

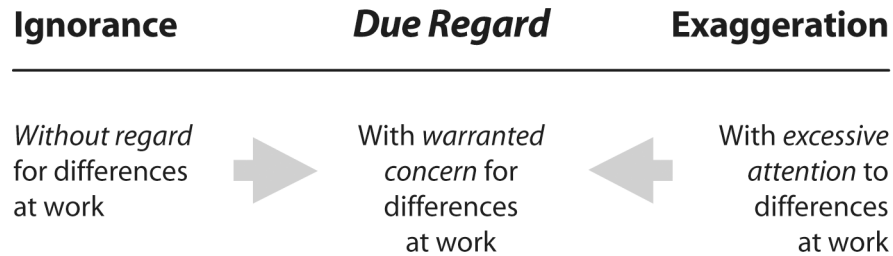
THINK

■ 30 ■

Invest heavily *in due regard.*

One of the key practices in this book is **due regard**, the ability to distinguish among the attributes and cultures of your employees, peers, superiors, and customers, so that you encourage their contributions. This is a method to individualize your leadership, by attending appropriately to differences. You must make your own informed judgment about the degree to which dimensions of diversity are operative.

Due regard is an approach through which you learn to give the right weight to diversity in your leadership work: not too little weight, in which a person's relevant traits are denied or ignored; and not too much weight, so that the race or gender "cards" are constantly in play.

*Figure 30*

Here's an illustration from a retail company with a large presence in the South. James, a high-performing black department manager from Atlanta, was promoted into an assistant manager position in a Tennessee store. Ted, his new store manager (a white man with a great reputation in the company), was really excited about the promotion. James knew the operation inside out, related to customers beautifully, and handled employees with directness and humor.

On James' first day on the job (I'm not making this up), Ted took him out to raise the store's flags, a daily ritual of pride. Ted passed James the American flag, which he raised up the middle, tallest pole. Then James was given the State of Tennessee standard, which he also raised. And then Ted handed James the banner of the Confederacy. Oops.

James unfurled this symbol of slavery (this is how black Americans interpret the Confederate flag), and wondered what he'd gotten himself into with this promotion. His hesitation spoke volumes as he looked down at the flag. When he looked up, he could see that Ted understood the poignant moment.

So Ted got to provide us with this case study in due regard. Here are the options for Ted's path to action as they flashed through his mind.

Ignorance: Ted could try to ignore the painful and unspoken meaning in the moment, and mess up the start of a promising partnership. Ted could call

the corporate legal department, hoping to validate his decision to handle the situation “without regard” for James’ “over-sensitivity.”

Exaggeration: Ted could make a fool of himself by blushing, stammering out a lame-ass excuse for the practice of flying the offensive symbol, and not raise the Confederate flag (do you suppose employees and customers might have noticed its absence?).

Due Regard: Ted, with remarkable poise, acknowledged the surprise and awkwardness of the moment, took the banner from James, and raised it himself. Then they returned to the office for their first substantive heart-to-heart talk (one of many, I’m glad to say).

Lead with due regard for human differences. This incident led to a long conversation in the store, the corporation, and the community. In the end, store leaders decided to stop flying the Confederate flag, out of respect for black customers and employees. This was not a minor matter, as a small and vocal number of white employees and customers felt their traditions were now disrespected. Some of these customers quit shopping at the store, although the loss in sales revenue was more than offset by new business from the black community.

STICK AND CARROT

The stick is the law, which motivates us to avoid discriminatory behavior and the lawsuits which discrimination engenders. Make no mistake: avoiding the stick is good.

But we lead to achieve results with our employees; we do not lead merely to avoid discrimination and litigation. If your natural approach to diversity is “I just don’t take those differences into account, because I don’t want to

discriminate,” you miss diversity’s power when you focus on avoiding the pain. The stick can never deliver what only the carrot can provide.

Due regard is the carrot: take into account the uniqueness of colleagues and customers. The risks of ignorance and exaggeration will diminish. Then your leadership will evoke their full contribution, and your results will demonstrate your ability to lead a high-performing business.

CONVERSATION STARTER: *How could the practice of due regard equip you to lead with more confidence among diverse colleagues and customers?*