (Unit II lead manager, African American, 48) leave a unit meeting, Arthur confides, "Carlos [production worker, Mexican American, 30] was late again today, and I'm frustrated."

"Why don't you say something to him?" asks Mervin.

"Well," replies Arthur, "I don't want him to think I'm picking on him because he's Hispanic. You know how quick these colored people are to play the race card."

"It's better to say *people of color*," Mervin says gently.

"Whatever," grunts Arthur. "Who can keep up with all these politically correct labels? Anyway, Carlos gets so emotional when I say anything to him, and he might just get physical with me."

Mervin responds, "I think you're exaggerating this whole thing, Art. Carlos has never shown any signs of getting physical. He's just an expressive person. Talk with him to find out what's going on. I know he was having car trouble, and the buses run so infrequently out here."

As Ted Watson (director of human resources, European American, 46) walks by Shaneeka's (administrative assistant, Human Resources, African American, 31) workspace, he notices that she has hung another African print on her wall.

"Gosh, Shaneeka," he exclaims, "Your space looks more like some kind of museum than a place of business!"

Shaneeka pauses and says slowly, "I'm proud of my African heritage, and this is how I choose to express my pride. All the other artwork around here is Eurocentric, and I want something that celebrates my background."

"Oh, I see," Ted replies. "Have you ever been to Africa?" he asks.

"Not yet," says Shaneeka. "But I'm saving my money for a trip with my church next year, and I can't wait to go!"

As Edna (executive secretary to the president, European American, 58) tries to understand an error message on the photocopier machine, she sees Rachel (data entry clerk, Mexican American, 32). "Carmen," she calls out, "can you help me?"

"I'm *Rachel*, not Carmen," Rachel mutters.

"Oh, sorry," Edna says, shrugging. "I get the two of you confused." (Carmen and Rachel are the only two women with Spanish surnames in the front office. Carmen is petite and light skinned; Rachel is a foot taller, and her complexion is darker.)

As they walk down the hall after a staff meeting, Allison Paige (accountant, European American, 34) asks "John" Wu (accountant, Chinese American, 36; his name is actually Jiang, but his coworkers struggled with pronouncing it, so he told them to just call him John), "Are you going to the office FAC [Friday Afternoon Club—happy hour]?"

"No, I never really feel comfortable at those events."

"Maybe you can tell me sometime why you're not comfortable," Allison replies. "But I think you're missing a good opportunity to network. Tell you what: let's go together and stay for just half an hour. I think you'll see it's not so bad."

"Well, okay," John replies.

Later, Mervin (Unit II lead manager, African American, 48) sees Eddie (production worker, African American, 50) in the men's room and says, "Flo [production worker, African American, 37] asked me to help her get promoted, but I just can't, man. I mean, she's not in my unit, and I don't want Arthur [Unit I lead manager, European American, 41] to think I'm stepping on his toes. And I don't want higher-ups to think I'm showing favoritism 'cause she's Black. Besides, Flo is one fine sister, and I don't want anybody thinking we got a romance thing going on, you know what I'm saying?"

Son (production worker, Vietnamese American, 48) says to Flora (production worker, African American, 37), as they walk from the lunchroom to their workstation, "I have idea for how to connect calibrator, but when I try tell Arthur, he won't listen, say he can't understand my English."

Flora replies, "Your English is just fine, Son. If Art won't listen, you should go directly to Ed. He welcomes new ideas, and he gives credit where credit is due."

When Jim (president of WeighCo, European American, 57) leaves Ed's (director of plant operations, European American, 53) office, Ed accompanies him. Ed feels positive about their meeting because Jim seems more open than his predecessor to diversity issues that have long troubled Ed. Jim has set up a long-term training initiative for employees to learn about differences in cultural values and communication styles. Also, Jim has asked Ed to have Spanish and Vietnamese interpreters present at the all-plant monthly meetings. And he's considering offering free English classes for ESL employees.

As they walk onto the floor, Ed touches Jim on the elbow and says, "Allow me to offer a little hint: say hello to workers on the plant floor. They like to feel acknowledged."

"Oh. Okay," replies Jim.

Jim and Ed pause at Son and Flora's workstation. "How are you today?" asks Jim. Flora's eyes widen as she responds, "Why, I'm just fine, thank you. How are YOU?" They chat a few minutes, and Flora tells them about Son's idea. Jim and Ed ask Son to set up an appointment with them.

Watching Jim and Ed walk away, Flora remarks, "Maybe I was wrong about Jim."

"Yeah," Son agrees. "Maybe so."

## REFLECTIONS ON THE INTERACTIONS

Organizations benefit when employees experience positive interpersonal relationships in the workplace (Eisenberg & Goodall, 2004). Such relationships are "a prerequisite for effective job performance," and they "provide social support and a sense of identification with and participation in the organizational dialogue" (Eisenberg & Goodall, 2004, p. 234). Among numerous factors that might influence the quality of workplace relationships is race.

### Race Matters

Race matters because it is a significant aspect of social identity that is "manifested in everyday life experiences and social interactions" (Nkomo, 1992, p. 488). Most people learn communication styles and rules based on membership in racial groups, and we relate (or don't!) to others (or don't!) based on how we have been socialized. Throughout our lives, sources such as parents, teachers, peers, and the media socialize us about our own racial identity, and they teach us about other racial groups. As a result, we learn to view race as a "central cue for perceptions about others: temperament, sexuality, intelligence, athletic ability, aesthetic preferences, and so on are presumed to be fixed and discernible from the palpable mark of race" (Omi & Winant, 1994, p. 60).

Perceptions about race are often based on **stereotypes**, which are oversimplified preconceptions and generalizations "that provide meaning and organize perceptions, inferences, and judgments about persons identified as belonging to a particular social category" (Lott & Saxon, 2002, p. 482). Consequently, when we interact with others, we bring preconceptions and expectations about race that can affect what, how, when, why, and whether we communicate. Thus, race matters because race-based preconceptions and expectations can shape our attitudes and guide our behaviors.

Race is especially salient in contemporary workplaces, where percentages of racial minority employees are increasing and where workers are more likely than ever to engage in interracial interactions (Allen, 2004). Workplaces are also sites where communicators routinely enact ways in which they have been socialized about race (Orbe & Harris, 2001). The interactions at WeighCo illustrate some of the ways race matters in the workplace.

The stereotype that Black men love sports may have encouraged Jim (European American) to talk about sports with Mervin (African American). Also, the stereotype that all members of racial minority groups look alike may have led Edna (European American) to mistake Rachel (Mexican American) for Carmen (Mexican American). In addition, the generalization that all persons with Spanish surnames speak Spanish probably prompted Edna (European

American) to assume that Carmen (Mexican American) spoke Spanish. Finally, an expectation that people of color are experts on race issues could have cued Ted (European American) to ask Rachel (Mexican American) about naming conventions for members of her racial group.

Naming conventions signify another way we are socialized about race. Names for various racial and ethnic groups change across time, and members of those groups usually have preferences for how to be classified (Allen, 2004). Furthermore, preferences can vary within groups. Also, some people may become indignant or feel insulted if someone does not address them appropriately. Therefore, Ted (European American) was justifiably concerned about what to call the group of people he was going to meet. Awareness of this issue also probably explains Arthur's (European American) comment to Mervin (African American) about political correctness when referring to people of color.

When we are socialized about race, we often acquire an "us-versus-them" mentality that can affect our relationships with in-group and out-group members. Flora (African American) invokes this mentality when she refers to Son (Vietnamese American) and herself as "folks like us" while labeling Jim and Tom (European American) "folks like them." Flora may have been alluding to the fact that in Western society she and Son are considered "people of color" and that this may affect their roles within the organization. Flora also invokes an "us" mentality by expecting Mervin, another African American, to help her get promoted. Related to this, Mervin (African American) contests Flora's assumption because of his concern about what others ("they") might think if he assists her. In addition, Shaneeka and Wanda (African American) commiserate about how "they" (White people) view Black women's hairstyles. Finally, Anthony (European American) presumes that Arthur (European American) will agree with him that reverse racism may impede their promotions because they are both White males ("us") rather than members of other racial-ethnic groups ("them").

Another topic of socialization about race that can affect workplace relationships is racism. Most individuals do not want to be viewed as racist, for face-saving reasons (see Chapter 8), and/or due to fear of litigation, demotion, or other negative repercussions. Any of these reasons may have motivated Arthur (European American) to avoid confronting Carlos (Mexican American) partially because he thinks Carlos might perceive him as racist. Ironically, Arthur actually could be engaging in racist thinking when he assumes that Carlos's race would affect his judgments of Arthur's behavior. Assuming that people perceive others only in terms of racial and racist lenses can make open communication difficult between coworkers.

As the examples imply, racial dynamics permeate interracial *and* intraracial relationships. As the examples also imply, variables in addition to socialization about race might influence those relationships. These variables include sex, age, educational background, nationality, organizational role, and social class, to name a few. Consider, for instance, Mervin's anxiety that others might think he is having a romantic relationship with Flora, and recall Arthur's belief that his

Associate's degree is insufficient for promotion. Thus, workplace relationships are subject to numerous issues related to social identities of employees. Workplace relationships also are subject to power dynamics.

### Power Dynamics

Inherent in the interactions at WeighCo are **power dynamics**, which occur as different groups strive to serve their own interests and to control symbolic and discursive resources (Allen, 2004). Members of organizations enact power in their relationships to produce and reproduce, resist, or transform structures of communication and meaning in even the most mundane social practices (Mumby, 2000). These dynamics drive communication processes in organizations.

In many workplaces, power dynamics interact in complex ways with racial issues, as formal and informal policies are often based on White, Anglo-Saxon, protestant cultural norms and values (Carter, 2000). These norms and values often derive from dominant ideologies within society.

**Ideology** Although **ideology** is a complex concept, it is defined simply as "a set of assumptions and beliefs that comprise a system of thought" (Daniels, Spiker, & Papa, 1997, p. 255). In most societies, members of dominant groups create and normalize ideologies that most benefit themselves. Therefore, it's not surprising that the most widely accepted ideologies in a society usually reflect experiences and perspectives of dominant groups (Allen, 2004).

Ideologies function not only on the broad scale of cultural life, but also in more specific contexts, including organizations. Although not all organizations necessarily accept dominant ideologies, most tend to accept them to a degree in order to succeed. Exceptions are organizations that define themselves as specifically resistant to dominant ideologies.

However, employees at WeighCo tend to rely on dominant norms and values as they interact with one another. Underpinning many of these norms and values is the ideology of White supremacy, an internalized belief in White superiority that has existed in the United States since its inception (Allen, 2004; Omi & Winant, 1994). Because of this ideology, members of racial minority groups are usually expected to conform to formalized expectations or unspoken norms based on White, Anglo-Saxon, protestant assumptions and beliefs. Therefore, members of racial minority groups often believe that they cannot be "themselves" at their workplaces because they feel obligated to accommodate to "White" ways of being. And people of all races may behave in ways that reinforce dominant norms and values. Recall, for instance, that Tom (European American) asked Wanda (African American) not to look "ethnic," and Wanda complied by changing her hairstyle.

Another example of how dominant ideologies operate is evident when Arthur (European American) criticizes Carlos's (Mexican American) expressiveness. Arthur may have been enacting the ideology of rationality, which values objective, "cool-headed" behaviors and devalues emotionally expressive communication styles that are characteristic of some people of color (Conrad &



Poole, 1998, p. 363). In addition to communication styles, other aspects of language are subject to dominant value systems (Artz & Murphy, 2000).

**Linguistic Dominance** In most organizations, powerful groups tend to exercise **linguistic dominance**; that is, they control language by expecting everyone in the organization to use mainstream linguistic codes. To maintain control, dominant group members subtly and blatantly control language through jargon and vocabulary and by regulating "appropriate" dialects and accents. Thus, Arthur (European American) says he cannot comprehend Son's (Vietnamese American) English, although Flora (African American) contends that Son's English is "just fine." And Carmen (Mexican American) reports that her grandparents inhibited her parents' speaking of Spanish because it was not desirable in the workplace.

Norms about language also can influence small talk and other informal interactions. Some people of color might avoid informal networking opportunities, such as company-sponsored social events, because they anticipate a "culture clash" (Cianni & Romberger, 1995; Lindsley, 1998). For instance, John hesitated to attend FAC because he is not comfortable with the level of personal disclosure he's experienced in similar settings. His cultural background obliges him to be less forthcoming about his personal life.

However, as some people of color negotiate dominant norms about communicating, they may use language as a form of social bonding in intraracial relationships. For instance, when Shaneeka (African American) interacts with Wanda (African American), she uses informal language, including slang and Black English vernacular. Mervin engages in similar behavior while talking with Eddie.

This brief overview of how race intertwines with power, ideology, and language exposes mainly negative implications of race and power dynamics for workplace relationships. Fortunately, positive implications also exist.

### **The Transformative Potential of Workplace Relationships .**

Through intentional and unintentional behaviors, employees can develop positive, productive relationships that challenge dominant ideologies and transform organizational cultures (Allen, 2004). Members of majority and minority racial groups sometimes imagine alternative realities to the ones that organizations try to impose upon them, and they plan or take actions to manifest their visions (Mumby, 1997). For example, Flora (African American) encourages Son (Vietnamese American) to ignore the hierarchy and go over his boss's head to get his idea heard. Shaneeka (African American) proclaims to Wanda (African American) that she will use formal means to challenge anyone who tries to control her hairstyle. Shaneeka also hangs African art in her work space to signify her racial pride. In addition, Jim (European American) collaborates with Ed (European American) to develop an organizational culture that values racial diversity. Because Jim and Ed are members of the upper level of the organizational hierarchy, they may use their power to effect significant change at WeighCo.

Embedded in the interactions are additional examples of how organizational members may communicate race to develop and maintain positive workplace relationships. For example, Allison (European American) offers to accompany John (Chinese American) to Friday Afternoon Club and to discuss why he feels uncomfortable. Also, Mervin (African American) tries to help Arthur (European American) understand that Arthur should not feel threatened by Carlos's (Mexican American) communication style. Mervin also suggests alternative wording when Arthur uses the phrase *colored people*. In addition, Ted (European American) listens to Shaneeka (African American) and tries to understand that her racial heritage is important to her. These types of interactions are pivotal for creating organizational cultures that value diversity (Thomas & Ely, 2001). Organizational psychologist Clayton Alderfer (2000) asserts, "regarding racial matters, we need realistic, direct, and mutually respectful talk—not denials, evasions, duplicities, and condemnations" (p. 32).

## CONCLUSION

The scenarios at WeighCo only begin to suggest the range of issues related to communicating race in the workplace. Although the scenarios reveal challenges that confront organizations and their members when they strive to value racial diversity, they also illustrate ways in which workplace relationships can facilitate developing organizational cultures in which everyone feels valued.

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