

What Does It Really Mean to “Affirm” Versus “Promote ”?

by Evonne Hedgepeth, Ph.D.

Decision-makers who develop specific programs or non-discrimination policies to address the unique needs or realities of historically marginalized or under-served groups among youth, clients or employees often fear they will be accused of undermining merit-based advancement, "promoting" homosexuality or bisexuality, violating traditional social norms about gender, “abusing” individuals who seek corrective medical treatments and other unwarranted concerns.

Dr. Evonne Hedgepeth created the following tool to explain the difference between **AFFIRMING** a group (or affirming respect for diversity in general) and **PROMOTING** a group.

Many administrators and front line staff provided with this tool during training on diversity issues have praised its usefulness in handling actual or anticipated opposition to a wide variety of diversity-related programs and policies, reducing conflict in workplaces, schools and other settings and improving organizational outcomes on a number of metrics for success.

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What Does It Really Mean to “Affirm” Versus “Promote”?

<i>Disparage*</i>	<i>Deny*</i>	<i>Acknowledge*</i>	<i>Affirm*</i>	<i>Promote*</i>
WOMEN are weak, irrational, more susceptible to influence, and inferior to men. Men should protect and control them.	Women and women’s issues are excluded from history books, policies, positions of power and even written and spoken language.	Women exist and have many of same needs/ interests/abilities as men. Many have made unique contributions. They deserve fair treatment.	Women have unique strengths and qualities, beyond procreative powers. Are essential part of human diversity. Women’s ways of being are valuable.	Women’s qualities are better than men’s (men are deficient). Society would be better off if women, rather than men, were in control.
PEOPLE OF COLOR are naturally deficient in some way and inferior to white people. Whites should hold the power in society.	People of color (and their issues/contributions) are excluded from history, policies, positions of power and language/ discourse.	People of color exist and soon will represent the majority in the US. They have many of same needs/ interests/abilities as whites and have made unique contributions. They deserve fair treatment.	People of color have unique strengths and qualities and represent an essential part of human diversity, which enriches our society and institutions.	The qualities of people of color, because of their unique experiences, make them superior to white people. Society would be better off if “minorities” were in control.
JEWS are usurers, historical Christ-killers and a threat to society.	Jewish people (and Judaism as a faith) are excluded from history books, policies, positions of power, official holidays and discussions of religion.	Jewish people exist and are not that different from non-Jews. They have made many unique contributions and deserve fair treatment.	Jewish people have unique strengths and qualities and represent an essential part of our cultural diversity. Judaism is a valuable part of religious diversity.	Judaism is superior to other religions. Preferably, everyone should be Jewish.
CHRISTIANS are close-minded bigots who want a government controlled by Christians. They are a threat to democracy.	Christians (and Christianity) are excluded from history books, policies, positions of power, official holidays and discussions of religion.	Christians exist and have much in common with non-Christians. Many have made unique contributions to society. They deserve fair treatment.	Christians have unique strengths and qualities and represent an essential part of our cultural diversity. Christianity represents an important part of religious diversity.	Christianity is the one true religion. Preferably, everyone should be Christian and our institutions should be based solely on Christian beliefs.
LESBIANS, GAYS, BISEXUALS, TRANSGENDER & INTERSEX PEOPLE are immoral and a danger to children and institutions. People shouldn’t be LBGTQ	LBGTI people and their contributions are excluded from history books, policies, positions of power, and language/ discourse.	LBGTI people exist and share many qualities with non-LBGTI people. Many have made unique contributions to society. They deserve fair treatment.	LBGTI people represent a valuable part of human diversity and enrich our society in many ways.	Being LGB is preferable to being heterosexual. Being transgendered or intersex is better than being non-transgendered or non-intersex (cisgender).

[* See Definitions and Notes on next page.]

Affirm versus Promote: Definitions and Notes

1. **Definitions:** (*Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language, 1996*)

Disparage	<i>to belittle, demean, ridicule, discredit</i>
Deny	<i>to refuse to recognize or acknowledge</i>
Acknowledge	<i>to admit to be real or true; recognize the existence of</i>
Affirm	<i>to state or assert positively (about a group)</i>
Promote	<i>to further, advance, or exalt; put in a higher position (than another group)</i>

2. Because individual attitudes and practices are slow to change, organizational climate typically lags at least one step behind official policy:

for example, if the organizational policy is to acknowledge, most individuals in the organization will continue to deny.

3. **Remember.** Promoting respect for diversity is not the same thing as promoting a group.

To spend public resources to promote diversity (i.e., respect for all) is a reasonable, productive organizational goal and does not equate with promoting any particular group.