



# COMPARABLE TREATMENT

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**Question:** What does it mean when an employee asks "Why are you singling me out?"

**Answer:** When black employees ask, "Why are you singling me out?" it is often code for: "When white people do this, it's OK. But when I, or other black people, do it, it's not!"

Example: A black nurse was told she couldn't take vacation the week she requested because two employees had already requested the same week off. The black nurse knew that three white nurses had been off at the same time in the past and felt she was being held to a different standard. After all, even if the rule said only two people can take vacation at the same time, in the past an exception had been made. The nurse was upset and said she was going to take vacation anyway because her family had plans. She began looking for another position.

When these things occur, it is important to investigate to see if different treatment has been applied. If it has, it is necessary to apologize and to make sure it doesn't happen again.

Unfortunately, in our litigious society organizations tend to "deny, deny, deny" rather than to admit they made an error. Among white Americans, personal acknowledgment or admission of an error might be seen as a sign of guilt or weakness, but for many black Americans personal acknowledgment or admission is the

first sign of redemption and a readiness to address and deal with a problem.

A white person's cultural tendency might be to defend their moral character when faced with a cultural inequity by saying something like, "I'm not like that," or, "My best friends are black." But black employees might see defensiveness on the part of a white person as proof that the accusation struck a chord and therefore must be true. That's why it is better for a white person to say, "Tell me what you're concerned about, and let's deal with it."

At the same time, it is important for black employees to refrain from characterizing something a white person has said or done as "racist" and instead focus on how treatment—such as the response to the nurse's request for time off—differed. This is because when white people hear the word "racist," they might take it as an assault on their character and shut down. This puts the real issue—the different treatment—on the back burner.

Unfortunately, black employees are often placed in a no-win situation. If they simply describe the different treatment, they are likely to be met with denial instead of an apology and a commitment to change.

Black employees are likely to get better results if they approach a sensitive discussion by saying: "You may not be aware that I am being treated differently. I would like to present the details." Then they should:

1. Describe the situation in detail, pointing out the different treatment;

2. Request a specific outcome: the same treatment; and  
3. Have a written copy available, so the decision-maker can be clear about what happened and what outcome is being sought.

White—and black—employees are more likely to look at how they might have treated someone differently if they are first given the benefit of the doubt.

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