

10th Anniversary Edition

# WHAT IF



SHORT STORIES TO SPARK  
INCLUSION & DIVERSITY DIALOGUE

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## Equal Is Not Always Fair

A few years ago I attended a conference at a hotel in one of my favorite cities, Chicago. After checking in and finding my room I, like always, explored the venue. As I walked the halls looking for the fitness area (healthy living always begins with good intentions) and busily checking voicemail with my cell phone, I entered what I thought was the men's restroom. I immediately noticed something wrong: I could find no urinals on the wall. There were five stalls but no urinals. And the clinching telltale sign: This place I thought was the men's room smelled rather nice—as I

imagined a women's restroom would.

Immediately realizing that this was not where I should be, I left. Fortunately, no one observed my absent-minded, cell-phone-enabled mistake.

I went across the hall to the men's restroom and, comforted by the urinals, did what I set out to do. On my way out, I noticed that there were three urinals and two stalls. The architects who designed these buildings must be enlightened about gender equality, I thought, comparing the five places for relief in the women's restroom and the five places in the men's restroom. Feeling good about the state of gender equality regarding restrooms, I retired to my room for a good night's rest.

The conference began the next day with a great opening session during which everyone seemed to have a cup, or two or three, of coffee or tea. At break time, there was the expected rush of people in search of restrooms. Some people fired up their cell phones as they searched. Big mistake, I thought.

I, too, had to use the restroom, and I knew exactly where it was. As I approached the men's room, I looked across the hall. A long line had formed at the entrance to the women's restroom. I then looked to where I was headed. There was no line, and no wait, at my restroom. Yes!

Feeling a little guilty about my immediate relief, I thought about what I had observed. Long line for women. No line for men. Hmmm. This might not be fair, my inner voice of justice and fairness whispered.

I thought about the building's architects and my recent sense of satisfaction with restroom equality. The architects, most likely male, had done the "equal" thing. Five relief places for women, five relief places for men. Conceptually, it seems like the right thing to do.

But the break in the conference exposed a different operational reality. Treating people equally is not necessarily the same as treating people fairly. Without going into too much detail, let's just say that men require

less time to use the bathroom, on average, than do women. Hence, longer lines for women.

And that's only the physical aspect of going to the bathroom. There are other differences. While I have not done any scientific study, my informal observations suggest that women are more likely to use a bathroom trip as a mini social outing. I have often observed women inviting other women to the restroom, but I have not personally heard one man say to another man, "Hey, come with me to the bathroom. I need to talk to you about something." So the women's room lines are longer because there are also more individuals in them.

## **What's Your Corporate Blueprint?**

It's often easier to treat people equally than to treat them fairly. Applying the concept of equal treatment to restrooms, for example, requires little thought. One makes a rule (five relief places for each gender) and applies it without giving much consideration to differences that may

be found in the subjects to which the rule is being applied. But is it fair if people are substantively different?

The very fact that the application of an “equal treatment” policy produces different outcomes among different groups should trigger further inquiry and questioning. Note that I did not say that an equal treatment policy is always wrong. What I am saying is that it is not always right in a world filled with myriad types of people representing multiple belief systems and ways of doing things. If we live in a truly diverse world, then “equal treatment” approaches must always be examined through the lens of fairness.

If my example of how real biological and sociological differences between men and women can affect going to the restroom did not convince you, consider this question: What if there were a policy to promote only people with good leadership qualities (not necessarily a bad policy) *and* men (because they have historically held positions of leadership and thus got to write books on leadership) get

to define what those qualities are (qualities often based on how they were raised and on male-oriented societal expectations of what it means to be a man)? Put differently, what might happen if a male-created mental model of how a leader should look and act looks and acts like a man? Might it contribute to the fact that, in 2008, 488 of the Fortune 500 CEOs were men? That’s 97.6 percent of all the Fortune 500 CEOs. From a “glass half-full” perspective, that is a couple of percentage points better than it was a couple of hundred years ago, when 100 percent of the most powerful positions in the fledgling country were held by men. Hooray for progress! From another perspective, such “progress” is unjust, unfair, and inequitable.

Fair as opposed to equal treatment entails more analysis and examination, maybe more research and consideration. It usually involves more time and more thinking. And it’s likely to require a different type of thinking, with different thinkers with different

perspectives around the table. If you are passionate about justice, then give the concept of fairness a fair chance.

### **Adding More Stalls**

*Might some of your organization's policies, behaviors, and practices negatively (or positively) affect certain groups more than others? To help you examine that possibility, here are some questions to ask, an activity, and an assignment for this week.*

- 1. First glance.** What are some examples of “equal but not fair” in your organization? What leadership qualities are promoted in your organization?
- 2. Looking inward.** Think about a time when you were treated equally but not fairly. What

would a more fair treatment have been?

- 3. What if?** What if your organizational blueprint is more “fair” for some than for others? What new “architects” might you need to assist with your redesign?
- 4. Activity.** In a group, brainstorm some other examples of when equal may not be fair. If you find this difficult, ask if there are any left-handed people in the group. Ask them if it was *equal* and *fair* when their grade school teachers passed out right-handed scissors to the entire class. Ask them if it is *fair* that most power tools today are designed for a right-handed world. What would the equal response be? What would the fair response be?
- 5. This week's assignment.** Think fairly—and act with a “fairness” orientation. Practice fair treatment by considering the many ways people may be different or may be dealing with different circumstances.