

White Male Physicist Champions Workplace Diversity

Sexual harassment, racial bias, reverse discrimination, the angry white male, the corporate "glass ceiling"... It seems like the problems of living in a diverse society grow more intractable each day. Can't we all just get along? Yes, we can, says John E. Foley, an expert on diversity and ethics in the workplace. Being a white male physicist, and a 24-year veteran of Los Alamos National Laboratory, he knows he's an unlikely champion of such causes. But he seems to relish that image. In presentations for community groups, government agencies and private corporations, and in papers like the provocatively titled "Beyond Bashing: A White Male Manager's Inquiry into Diversity and Justice," he outlines the evolution in his own thinking, from denying that there was a problem to making a personal commitment to work for change.

Trained in physics and nuclear engineering, Foley joined Los Alamos in 1969, after earning a PhD from the University of Arizona. He worked on nuclear reactor safety and nuclear safeguards, developing techniques for measuring nuclear materials in compliance with the Non-Proliferation Treaty, and he spent a year at the International Atomic Energy Agency in Vienna. Moving up through the Los Alamos ranks, he was leading a 60-person group by the early 1980s. It was then that Foley began to realize "there's more to science than just science, that you could do better science by setting up a healthier environment for people."

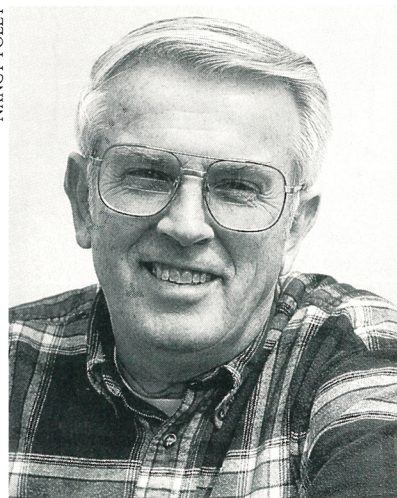
Foley's career took an abrupt turn in 1986, when he was asked to be the lab's first director of human resources. "That was a real shock to my system," he recalls. Almost immediately, "I had this long line of people coming to me, saying they were afraid to speak up or make a comment for fear they would pay a price somehow... I thought, How can you have a world-class organization when you've got so much fear?"

With the best intentions, Foley still floundered in his new role, and before long, he felt "under siege, from everyone and from every direction." He expressed that growing frustration in "Foley's law": If you are a white male who is involved in diversity programs, you'll eventually have the women and minority leaders mad at you, because you cannot do enough to help their causes; you'll eventually have the white male managers mad at you, because you threaten their traditional world; therefore, you'll eventually fail.

Desperate for answers, he attended seminars and conferences and read

"every management book I could get my hands on." A major, if unexpected, influence was Sissela Bok's *A Strategy for Peace*, an ethical discourse on building trust among nations. "When I substituted the word 'countries' with 'company,' I realized it described what was going on at the lab," says Foley. Another breakthrough came in October 1990, when he met Lillian Roybal Rose, a specialist in cross-cultural awareness training. She encouraged Foley to examine his own subtle racist and sexist attitudes, and she pointed out how his attempts to "help" women and minorities, though well-intentioned, were pa-

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tronizing, and therefore doomed. "You must fight racism and sexism for yourself, not for me," she told him. "You fight them because of what you lose if you don't—genuine human connections and relationships, your humanity, your authenticity. Help yourself, not me."

Back at Los Alamos, Foley began giving short talks to fellow managers and employees, incorporating the ideas he had picked up from Roybal Rose, Bok and other sources. He suggested that the tensions between various groups—women and men, nonwhites and whites, nonscientists and scientists—arise not from mere differences of opinion, but from power imbalances. Correcting those imbalances, he said, would require both personal and organizational changes, from engaging in open discussions of racism and sexism, to providing "credible" mechanisms for airing grievances.

In 1993, Foley took early retirement. As an independent ethics consultant and trainer, he now gives workshops in and around Los Alamos and also teaches courses on workplace di-

versity and "everyday ethics" at the University of New Mexico. "It's fascinating stuff," he says. "I'm continually seeking out models, looking for mental pictures to explain what goes on." Many scientists overlook or discount the "people stuff," he says, and that's unfortunate, because "a lot of the people stuff is not well thought out, and scientists are good thinkers." His own grounding in physics has been extremely helpful, Foley says, in "looking at the chaos of the workplace and seeing where the patterns are."

Some get it, some don't

Virginia Smith, an environmental scientist at ICF Kaiser Engineers, recalls the first time she heard Foley speak: "It was revolutionary—it was the first time that I heard a white man, a member of the dominant culture, articulate these things." Although she had previously considered many of the issues he raised, she credits him with, among other things, helping her "move away from looking at the world through the eyes of a victim." She's noticed that, among those who turn out for his lectures, the greatest resistance seems to come from Foley's own peers—older white men. "You see these looks of incredulity cross their faces," she says. "Like, Am I really hearing what I think I'm hearing?"

Foley guesses that in a typical audience, "maybe a third hate what I'm saying, a third like it and the rest are on the fence." Nor does he aim for instant results. "People aren't going to wake up one day and suddenly be enlightened. It's only going to happen by lots of people chipping away at these problems."

Examining one's prejudices "is not something most people want to do," notes Michael Lucero, Los Alamos's current director of human resources. The perspective Foley offers is "very powerful, very relevant," he says. "Certainly anyone listening would be forced to look at themselves, maybe with a different mirror than they'd used before."

Taking Foley's workshops "really opened my eyes," says John Viechec, a technical manager at Los Alamos who now heads the lab's diversity council. "I don't feel as awkward as I once did" when dealing with people from different backgrounds. The lab as a whole is also beginning to change, he adds. "I can't tie it directly to John Foley, but I think he was a catalyst," Viechec says. "I think the senior managers now recognize that what John was saying makes a whole lot of sense."

JEAN KUMAGAI