

ETHNOCENTRISM

I have been reading a handbook entitled "Working With Differences In Communities" authored by Ann Schauber, Oregon State University Extension. I am reading this book to get some ideas on how to help the agricultural producers of this county interact with a growing population of consumers who have limited understanding of approved agricultural practices.

Schauber uses the term "ethnocentrism". She explains ethnocentrism as seeing the world from your own perspective to the exclusion of other perspectives. She teaches we are all ethnocentric, some more so than others. We believe that our way of thinking, feeling, and acting is the right way. Some of us believe that our right way is the only way for all people. The term is generally used to define ethnic differences, but is appropriate to define other variations, too.

The first step to resolving community problems, in a way that includes others who see the world differently, is to step out of our ethnocentrism. This does not mean we must give up who we are or what we believe, but it does mean adding more ways to see the problem and more possible solutions. We attempt to step into others' ways of thinking, feeling, and acting.

Schauber suggests we can all learn more than one way of seeing the world. There is much more to see than simply our own view. We are usually down on what we are not up on. The old adage, "Never judge a man until you have walked a mile in his shoes" is one of her fundamental messages.

The book also discusses the concept of in-groups and out-groups. Groups that we belong to are called our in-groups while groups that we do not belong to are called out-groups. We tend to exclude individuals in our out-groups, regard them differently, and trust them less than the in-group members. As such, we are less likely to understand them and their lives. We have a tendency to trust and be more loyal to in-group members and to exclude out-group members. Within the in-group, loyalty and trust are usually reciprocal.

In-group, out-group relationships become more complex when we think of the many groups that we belong to at any given time. Taken together, all of our in-groups make up our social identity. Indeed, birds of a feather flock together.

People who operate a farm in the country and people who own a home in the country often have two completely different perceptions of the same area, with a wide gulf in between. The purpose of a farm is to efficiently produce agricultural products and to generate a living for the farm family, often providing employment for additional members of the community. The purpose of a rural home is to enjoy all the benefits of living in wide open spaces without having to contend with many urban issues such as traffic, close neighbors, and noise at night.

With two different agendas at work in the same area it is understandable that conflicts and disagreements can arise. Common conflicts include such things as the smell from hauling manure, dust while working fields, flies from livestock, or noise when harvesting is done at night. Another common discord is the difficulty of irrigating fields without getting water into a new neighbor's basement. Wide, slow moving farm equipment also irritates some people, but all are essential to a successful farming operation and in most cases the farmer was there many years before the homes and traffic came.

A final concept of Schaubert's book is that all of us, regardless of which "group" we are in, must be willing to understand the position of the rival. "I" am the one who must learn and adapt, not "them". That concept may be thorny to work with at times. In some cases, developing a positive relationship with neighbors may be difficult because of their attitude. We cannot control how they feel or what they say and do, but we can control how we communicate with them and how we react to their concerns.

Hopefully, all of us can make a greater effort to understand others' point of view. Every member of a growing community needs to invest time and effort in public relations. Open communication and an understanding of why we do what we do are imperative. Cache Valley is a beautiful place to live and work. Our diversity of interests need not destroy our unique reasons for living here.