

Diversity and Inclusion – Are Measurements and Timelines The Key to Success?

To advance diversity and inclusion, for-profit companies promote the economic benefits of greater access to resources and markets. Similarly, school systems promote the educational benefits produced by cultural proficiency and appreciation of learning styles. So, why would a for-profit company promote diversity if it exhibited no economic benefit? Why would a school system promote diversity if it showed no significant improvements in student achievement? When timelines are ascribed, these questions can become even more compelling.

Organizations attempt to quantify risk in their pursuit of benefits and results. Generally, they make decisions that generate the greatest upside and least downside for operations (i.e., high upside/downside ratio). More simply put, organizations look for good returns on their time and investments. By and large, investments in diversity and inclusion are framed in a similar manner. However, research from multiple published studies show diversity and inclusion can add organizational costs and complexity before any significant benefits are realized. The costs mainly acknowledged are expenditures for management expertise and training, but it is common to incur other, less quantifiable costs when diversity efforts are implemented.

Several studies document the challenges of diversity. One particular study (Watson, Kumar, and Michaelsen 1993) concluded that heterogeneous groups require greater time to develop rapport and trust compared to homogeneous groups, illustrating how the merging of differences can add costs on the front end. Another study (Jehn, Northcraft, Neale 1999) documented that heterogeneous teams initially require more time to get to solutions than homogeneous teams.

In any situation where change and differences are introduced, there are inherent risks. As organizations seek to become more diverse, the possibility looms that efforts will not be valued or fully integrated. Our history shows that the road to diversity is littered with failed risks. We cannot expect to avoid risks, but we should expect to learn from those that don't pan out. While failures are unavoidable, that does not necessitate they be repeatable. Unfortunately, many failed strategies are abandoned with little or no assessment. For diversity and inclusion, there is much to be learned from failed experiences that could be applied to future risks.

When diversity and inclusion initiatives are implemented, studies document the benefits. One earlier-referenced study that highlighted challenges (Jehn, Northcraft, Neale 1999) also showed heterogeneous groups tend to generate more innovative solutions than homogeneous groups. In addition, heterogeneous groups tend to be more effective than homogeneous groups. Even without research, it is logical that more information and perspectives available to a decision process allow people to develop strategies and solutions with greater upside than downside.

Diversity and inclusion, which involves changing the status quo, will always be high risk. As with any high-risk investment, potential returns are also high. This suggests organizations need to make significant investments in diversity efforts to see meaningful returns. Accordingly, an

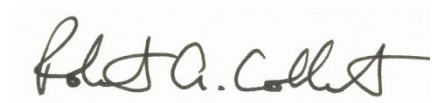
organization's commitment to diversity and inclusion is determined by its ability to accept risk and learn from failures.

Diversity and inclusion will never be achieved by focusing primarily on quantitative measures and timelines for success. If so, what happens when measurements are not met within the time frames set? Do we abandon the proverbial ship and jump to another? This would be the equivalent of Einstein's adage, "doing the same things and expecting different results". Efforts would be better mobilized toward qualitative factors: leadership, relationships, affirming environments. To achieve sustainable diversity, the organization must advance these elements. Diversity measurements and timelines should merely be guideposts, not end goals.

Using the analogy of a good financial advisor, their job is to comprehend client goals and put plans in place to help accomplish them. Results achieved at specific time points are simply benchmarks to determine if current strategies are working. The advisor is aware that down cycles inevitably occur, and they seldom abandon strategies when goals are not met within preset time frames. Instead, they focus on qualitative processes to produce quantitative results that endure over time.

My diversity message is based on similar principles: good diversity strategies and investments produce returns that accumulate over time. With any investment, the quantitative goals are more readily achieved when key qualitative factors are considered and addressed. Organizations that focus on qualitative areas are better prepared to expand community representation.

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.



R. Colbert Consulting



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

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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 the Cleveland Neighborhood Association. 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."