

# **PAMPHLET 16**

## **BETTY**

**by Tom Heuerman, Ph.D.  
with Diane Olson, Ph.D.**

Little did I know how much Betty would teach me about diversity when I met her at the time we created the new business unit (1990). Our first impressions of one another were not positive. The Teamsters were attempting to organize a union in her department, and it was my job, as manager of the business unit, to defeat the union. I suspected her of being one of the leaders of the organizing effort.

People organize unions because they believe they are being treated with disrespect, and the people who worked with Betty were being led poorly. The effort to organize was their cry for help. I began to understand Betty. She worked in a demoralized department and was unhappy. Changes being forced upon employees made no sense to them, and their protests were not being heard.

I held meetings with this group of people and got to know Betty. She was a stately Black woman with a loud voice and a great sense of humor. Betty was down to earth, and she asked tough questions. She cared about people and was not intimidated by me. Soon my first impressions changed; I liked her.

After several months the union organizing effort was dead. The department had been redesigned, delayed, downsized, and the people were operating as a self-managed team. The people in Betty's department, who had led the organizing drive, had been involved in all aspects of these changes and were now leaders in our move to employee involvement. I realized that the we/they atmosphere had shifted to the beginning of a sense of community as we began to see and appreciate one another's humanity.

I asked Betty to be part of a presentation to a group of senior executives. The topic was employee involvement. When it was Betty's turn to speak,

she stood up and said, “My name is Betty, and my knees are shaking.” Five minutes later she was in total control of the room. I think this shift happened when she asked a senior vice-president what he did all day long. He was startled and began laughing. Betty’s voice became stronger, and her confidence grew. She was having fun.

A few months later Betty was a key participant in a presentation about our business unit’s reorganization to the company senior staff. This was an uptight, formal, and skeptical group of about 80 managers. When it was her turn to speak, she stood at the podium, looked at the audience and said, “My name is Betty, and I’m from Field Services, and I’m nervous. I’m really proud that you all got dressed up. . .because I was told by a team member that you wouldn’t have clothes on.” The room echoed with laughter. Betty had connected with this group. Betty proceeded to tell a great story of how her team had redesigned their work, reduced their staff from eighteen to eleven, and attended group process skills training. She described how difficult, frightening, and challenging the changes were. She spoke from her heart, and you could hear deep pride and dignity in her voice. I looked out at the audience and saw many cynics with tears in their eyes.

When the presentation ended the CEO of the company stood and asked if he could speak. With a tear in his eye and a frog in his throat he said, “People often ask me what living out the values in our charter will look like. You have just seen it.”

Over the next few months Betty and I developed a good relationship. One day I invited her to lunch and told her about some problem I had with a major vacation I was planning. This was the big issue in my life on that day. She listened with interest and then told me how she was raising four children without a father in south Minneapolis. She described how she was trying to protect her children from gang influence and how she was raising them to value work, education, and caring for others. I felt about two inches tall. How could I work one hundred and fifty feet from someone and have no idea what her life was like? How could I assume that she could relate to my vacation problem or that I could relate to her life? How could I be so oblivious to the challenges my coworkers faced?

Several months later, at Christmas time, Betty and I went to lunch again. She told me, in a matter-of-fact way, that she and her children had a monthly roundtable where they discussed issues and made decisions. The

discussion this month had been whether to use their available money to either get their car fixed or to buy Christmas presents. The younger kids wanted Christmas presents. The older kids realized the importance of a car in the wintertime and reminded the younger ones of how cold these months were. The consensus was to get the car fixed. Betty described how the last time the car broke down she had traveled by bus to take the kids to the baby-sitter and to get to work. That reminded me of the story of a senior executive who rushed into a 9:00 a.m. meeting, out of breath, and exclaimed, "I'm sorry I'm late. The nanny was sick, and I had to get the kids ready for school." Realizing his audience, he looked up and said, "I'm sorry, all of you have to do that every day."

While the transformation of our business unit was taking place, the company was reexamining its core values. Diversity became an espoused value of the company. People were attending training classes and rushing to demonstrate how much they valued diversity. Appreciating differences had suddenly become politically correct.

One day I visited with a vice president and another manager. The vice president had been to a two-day seminar on diversity recently, and he spent the better part of an hour telling us what he had learned. He told us that when someone died in their family, Mexican employees, many who did not have cars, had to drive around the country picking up relatives to take to the funeral in Mexico. Therefore, they needed more time away from work than did other employees. (We had only one Mexican employee in the business unit, and he bought a new car almost every year). This manager was going to begin eating Mexican food, even though he did not like it, to give himself a better understanding of diversity. I was stunned by this man's remarks.

Betty taught me that the barriers of age, race, gender, and position can be overcome, and people can connect if they are willing to talk, listen, and hear one another. She also taught me how much we can learn from others. This is the true meaning of diversity: Each person is different and brings a unique life-experience, world view, ideas, hopes, and dreams to the workplace. A truly diverse workplace honors, accepts, and learns from the differences of each person and recognizes that diversity gives the organization the strength and talents to meet unknown challenges. The whole is best served by the differences of people who are not asked to sacrifice their authenticity as they work to serve the vision of the organization.

I was paid four or five times more than Betty. The CEO of our company was paid five or six times more than I. I sat about one hundred and fifty feet from Betty. The CEO of our company sat about one hundred and fifty feet above me. I wondered if his world was as far away from mine as mine was from Betty's? I wondered if he was as unaware of the differences between his life and mine as I was of Betty's and mine?

We cannot talk about community in the workplace when conformity is the first rule of organizational life, when inauthenticity has become a way of life, and when we are not even aware of the differences that exist between ourselves and our colleagues. Leaders can't capitalize on the diversity in organizations when they are not even mindful of it. Diversity cannot be a cultural cornerstone of a company when we have no idea of what those who work in close proximity to us have to go through just to get to work each day. People cannot judge the work of others when they do not have a clue about what the rest of the person's life is like. It is easy to lock our perceptions of people into the roles they fulfill and forget about them as a total person. We will not achieve the promise of diversity if we don't even talk to one another in our organizations.

Having the right percentages of the various groups of people in our society in the employee base of our organizations is no longer enough. My greatest learning has come through people and settings I might not have paid any attention to when I was an executive. Betty helped me to realize that life in organizations can be narrow and superficial, and the importance of executives is often inflated greatly.

Leaders, at all levels of organizations, should seek out experiences that will put them in the midst of people whose life experiences have been different from theirs. Sit quietly, listen intently, ask questions whose answers may be personally embarrassing and painful, and reflect on the experience. Learn from the understanding gained. Then create conditions for authenticity that embody the variety and diversity of the living systems your organizations are connected to. The greater your organizations diversity, the greater its range of options to respond to changes, and the greater its chances for sustainability.

Just eating Mexican food will not do much to further our understanding of one another.