

What's on Our Radar? – Recognizing our Personal Diversity IQ

When discussing diversity and inclusion issues, we often hear the question, “Why don’t they get it?” While such questions are rhetorical at times, they indicate a level of frustration on the part of diversity leaders and champions. It implies there is ample and irrefutable evidence of diversity issues; issues easy to remedy if others saw them as readily as we do. Is it possible diversity leaders also lack awareness and understanding, that we’ve forgotten our own struggles with choices about who to include and protect? This newsletter is intended to deepen our personal awareness by looking at our individual radars. We will examine how the things we detect on our radar screens impact our diversity IQ.

As diversity leaders and champions, we generally promote awareness of differing beliefs, attitudes and cultures. Our goal is to create a shared understanding in and among communities. By increasing awareness of others’ surroundings and circumstances we become more sensitive to their situations, especially those unlike ourselves. While such methods have been frequently applied, it is evident that our society continues to struggle with ways to recognize and address diversity issues. I contend that awareness tools have been used more externally than internally. We have attempted to use these tools to move others forward, but we have not always applied them on ourselves to the same extent.

The tools of awareness have as much, if not greater merit when applied personally. There is much to be said of the adage, “Keep your cup half full.” When our knowledge cups are full, nothing can be added. However, when we keep our cups half full and remain students to learning about ourselves and others, we grow as both individuals and diversity leaders. A principal benefit of increasing personal awareness is that we develop greater empathy for those who struggle with diversity issues and remedies that seem obvious to us.

There are always imperceptible blips on our radars; things we cannot see until they are brought to light. As we uncover these areas, we deepen our understanding on both ends of the spectrum: those affected or influenced by particular circumstances, and those with little awareness or appreciation for those affected. By understanding these polar perspectives, we as diversity leaders can develop and build bridges between communities.

There are numerous illustrations of how our personal radars overlook or ignore information. Below are just a few examples:

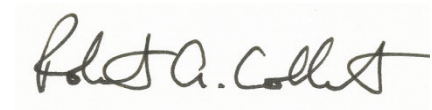
- Paraplegics and other persons with physical disabilities face challenges able-bodied persons do not. We observe issues like mobility problems and limited access to areas, but there are less noticeable social ordeals as well. For able-bodied persons, it's not unusual to experience tentative or hesitant moments when interacting with persons who have physical disabilities. Conversely for adult persons with physical disabilities, it's not uncommon to be treated like helpless children when managing situations that have nothing to do with physical limitations. These thoughts and behaviors hinder true communication and discovery between individuals.
- As Americans, we make up 5% of the world's population while consuming one-third of the world's resources (World Resource Institute). As natural resources dwindle, our large global footprint can deprive others around the world today and also in future generations. Generally, this information has little impact on our energy use and consumption patterns.
- Many of us patronize retail establishments such as Target and Wal-Mart. When we purchase items such as jeans or shoes, few of us reflect on the conditions endured by many workers who produce these goods. It is common for these goods to be manufactured in plants that exploit underage workers and/or labor laws. While information on sweatshop-free goods is readily accessible, our decisions to purchase goods seldom consider this input.

The idea of becoming aware of every person's plight in the world can seem daunting, but like most things, we increase our awareness over time. As a diversity change-agent, I also think it's important to incorporate a different approach than we often see advocated. Instead of "walking a mile in someone else's shoes" (which is difficult to truly accomplish), we should examine our own paths of "exclusion" and "powerlessness" along which we have walked. By understanding our own struggles, we can better relate to the struggles of others, struggles not easily seen on our personal radar screens.

We develop a clearer vision of unsolved problems when we increase our awareness of common struggles and inequities. Lasting solutions arise from a place of understanding and compassion – not only for those who face inequities, but also for those who knowingly and unknowingly perpetuate inequities. The more we examine our radar screens, the more we find that most of us fit in both categories. As suggested earlier, when our radars reveal inequities from polar perspectives, we are better prepared to build and repair bridges across our communities.

In closing, I hope we all continue to observe our personal radars more closely. As we become sensitive to prominent radar blips as well as the ones that barely register, we can grow significantly in our approach to diversity and inclusion. If organizations are to embrace multifaceted initiatives, diversity leaders must lead by example and incorporate their own personal development. Without this understanding and growth, our diversity IQs will likely be stunted and our leadership weakened.

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 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."