

When You're Up to Your Butt in Alligators ...

Diversity planning and discussions seldom address a key barrier: pressures encountered by individuals in organizations (or communities). These pressures come in varying forms and intensities and are difficult to gauge. So how do we recognize and mitigate the impact of pressures on individuals? This issue is devoted to insights on diversity barriers that stem from organizational pressures.

Pressures and related stresses significantly impact societies. Our news media make this clear on a daily basis. In workplaces, both professionals and non-professionals are struggling to keep jobs from consuming their lives. In communities, limited financial resources and tight job markets are squeezing standards of living. Around the world, frictions are increasing between leaders and citizens as greater rights, freedoms and access are sought. Some define today's challenges as unprecedented, but throughout history, similar pressures have generated tensions among peoples and societies.

A recent 2011 study, conducted by Harris Interactive and commissioned by the American Psychological Association, reported more than one-third (36 percent) of workers said they typically feel tense or stressed out during their workday. Twenty percent report their daily level of work-related stress as an eight, nine, or ten on a 10-point scale. Over the past decade, annual Gallup polls (Attitudes in the Workplace surveys) have reported increased workplace stress and increased gossip and arguments among co-workers compared to prior years.

When resources are limited or tight, people tend to group with able and like minds to protect mutual interests. In organizational settings, these human tendencies can disregard persons with little power or resources. Consequently, when pressures are high, there are corresponding downsides to workplace inclusion. Because certain groups have historically lacked power and resources within organizations (e.g., women, minorities), these groups have also had a minor voice in decisions and outcomes that impact them, especially when environments are tense.

If we acknowledge that human tension hampers diversity and inclusion efforts, and tension inevitably rises when people are under pressure, it is somewhat surprising so little attention is devoted to the weight of demanding pressures in organizations. Then again, it is not startling that discussions about pressures are avoided. Such admissions can draw attention to polarizing conditions. Unfortunately, reticence to address the effects of organizational pressures is akin to watching a run-away train headed toward an impending derailment – the ending won't be good.

Over the years, I have heard many stories about high-pressure situations. One theme running through several stories involves insecure individuals in positions of authority. These people, especially ones deemed intelligent as well as insecure, have been significant obstacles to diversity and inclusion. Many of these people have been trusted lieutenants within organizations because they focus on managing upward and pleasing their superiors. Because they tend to

concentrate on their own reputations and circumstances, diversity and inclusion have not been natural passions. Those who shared stories also concede that many of the individuals who fit this profile have experienced careers that backfire over time. Unfortunately, during their prime, these individuals have been roadblocks to scores of qualified female and diverse persons. Even more disappointing, persons whose talents were underused or severed often go unnoticed by organizational leadership, even in organizations that purport to be high on diversity.

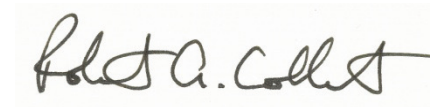
Even staunch diversity advocates can succumb to overwhelming pressures. One common story theme addresses tough decisions faced when hiring women or diverse candidates. Difficulties centered on backing the “right” candidate(s) who would be a good fit for the organization. Correspondingly, if or when hires did not pan out, advocates could not avoid thinking how this might reflect badly on their own reputation and future diversity efforts.

Pressures have been and will continue to be constants in organizations, especially as conditions change or become more challenging. Complicating matters further, pressures have wide-ranging effects – some individuals struggle much more than others. The central point is that pressure and tight environments elicit human fear and insecurities. For those who harbor insecurities, pressure situations can heighten them. As these negative feelings intensify in organizations, they become major barriers to diversity and inclusion. While diversity leaders cannot eliminate pressures, the strategies they implement should not ignore them either. The key is employing safeguards that minimize the effects of organizational pressures on diversity efforts.

Targeted performance objectives are one important safeguard that can be used more successfully by organizations. Often, leaders in organizations expect managers to meet or exceed their business objectives while assigning high priority to diversity initiatives. However, leaders seldom give weight to diversity objectives in performance evaluations. When diversity objectives go unmet, well-intentioned leaders are at a loss to understand why. For managers, an old saying rings clearly, “When you're up to your butt in alligators, it's hard to remember your objective was to drain the swamp!” When specific objectives are excluded from the evaluation process, managers effectively assume all the risks inherent in advancing diversity objectives with unclear opportunities for recognition and rewards.

To offset barriers that grow with organizational pressures, diversity strategies must include leader-defined goals and accountabilities. This establishes risk sharing with middle managers and reduces ambiguities among priorities. When managers grasp commitment from senior management in the form of recognition and rewards that improve an individual's position and status within the organization, they are more likely to further diversity and inclusion goals, even in pressure-packed situations.

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 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."