

What Are Your Goals for Diversity?

Throughout my newsletter series, I have shared concerns about diversity goals and strategies commonly applied in organizations. Success is mainly predicated on integrating people from diverse and underrepresented backgrounds. While there is no question these outcomes are crucial, success defined simply in these terms allows little consideration for other key factors. This newsletter is devoted to defining richer diversity goals, goals that develop human connections as well as human associations.

While working in corporate America, a senior executive once told me if he had two of himself, one could be let go. He shared this during one of our initial conversations. He believed redundant personnel were much less effective than personnel with varied thinking and skill sets. I admired this thought coming from a mentor who happened to be a successful white male. In ensuing discussions, we would regularly discuss corporate moves and strategies, but I noticed he tended to ask questions he had previously asked: “Do you have a personal development plan? Do you have your MBA?”

These repeated questions were perplexing, especially since I had provided information both verbally and in written form. He was doing what was expected of a good mentor, challenging me to advance my career through personal goals and accomplishments. But, since my answers to his main questions were affirmative time and again, I began to realize I was more of a project than an unfolding relationship. It appeared our rapport was stuck and could go no deeper. We began to get together less, and over time, drifted apart in the corporate sea. I remember seeing him a few years later and noticed we barely recognized one another.

This executive could have opened doors and offered needed feedback on my career path. As my career progressed, I sometimes wondered if I should have figured out a way to maintain a working relationship with him. However, if I had, I doubt it would have become a close and trusting relationship. This was the crux of my decision to let the relationship go. I don’t think my decision necessarily burned bridges, but it probably limited my access to the inner circle.

Looking back, I recognize neither of us could have made the relationship work on our own. It required interest and commitment on both sides. As fallible human beings, we made mistakes as we developed our relationship and rapport. At some point, I sensed he did not want to invest much into a connection with me. I responded by pulling back rather than pushing forward. By refusing to stay in the dance, my career suffered in some ways. In other ways, it flourished. I became a stronger individual by defining the type of working relationships I sought to develop and maintain.

Most people desire stronger and deeper relationships. However, human connections can easily weaken or sever when it is difficult to see pathways forward. This susceptibility must be

considered throughout the process of establishing diversity goals and strategies. When diversity plans are heavily focused on new associations, little is done to build connections required for strong relationships. This can be characterized as a form-over-substance issue, complimentary subjects I introduced in my third newsletter. I distinguished the polarities of form and substance to foster insights into areas that drive sustainable diversity.

Diversity forms are commonly presented in quantitative terms (e.g., number of people from different backgrounds, number of diverse people in authoritative positions). The substance of diversity is more qualitative and much harder to quantify (e.g., rich input, significant collaboration, high innovation). Diversity forms without accompanying substance are meaningless – good quantitative numbers without good qualitative outcomes does nothing for organizations. The issue is not that organizations desire to forgo substantive outcomes from their diversity efforts. Rather, problems arise when organizations automatically expect quantitative diversity goals to produce substantive results such as greater input, collaboration and innovation. Diversity goals and strategies based primarily on forms can increase targeted numbers, but those numbers seldom last without corresponding efforts to enhance substance.

As organizations strive to establish and maintain diverse forms, they can lose sight of the substantive benefits they seek. When there is little in the way of substantive diversity and inclusion strategies, it is common to find mistrust of management motives and feelings of insecurity and vulnerability within the ranks. Also, when priorities are weighted toward assembling and maintaining the “right” forms, this relegates key strategies such as personal and professional development. In turn, this can lead to limited promotion of internal candidates from diverse backgrounds, high turnover of persons of color, and generous opportunities for members of the majority culture who enjoy powerful sponsors and/or pedigrees. Accordingly, the health of the organization is harmed when many believe they have been undervalued or left behind.

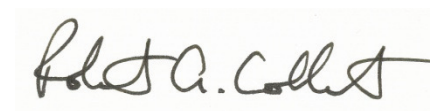
When things go wrong with diversity efforts based primarily on quantitative goals, organizations frequently do not understand the reasons. One question habitually asked is, “Why can’t we retain our recruits?” This question reveals a key and somewhat ironic supposition: while forms are more easily measured than substances, substances are more easily assessed than forms. By taking time to understand the degree to which someone feels their contributions are or are not valued, efforts can be aimed toward solutions that enhance overall diversity initiatives. Organizations that gauge their success in areas such as greater input and collaboration can more readily execute plans that benefit their numerical diversity and inclusion goals. Just as importantly, the strategies generated from assessment of qualitative factors uplift everyone within the organization, not just the groups targeted.

A number of diversity goals and strategies can stimulate substantive outcomes. Among these are: rewards, recognition and advancement for successful diversity advocates and champions; assessment of retention, promotion and fulfillment, especially within underrepresented groups;

implementation of informal communication outlets and rapport that are regularly held across all levels of the organization. While these examples are recommended, they are by no means an exhaustive list.

If similar diversity goals and strategies had been in place during my time in the corporate sector, it is possible the senior executive mentioned earlier might have spent more time with me to navigate the corporate path. He may have shared knowledge I could have applied to become a stronger contributor for the organization. We might even have become good friends. It's unfortunate I will never know.

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 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."