Zero-Sum as a Counterproductive Strategy

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Strategies are similar to medications where both are designed to solve a problem. Assuming the problem is correctly diagnosed, choosing the incorrect strategy not only does it not solve the problem but it may make it worse. And when the appropriate strategy is selected – like with medication – then the dosage and time needs to be adjusted in order to provide its full effect. An example is when someone talks about Zero-Sum around a diversity issue – this strategy focuses on a lose/win approach and so it is not very inclusive. So what is the antidote for a lose/win strategy in workplace diversity? By A. Corral

Leader Talking Points

Opportunity: Team-Building Activity
a.   Ask team members to think of a time when someone used the Zero-Sum strategy outside of work.
  1)   Politics: Elections where one candidate wins.
  2)   Fun Games: Arm-wrestling.
  3)   Other Games: Checkers or chess.
  4)   Other instances where only one side can win and the other loses.

Discussion Points
a.   Ask your team for examples of a situation where zero-sum prevails.
  1)   Communication: Someone does not share information with others.
  2)   Collaboration: Refuses to help on projects outside of team's domain.
  3)   Exclusion: Including only those who are perceived as part of the inner-circle.
  4)   Other?

b.   Ask your team for ideas on how to manage zero-sum.
  1)   Company Values: Focus on existing values that promote cooperation.
  2)   Senior Management Commitment: Message needs to come from the top.
  3)   Communication: Discuss inclusion to make the "pie" bigger vs. keeping it the same.
  4)   Other?

Team Challenge Activity
a. Ask the team to offer one or two areas where zero-sum can be a problem.
  1)   Example: Exclusion of one or two individuals on special team projects.
  2)   Solicit ideas on how this situation can be improved.
  3)   Ask for a volunteer to take the lead to work with the manager on the selected opportunity and report back to team on next steps.