

Sustaining Diversity Initiatives – A Look at Form and Substance

This issue explores the rationale for new thinking and approaches to diversity through the lens of form and substance. In many cultures, form and substance are complementary forces that require balance. In western culture, the two polarities are seldom distinguished. By contrasting them, we have an opportunity to reflect on diversity in new ways and examine areas overlooked in efforts to build inclusive organizations.

When ascribed to persons, form is typically embodied in observable characteristics (e.g., age, gender, skin color, language, culture, religion) and is easily defined as we experience it through our senses. Substance, however, is personified in the essence and values present (e.g., integrity, judgment, experience, talents, charisma). Substance is harder to characterize since it is difficult to see, touch or measure. We generally think of persons having or lacking substance based on our perceptions of their actions and inactions.

In my previous newsletter, I discussed the shortcomings of applying linear solutions to non-linear matters. Linear solutions have the trappings of form since they primarily focus on observable challenges. Historically, diversity efforts have addressed the visible challenges: low numbers of persons from disenfranchised groups and low shares of growing and emerging populations. Strategies have been implemented with the presumption that long-standing issues will be resolved by moving these data points in positive directions. Such linear approaches may provide short-term remedies, but alone, they seldom generate sustainable results.

Ironically, it is necessary to apply linear reasoning to elucidate most subjects, including non-linear issues. It is difficult to share thoughts and knowledge without a linear framework of discussion. This paradox can lead one to conclude that linear solutions are readily applicable to diversity problems with complex underpinnings. Such thinking perpetuates Einstein's definition of insanity, "... doing the same things over and over again and expecting different results."

These thoughts are not intended to dismiss the importance of endpoints that exhibit observable and measureable improvements. They merely suggest that our path to reach diversity and inclusion goals is less apparent. To build sustainable solutions, we must ensure the foundations of organizations or groups are fertile ground for resources not typically cultivated. The process of strengthening foundations is less observable and measureable than data on scorecards, but it is paramount to diversity success.

These ideas are more easily revealed through the poles of form and substance. As intimated, form receives much of the attention and focus in diversity initiatives. This generally happens because substance is assumed to equate with form (i.e., more people with diverse backgrounds equate to more successful diversity outcomes). On the surface, this supposition is understandable given that forms are identifiable and can be categorized and measured. However, the substance of successful diversity is much more than achieving data points.

A simple example of our reliance on form is the use of resumes to assess job qualifications. If a candidate with a marketing background on their resume were to apply for a finance position, they would likely receive little consideration. Without greater knowledge of the candidate's history and aptitude, we would be skeptical they could perform successfully in a finance role. We recognize the resume as a form that provides clues to substance, but we also realize information on a resume does not always equate to the substance sought. That is why further steps are taken to verify a candidate's knowledge and experience. Generally, the candidates deemed qualified are subjected to further screening. This leads to the main point of this issue: to achieve sustainable diversity and inclusion, we must ensure that form and substance are aligned.

To examine diversity form and substance more closely, let's consider the following question, "If you were to add a person to your team, would you add a diverse person or a person who values diversity?" With little thought to form and substance, it would be easy to conclude you would be closer to achieving diversity by adding a person with a diverse background. However, if the new team member had no interest in fostering diversity and inclusion, it would be hard to envision a more diverse team emerging. To ensure substance receives equal consideration, we need to ask a more probing question, "Would the new team member enhance our diversity goals and efforts?" This substantive question is as key to your search as identifying and selecting gender, ethnic or other diverse forms.

At first glance, this appears to put undue pressure on selecting the ideal candidate – one who is both diverse in background and committed to diversity and inclusion. In addition, when we look further down the path, it becomes clear that once the "right" candidate is found, they now carry the weight of being an exemplary model of meaningful diversity. The burden of either of these conditions can hinder sustainable success. More importantly, if leaders and other influential persons in the mainstream of the organization lack fervor for diversity and inclusion, any progress or success will likely be short-lived.

Initially, organizations should focus on persons who value and promote diversity and inclusion, no matter their external make-up. These individuals, impelled by their internal make-up, will drive culture change and growth. Their respective organizations will develop well-grounded foundations capable of embracing new thoughts, approaches and diverse persons. Likewise, the quest for substantive diversity puts responsibility on the entire organization or group, not just individuals with diverse backgrounds brought in to "diversify" the organization. When talented individuals with diverse backgrounds are brought into the fold, they require support and assurance from mainstream leaders who can filter interference and challenges faced simply because they are different. This only happens when key leaders value diverse thoughts and approaches and recognize the adversity that often comes with being different. Their support makes it easier for diverse forms to reflect the substance of diversity.

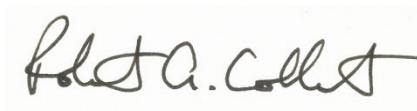
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PERSPECTIVES ON DIVERSITY

In order to achieve successful diversity and inclusion in organizations, certain substantive results should manifest: more rich and creative input, greater collaboration, more contentment, more growth and development. This is the success we seek from diversity and inclusion. Just as importantly, the contributions of diverse and varied forms are required to kindle these outcomes. Otherwise, we risk quelling or extinguishing the strengths and talents that any individual brings to the group. As Martin Luther King, Jr. shared during the civil rights era, "An injustice to anyone threatens the justice of everyone."

In conclusion, the early steps we take on our path to diversity and inclusion may look different than the steps we take closer to the destination. As you initiate new diversity strategies, realize that it is hasty to assume diversity and inclusion will be achieved and sustained simply by integrating persons with diverse backgrounds. The organizations that focus on more substantive steps early on will spur an equal complement of diverse forms that can be sustained over time.

Should you have questions or comments regarding this newsletter, please contact me. If you find my thoughts intriguing and would like to hear more about my approach and methods, I welcome your inquiries. If you would like someone added to my distribution list or want to unsubscribe for future additions, please reply to my e-mail address.



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**Presenter and workshop facilitator:**

Robert Colbert has over 30 years of experience in the corporate world. He began his career in public accounting, continued into the private sector of Corporate America, moved into the non-profit sector, and subsequently became a business consultant. During his career, he's had assignments in audit, finance, corporate development, technical sales, marketing and non-profit operations. His educational credentials include a BA from

Minnesota State University, Mankato and an MBA from the University of Minnesota Carlson School of Management. He is also a CPA and holder of a U.S. patent. In addition, he teaches tai chi in the Minneapolis community and currently serves on two non-profit boards: Cammack Marshall Fund for Children, and Freedom Train, Inc. His approach to diversity was developed and honed from experiences he and many others faced during their time in the private and non-profit sectors. His basic premise is that human beings struggle with change and variation; challenges that impede our ability to accept and value one another. To build sustainable diversity, our challenge is to find answers to an overlooked question, "How do we compensate for the human condition as it contends with change and variation."