

Avoiding the Dead Elephant

Communicating Across Cultures

By Jessica Walter-Groft, DDC Command Affairs

“Communication is the power failure in organizations...and miscommunication leads to conflict,” said Darlene Floyd, president and founder of Horizons Management and Training Consultants.

During the recent Defense Distribution Center (DDC) Management Conference, Floyd gave distribution center commanders and DDC staff a presentation on how to avoid conflict in the workplace by recognizing how cultural factors impact the way we communicate and perceive messages.

Floyd said this cross-cultural conflict can often go unresolved because both

ethnicity, sex, and age impact the words we use to communicate, the manner in



DDC Commander BG Kathleen M. Gainey, USA, presents Floyd with a Commander's coin.

By recognizing this, Floyd said, we can have a better understanding of the true message because there is no way to avoid the impact of culture on the way we communicate. “Culture is intrinsic-it’s part of everything we do.”



DDC Equal Employment Manager Patricia Compton presents Floyd with a plaque in recognition of her participation in the conference.



Floyd explains the importance of avoiding conflict by learning how culture impacts communication.

sides find it difficult to communicate effectively. Floyd described that unresolved conflict is like having a dead elephant in the middle of the room. “It’s dead. It’s ugly. It stinks. Everybody knows it’s there, but they just keep stepping over it like it doesn’t exist.”

Cross-cultural conflict, said Floyd, is often caused by misunderstanding someone’s message because our

which we communicate, and even the pattern of our voice. “And when we don’t understand, we turn to our assumptions,” she said.

Although some conflict can be positive, Floyd explained, it is often disruptive, keeping us from meeting our mission in the most efficient way possible. It can lead to distrust, lack of teamwork, loss of creativity and innovation, and work that doesn’t get done. “People take sides,” she said, “It’s the good ol’ American way.” And the price for that conflict is paid in time and resources.

So in order to avoid conflict resulting from miscommunication, Floyd stressed to the commanders and staff that “we must be culturally sensitive in order to understand the message.”

European-Americans, according to Floyd, generally communicate by allowing the words to convey the message. African-Americans, Hispanic-Americans and Asian-Americans, she said, communicate in a primarily non-verbal manner-placing less importance on the words of the message and relying more on body language and tone of voice.

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