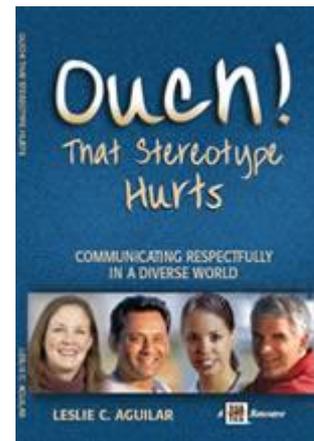


Book reviews

Reviewer [George Simons](#), SIETAR member
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Author Leslie C. Aguilar
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Communicating Respectfully in a Diverse
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About 20 years ago, I gave a presentation at an ASTD meeting in which I used the word “niggardly.” I was post factum reprimanded by several individual participants warning me to avoid racial slurs. I absolved them for their lack of knowledge of the English language but went away strangely disturbed about the compound of sensitivity and ignorance at work in this situation. Later in 1999 a white staffer of the black mayor of Washington, DC was forced to resign over using the very same word as a staff meeting. The incident sparked a debate about the political correctness of that word rather than producing funding for language education. Outsiders may wonder if US identities are really so fragile that “sounds like” is equivalent to “is?” Where will it all end, we might ask, as corporate globalization often involves the exportation of US diversity standards along with other business practices and products?

Is “Politically Correct” (PC) language really “Professionally Competent” language as Leslie Aguilar suggests in her new book, *Ouch! That Stereotype Hurts*. Apparently the adage, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me” is long gone from the US mentality. The message of any communication is what the other person gets—or chooses to get. Consequently, many USians live double lives, speaking one kind of language with family and friends and another needed to tow the “Professionally Correct” line at work.

Most of us do not want to offend others, but occasionally we do, whether we are aware of it or not. Of course for a real offense to take place, one might assume that it must be both given and taken. Apparently in the current US culture taking offence, playing the victim card has become a good strategy making it even more critical for both managers and employees to be careful about their communication.

Distinguishing intention from impact has emerged as a key principle of the diversity movement, inspiring the legislation supporting it. Impact is generally supposed to be recognizable by that legal fiction known as a “reasonable” person. In fact, no one has control over impact on another, but only over her or his intention and action. Hence a certain kind of omnipotence is assumed in our use of language. Perhaps this sense is a byproduct of the social constructivist philosophy of language—my words create your feelings. Like God, I speak and

it happens. Herein lies much of the frustration of social communication in the USA. The paradox is that in a society where people are supposedly free to reinvent themselves, neither fettered by history nor by what others think, “You make me feel...” has become a trump card in the diversity game to say nothing of its use as a weapon in gender politics. In a nation where *control*, *speaking out*, and *initiative* are core values, so many seem remarkably powerless when it comes to managing their own feelings.

Consequently we require enhanced skills at preventing and repairing offence. In US culture as elsewhere, communication competence will require us to send the kinds of messages that are most likely to arrive as we intend them and be accepted positively and evoke what we intend in the receiver with as little static as possible. *Ouch! That Stereotype Hurts* teaches us this language particularly as it has developed in the USA.

If you need to deal with US Americans in the workplace, then, you can do well by heeding the prevailing rules of their workplace culture using the clues and tips for communicating successfully that are contained in Aguilar’s book. The first rule, though not explicitly stated in the book, seems itself to be a paradoxical stereotype that runs, “all Americans are unique.” This is based in the mega-value of freedom, which, in the US, essentially comes down to the belief that one is free to be who one wants to be and has the ability to recreate oneself at any point in life and therefore should not be impeded or discouraged from doing so. Therefore making connections to a person’s background, supposed identities and referring to them is likely to put us on slippery ground, particularly, but not exclusively, if they fall into one of the targeted classes. People in the US insist on deciding who they are and how they would like to be called. Anything else may be seen as nuisance or insult and injury.

Given this, how does one need to behave to communicate successfully to avoid others taking offense at what one says? First, though stereotypes are the normal inner conversations we use to assess any situation or person—we cannot think without them—we must avoid expressing them. The word “stereotype” in US English is no longer a neutral descriptor of a mental function but has a pejorative connotation of a bad habit whether communicated or not.

Ouch! That Stereotype Hurts opens with an emphasis on the importance of inclusion and provides a listing of the common ways stereotypes arise and are perpetuated. The opposite of inclusion is omission or diminishment. Jokes lead the list. When preparing expats from other countries for living and working in the US, I find it truly challenging to communicate how sensitive many USians can be about humor that seems innocuous to my students. Even when these expats have some awareness of the possibility that others might take offense, they fail to imagine the potentially serious social and legal consequences. Individualization in speech, according to Aguilar, is the key. Never assume that anyone is representative of anyone else or connected to characteristics that have been ascribed to one or another group. This may seem like denial to outsiders, but it is anathema to a large number of USians.

The author also urges us to do this visually in our use of photographs and illustrations of people. The cover of the book itself models this, using a white woman first and ending with a white man on the front cover and beginning with a white man and ending with a “woman of color” (how would she prefer to describe herself, alas, I do not know) on the back. All USians, no doubt, though our stereotypically oriented minds immediately want to know their origins. Such “balanced” imagery is now commonplace in US advertising and in the construction of Hollywood screenplays.

Granting equality of status is essential in language as well as in images. This is a sensitive issue in the US where the ideal of equality is often so different from the reality. Many USians unconsciously hope that if more equality can be created in language it will lead to more equality in fact. On the other hand it explains a lot when outsiders learn that in the USA equality means only “equality of opportunity” whose realization depends on the individual’s initiative, aided as little as possible by any form of social or familial welfare. It is a context in which increased equality is a vision, perhaps a dream, respect becomes ever more critical, precisely because it masks the enormity of the inequalities that USians experience in the communities in which they live and work. The subtext is that of blaming the victim and non-discriminatory language is aimed at diminishing this tendency.

The second chapter of this short book is about what to do if you “put your foot into your mouth,” as USians are wont to say, that is, when you have said or done something deemed inappropriate or disrespectful. The author offers a six step model for communication recovery. The keys are getting and listening to feedback, apology and a firm purpose of amendment. In true US fashion, if you can’t get it right the first time, you can fix it. The model is that of good customer service, where apology and attention can win back disaffected customers.

Chapter three is about what to do when biased language shows up and you are not the perpetrator. How do you speak up, give feedback without what you say being biased or offensive? Of course there is no guarantee that others won’t take offense or accuse you of belonging to the PC police, but Aguilar offers twelve techniques that can help you live by your principles or at least do what is expected to avoid collusion with the unsavory situation. The techniques are designed to minimize blame or placing guilt on others while making sure that the fault is attended to.

Why is this important? The missing tool of social control in the US cultural context is that of shame. In an individualistic society the element of *shame* is reduced to next to nothing because shame requires strong group bonds to operate as a social deterrent. USians are never supposed to feel bad about themselves. *Guilt*, however, is everything. One is responsible and can change things. In US business and politics, CYA (cover your backside) has become a common feature of damage prevention and control.

Apologies are commonly seen as an admission of guilt. So strong is this assumption that a law had to be passed stating that companies who offer apologies to customers who have in some way been harmed by their products are not de facto admitting responsibility for the damage. So, communicating that someone is wrong or behaving poorly (blame/guilt), negativity of any sort is unacceptable and normally stiffly resisted, hence the need to communicate effectively without recourse to such elements. Again one relies on an assumption of causality between words and the feelings that arise in the other when one tries to give feedback to another, e.g., “I felt bad when I noticed that X was embarrassed when you described her as...” “I am sorry that you feel that way,” is not an acceptable response unless you are a customer service agent hoping to further enrage an irate customer.

Inclusion takes planning, and the fourth chapter of Aguilar’s book contains twenty-seven suggestions as a checklist for how we speak and for the context within which we communicate. This is in effect a very useful planning guide for a successful meeting in which everyone, whatever their diversity, is included and cared for. It may surprise outsiders that in a society where people are expected to take care of themselves and forced to do so by the lack

of social services and the expense of healthcare, for example, that there is such intense focus on inclusion in communication.

At a time when, to much of the world, the USA seems scarily out of control, one wonders what might happen were more or the principles of communication found here taken as a serious agenda for politics and diplomacy. Conversely, one can also raise the question as to whether the struggle for political correctness is derivative of the same US ethnocentric and moralistic tendency to fix ourselves and others that purports to drive both foreign and domestic policy.

In short, this book is a quick and handy introduction to the thinking and behavior needed to succeed and not to run afoul of others as well as the law in US organizational contexts. On the other hand, it is also an invitation to reflect on US culture and our relation to it. The book and the suggestions it makes are themselves cultural artifact that, like all such, should be examined at carefully for possible synergies and learnings in other cultural contexts, lest they be used en bloc with good intention but have unexpected impact in other settings.